



BEFORE IT RAINS

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by

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## ABSTRACT

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Contemporary Christian literature is becoming first choice in public libraries and bookstores throughout the country. From novels about end-time prophesy to autobiographies of world-renowned pastors, works written for and about Christians have reached an all-time high. Before it Rains is indeed, according to the scriptural definition of salvation found in the King James Version of the bible, a contemporary Christian novel; the characters must go through the biblical process of accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior before receiving a newness or fulfillment of life. Moreover, this novel presents a particular focus on the African American community. Not only does the audience receive a glimpse of life from an African American perspective, but the reader also experiences a unique style of worship and the importance of religion in the black church. The reader is introduced to three religious characters, and the chapters in which these characters are introduced present strong images of the African American church such as handclapping and tambourines.

Although Before it Rains is a contemporary Christian novel, it can also be considered a romantic work. Elements of romantic writing that can be found frequently throughout the book include emphasis placed on emotions, emphasis upon freedom and individuality, and emphasis on imagination and fantasy. Quite often, prophetic dreams occur, and the reader is presented with flashbacks of the characters' pasts.

Before it Rains does not appeal to any specific audience; just as salvation, according to Romans 10:9, is open to all who believe, this novel serves as a nontraditional gateway for those who are curious about accepting Christ into their lives. Readers are presented with realistic characters who, like themselves, may be somewhat skeptical when it comes to spiritual concerns.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

COMMITTEE MEMBERS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
BOOK ONE.....	1
THE PROBLEM WITH BEST FRIENDS.....	2
GUT FEELINGS.....	18
KISSES AREN'T CONTRACTS.....	35
ON THE COUNSEL OF BARTENDERS.....	52
AS LONG AS POP'S AROUND.....	65
RHYTHM OF TAMBOURINES.....	79
LEAVING.....	92
THIS LOVE THING.....	101
FRONT OF THE ALTAR.....	113
BOOK TWO.....	120
CLEANING OUT CLOSETS.....	121
A GENTLE WIND.....	131
WHERE HIPS COME FROM.....	143
A CONSTENT REMINDER.....	149
TEA WITH MS. RYANS.....	157

FRONT OF THE ALTAR ..... 163

BOOK THREE..... 169

    NOT AN ANGEL..... 170

    SCENT OF A WOMAN ..... 182

    RAMBLING ..... 191

## **BOOK ONE**

## THE PROBLEM WITH BEST FRIENDS

I think I would like to meet the individual who came up with the saying, “love never fails.” It fails, all right. As a matter of fact, it flunked me. I would say that cupid gave me an F on the relationship report card, but I think that everybody gets at least a D for trying. The truth is, love has actually dished me some hard blows over the years. Well, I must admit that some of them I did deserve. As the saying goes, what goes around comes around, and for a while, I was dishing out some pretty heavy blows myself.

Take, for instance, Tina. She was a pretty chocolate lady with dark, midnight eyes and a smile that mocked the sun. We met my sophomore year of college under a huge oak tree outside of the campus bookstore. She was standing in a short, blue sundress, and her shoulder-length, raven hair blew in ripples against the back of her neck. Well, being the ladies man that I am, I strolled over and made conversation with her. As time went on, we developed somewhat of a relationship.

Tina was every man’s dream and every boy’s nightmare. She was clean and wholesome, and she knew what she wanted out of life. All I wanted out of life, at that moment, was a good time. Tina wasn’t having that, so we sort of drifted apart. Who could blame me? I was young and immature then, not realizing the value and importance of being in the company of a true lady.

Tina was a lesson well learned because after her, my love life went on a downward spiral. Since Tina, my dating experiences have consisted of cheaters, liars, hypocrites, and of course, those who just “want to be friends”. And the minute I thought the situation couldn’t get any worse, along came Chicken.

Chicken. Just the thought of her makes me shudder. She is one dirty female. Last year, I wanted to wash my hands of her once and for all, but she had to go and get pregnant. My relationship with my neglectful mother taught me to never abandon my children, so when Chicken decided to have the baby, I was there for her.

“You gotta stick by her now that she’s got that baby,” my Pop is always telling me. “That kid’s life doesn’t deserve to get screwed up because its parents are irresponsible. If she’s good enough to lie with, she’s good enough to raise a child with. And besides, I want a grandbaby named after me, ya hear?”

Chicken is very fond of Pop, and there is no arguing between the two of them, so if we have a boy, his name will be Evander Shai, and if it’s a girl, Shaira Evan. I pray it’s a girl.

It is half past noon, and Chicken sits across from me at my favorite restaurant Sunken Cavern. She eats a pound of shrimp and talks a mile a minute about nothing. I know she feels the tension that is rising in our relationship, but she continues to ignore the fact that we are drifting apart. The passion that was there in the beginning just isn’t present anymore, and all of the little aspects that I used to love about her are now getting on my nerves. I don’t know what is causing my constant irritation, but Chicken is starting to

bug the hell out of me.

I sigh, stare at her, and wonder how I ended up, once again, in a risky love situation. She sits here in a long, black dress, and her middle sticks out under the table. She is tall, thin, and bow-legged with short hair, dangerous eyes, and a devious grin.

She catches me staring at her, stops in mid-sentence, and manages a disturbed, “What?

“Nothing,” I lie. I want to tell her that the nose I used to think was so cute is now irritating the heck out of me. “I was just noticing that your middle is slightly lower than it was yesterday.”

“Yep,” Chicken says proudly. She moves away from the table and rubs her stomach. “Doctor says it won’t be long. I can’t wait because I’m tired of lugging her around.”

“Her?” I ask. “How do you know it’s a girl? Maybe I want a son.”

“You’re not fooling anybody mister, she laughs. “I know you want a daughter.”

“You’re right, I tease, “because I refuse to have a son named Evander Shai. I love Pop and all, but—“

“You’re so silly.” She giggles. “Evander isn’t such a horrible name. And besides, I love your father. It would be an honor to name our child after him.

“Pop is a pretty cool guy, but that middle name has got to go. Grandma must have been crazy to name him Shai.”

“I think it’s kind of cute,” she pouts.

“Well, I think we better have a girl, or Pop’s going to get his feelings hurt. Come on. It’s getting late, and I’m wanted back at the office at two. I’ll drive you home.”

The streets in Great Falls are busy with the last of midday traffic. We ride in silence, not knowing what to say to each other.

“Well, I guess this is it,” I say uncomfortably. I park my black Maxima outside of her apartment complex.

“Yeah,” she says softly, “I guess I’ll see you later.

She leans over to kiss me, but I back away. It’s not on purpose; it’s one of those involuntary actions that your reflexes do before your brain has a chance to think.

“Chicken, we need to talk,” I say. “But not now, I—“

“You don’t have to explain, Trevor,” she says softly. “I understand. Our relationship is not what it used to be. I understand if you’ve found someone else—“

“Chicken, there is no one else. It’s just that...there is this tension that is developing between us that is getting too hard for me to ignore...” I look into her eyes and try to find the right words to say. “Never mind,” I mumble finally, reluctant to argue. “Get some rest, OK? We’ll talk later.”

The minute she closes the passenger door to my car, I feel an instant surge of relief. I want to tell her to get lost, but then Pop’s words will come back to haunt me like a ghost. I sincerely want what is best for my child, but how can I be with Chicken knowing that I don’t care for her? I rub the back of my neck, and I try to gather my thoughts. Suddenly, a smile spreads across my face. Chocolate. She will know what to do. And even if she doesn’t, she will make me feel better. I pick up my cell phone and dial the all-too-familiar telephone number.

Chocolate is my best friend in the whole world. She is the epitome of ladyhood in my eyes. She's tall and slender with smooth, caramel skin, brown, dreamy eyes, and a full, rich voice. She is smart, sweet, and she has a lot of love to give. From the beginning I thought she was beautiful, but I could never bring myself to talk to her. She's a dream come true, so I don't feel worthy to ask her out. She deserves someone special.

"Hey, Choc," I say into the receiver of the phone. "It's your boy, Trev. Wake up."

"Are you kidding me?" a raspy female voice answers back. "Trev, it's...one-thirty in the afternoon. I'm just turning over!"

"Sorry." I smile.

"Yeah, right. Anyway, what's up?"

"Nothing much. Just wanted to hear your voice. What are your plans for the day?"

"Lifeguarding at the pool. I should be done around seven. Why, you want me to come over?"

"Yes," I say a little too quickly. "I need to talk to you."

"I'm there. Is it your turn to buy take-out or mine?"

"Yours, and no Chinese." The other end of the line becomes silent. "Chocolate, I'm serious."

I laugh out loud as I hear a groan followed by a dial tone.

I pull my car into the parking lot of Johnson Industries and stare at the massive building in the middle of downtown. Sometimes it is hard to believe that I own it all. Growing up, large buildings always fascinated me, and I often asked questions about how

they were constructed. Who would have thought that a little kid playing with legos and building blocks would one day grow up to own an architectural firm?

As I enter the huge, glass double doors, I am no longer Trevor. I am now greeted with the title of “Mr. Johnson” or “Sir”. I sometimes enjoy people constantly asking for my opinion or input, and other times, I just want to be left alone. Today is one of those days.

As I head to my office, out of the corner of my eye I catch Marissa, my secretary, approaching me. She’s a short little brunette, poised and perfectly pressed down in a black pinstripe suit with a large, white, butterfly collar. She stands with a pen and pad in her hand, no doubt ready to brief me on all the happenings at the firm the past hour I’ve been out.

As soon as my hand reaches the door to my office, Marissa starts to talk. Her pixy-like voice irritates me by the minute. She’s a great secretary, but how can someone be so work-oriented all of the time?

I don’t pay attention the whole time she talks to me. Instead, I stare at her soft features. If she ditches the huge framed glasses so that everyone can see the little specks of gold in her brown eyes, she might actually be considered cute. Perhaps even pretty. For a split second, I think about telling her this, but then I’m reminded of the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas situation and decide it would be in my best interest to keep my mouth closed. Not that I think the joker was telling the truth, but since then, women have become sexual harassment crazy.

I listen to her blab on and on about the new office building that we are designing and

how the client is impressed with our drawings and layouts.

“Thank you, Marris,” I say routinely. I walk her to the door in hopes that she’ll get the message. “If I need anything, I’ll call.”

After she is gone, I stroll over to the full-length mirror in the corner against the wall. Staring back at me is a tall, distinguished, baldheaded, black man with a goatee wearing a brown and black three-piece suit. This is the Trevor Johnson that everybody sees. Most of the time, I can relate to this image that stands before me, but on days like this, all I see is a little seven-year-old boy hanging onto the skirt of his mother. I smile. My mother was the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Well, next to Chocolate. And my sister India, of course.

Growing up, India wanted to be just like mom. She tried to wear her hair like mom’s, and she tried to wear mom’s clothing. As years passed, Mom was the last person my sister wanted to be. India deliberately tried to change the way she looked by cutting her long, black hair. That didn’t help any because no matter how hard she tries, she still bears an uncanny resemblance to mom. Sometimes it bothers her, but that was a long time ago. I sigh and decide to let the past stay in the past for now.

The rest of my day is filled with telephone conversations, conferences, and scheduled meetings. By five o’ clock, I am exhausted and ready to find comfort in my king-sized bed with dark geranium sheets. As I unlock the door to my spacious black and white apartment, the sounds of Jill Scott fill my ears. I just got into listening to her because my

ears can't take most of the trash that they play on the radio.

I whistle along with the music, stand in front of the refrigerator, and explore its contents. It's empty, of course, except for a carton of eggs, orange juice, and a bottle of V8 Splash that Chocolate left over here the other day. Gross. I want to throw it away, but the minute I do, she'll ask for it.

I hear someone call my name. Chocolate stands in the doorway and holds several white paper bags in her arms.

"Trevor, come on, don't just stand there, help me!"

I open the door for her and help carry the bags to the kitchen table.

"Since you refuse Chinese food," she says, "I bought barbecue. We can talk later, but right now, I'm hungry. I'm going to wash my hands."

Chocolate disappears into the bathroom as quickly as she enters the apartment. When she finally returns, we settle at the kitchen table.

I look her over. She sits on one leg in a wooden chair. Her body is covered in a rainbow-colored, striped halter and short, blue jean daisies. She wears clear, Espirit flip-flops, which she kicks off her feet the minute she hits the table. Half of her long, dark hair is pulled up in a twist; the rest falls lazily on her honey-brown shoulders. She is beautiful without even trying.

I can't help myself anymore, and I know that soon she's going to notice me staring, so I ask casually, "Chocolate, babe, I'm not understanding. You're gorgeous. Why is there not a significant other in your life?"

She frowns a little and continues to eat her ribs. I know Chocolate, and I prepare myself for what's about to come out of her mouth. Her dark eyes are brewing, which means she's going to say something hilariously funny or something that will make me regret being a man. To my surprise, neither is the case.

It is now close to six, and Chocolate glances at her watch.

"It's six o' clock!" she yells. "Goodtimes is on!" She grabs her plate, heads towards the TV, and sits Indian style on my white couch with the black pillows.

"Chocolate, the moment I see a speck of barbecue sauce on my white couch, I'll—"

"You'll do nothing but get over it. Now come over here and join me. And bring my V8 out of the refrigerator."

I join her on the couch, and I cannot help but laugh as she imitates each character scene by scene. And, of course, I'll have to sit another thirty minutes after the show is over and listen to her talk about how Bookman reminds her of her tenth-grade science teacher. I sigh once I realize that this is the episode where Keith hides alcohol in the bathroom tank. I can't bear to watch because too many memories haunt me. One run-in a day with the past is more than enough for me, so I rise and begin to straighten up the kitchen.

After a while, she joins me. I think she realizes that I am upset because there is an unusual quietness about her.

Finally, she says, "You know Trev, nobody has the perfect family life. Everyone has problems."

I don't answer. I know Chocolate means well by trying to make me feel better, but she was not there. She doesn't know how mom's condition affected India, Pop, and me. Especially Pop. I blow it off and quickly change the subject. I'm not prepared to share the past with her.

Chocolate is a smart lady, and she knows when enough is enough. Instead of drilling me with a million questions, she begins to tease me.

"You're such a neat freak," she says to me. "Are these dishes really bothering you?"

"Yes," I say sternly. I rinse off the plates in the sink and place them in the dishwasher. "And I'm not a neat freak. I just happen to like order."

"Order? Whatever Trevor. You know what? In the three years that I've known you, I've never seen you wear a shirt that was not buttoned up at the top. You're such a dork."

"Whatever." I laugh at the crinkled expression on her face. "It takes one to know one."

She tickles me, unbuttons the brown vest that I am wearing, and rolls up the sleeves to my shirt. "Much better." She laughs.

There is a knock at my door followed by a loud, male voice. "Yo Trev, open up!"

"Ben." Chocolate groans and covers her face. "I'm not here."

I laugh as she runs to the back of the house.

I go to the door to meet Bengée, a tall, lean, fair-skinned man with hazel eyes and curly, dirty-brown hair. Bengée lives next door to me, and over the years, we've become close friends. When Chocolate and I first became close, Ben thought we were a couple.

Since he realizes that nothing is going on between us, he is constantly trying to talk to her. I'm not having it. Bengee is a nice guy, but he's not privileged enough to talk to Chocolate. She's my heart, and I have to look out for her.

"Hey Ben, keep it down. It's too late in the evening for all of that yelling."

"Hey, I have to make my presence known, man. Anyway, what's up? How was the day?"

"Usual," I say as we sit on the couch. "All work and no play."

"I hear ya. How's that baby?"

"Just fine. It's due in a week. India and Pop are coming down this weekend. Pop is so excited about having a grandbaby named after him."

"What?" Bengee raises his eyebrows. "Evander Shai? You know that kid's gonna get teased."

"Hopefully it's a girl." I smile. "I've always wanted a daughter. And hey, she may even turn out to be just as beautiful as Dee."

Bengee grins a little. "By the way, how is that cute little sister of yours?"

"India's fine," I chuckle, "and when she gets here, I don't want you teasing her."

"Hey," Ben shrugs, "I can't help it if she's got the hots for me."

"She does not have the hots for you. It's just a crush."

"Too bad," Bengee smirks, "because if she was twenty-seven instead of seventeen, it would be on."

"Hey, lay off my sister man—"

“I’m not even about to get into it with you about your baby sister. What I want to know is where is that best friend of yours? Have you seen her today?”

I hate lying for Chocolate, but this time it’s important.

“Earlier,” I mumble under my breath. “Why? Do you want me to give her a message?”

“Yeah. Well, actually, I was kinda hoping to run into her today. It’s OK. I’ll just talk to her later.

Bengee stays awhile. We talk about a little of everything but mostly about Chocolate. I find myself promising once again to hook him up with my beautiful best friend.

After Bengee leaves, I finish clearing the kitchen table and travel down the hall to my bedroom. Chocolate is laying face first in my bed sound asleep. Coming from my CD player in the corner are the jazzy sounds of Angie Stone. I know that soon my CD will disappear and then show up again after Chocolate buys a copy.

I plop down on the bed beside her. She jumps.

“Wake up kid!”

“Trev, stop,” she says sleepily. She closes her eyes again. “I’ve been out in the sun all day. This little boy jumped off the high dive, and I almost drowned trying to save him. Leave me alone. I’m sore.”

I grin a little. “You want me to give you a message, baby?” I ask half-seriously.

“No!” she yells as she pushes me off the bed. It is obvious that I have embarrassed her.

“Just teasing.” I lie.

“What was Ben talking about?” she asks and rolls over on her back. She is fully awake now.

“Nothing much. Mostly about you.”

”What about me?”

“Ben thinks that you’re gorgeous, and you’re beautiful, and he wants to go to bed with you.“ “He did not say that.”

“OK, so I made that part up. But seriously, he thinks you’re all that and then some, and he wants me to hook him up.”

“I don’t think so,” she says; her pretty face turns into a frown. “Ben is...not my type. I’ m looking for someone like you, only cuter.” She winks before letting out a loud roar of laughter.

“Chocolate, baby, it’s not just Ben we’re talking about. You’re gorgeous, and you know it. You can have any guy you want, including me, so what’s really going on?”

“I don’t know Trev,” she says after awhile. “Guys don’t...like me. But we’re not talking about me now. What did you want to talk about?”

Chocolate has a funny way of changing the subject when she’s feeling uncomfortable. The truth is, she gets approached by guys all of the time, but most of them are no good and have no direction. She’s high class and deserves someone who will treat her right. Someone like me, but I could never tell her that.

I let out a sigh. I don’t want to burden Chocolate with my problems. Just being

around her is enough for me.

“I just...”

I start, but can't finish. I don't have to. She knows exactly what I'm thinking before I even say it. She blames it on intuition. I say it comes from hanging around each other twenty-four hours a day. She frowns again, and I just sit back and wait for her to blow like an erupting volcano.

“This is about Chicken, isn't it?” she starts. “Trev, I don't even see why you keep wasting your time. You know she's no good for you. And don't give me that crap about Pop and your responsibility to your unborn child. She's made you miserable from the very beginning. I would rather be alone than wish I was alone any day.”

“Chocolate, it's not that simple—“

“Yeah, it really is. Trev, you don't owe her your life because she's pregnant. Your relationship with your child has nothing to do with her. Your love for that baby is not going to cover up for the fact that you two are falling out of love with each other.”

“But Chocolate, I know what it's like to grow up with one parent. I just don't want my child to have the kind of life that I've had—“

“Well, it's a little too late for that now. It's time to face reality, babe. Chicken is pregnant, the baby's coming in a week, and there are no sparks flying. You need to stop delaying and tell her how you feel before someone gets hurt.”

“Chicken and I...we've been through a lot of problems before, and everything worked out. Maybe—“

“Trev, she hurt you. Are you forgetting that? She cheated on you! She cheated on you, and when she thought you were going to leave her, she ‘mysteriously’ became pregnant. I had to listen to it once, and I refuse to go through that again with you.”

“You’re cold, Chocolate,” I mutter under my breath.

“Yeah,” she laughs bitterly, “and so is she.”

Chocolate hates when we argue like this, so she rises from the bed. “I’m tired. I’m going home now—“

“No, wait, don’t go,” I call to her. “I want you to stay. We don’t have to talk about her anymore.”

“Trevor, we can drop the subject if you want, but the situation is far from being resolved. I know how females are. She thinks she can keep you because of that baby, and you’re playing right into her game by letting the past and your daddy’s feelings interfere with logical thinking. Hey, I care about you, and I don’t want to see you get hurt—“

“I know you do.” I interrupt her with a kiss on the cheek, “and I love you for it. Now can we please talk about something else?”

Chocolate and I spend the rest of the night talking about everything from relationships, to flavors of ice cream, to who played the better Batman.

Later on that same night, I lie awake in my bed; Chocolate’s words cloud my mind. That’s the problem with best friends. They tell you exactly how things are, even if it

means a slap in the face sometimes. I look over at the body lying next to me and run my fingers through her long, dark hair.

“Chocolate,” I say softly. “Chocolate, wake up.”

“What?” she mumbles, turning over in the bed to face me.

“Thank you,” I say, grinning shyly. “You were right, as usual.”

“Aren’t I always?” she asks, as she smiles and closes her eyes again.

## GUT FEELINGS

It is pouring down rain, and I awake to yelling outside of my apartment door. I try so hard to rise from the bed, but it is impossible because Chocolate's long torso is on top of my legs.

"Chocolate." I try hard to slide from under her body. "Get up. Someone's at the door."

She doesn't budge, of course. She's a hard sleeper, and this is the fifth position she's been in all night.

"Choc, get up." I push her a little.

She stirs, and a frown spreads across her lovely face. "Some host you are," she mumbles.

I rise from the bed and cover Chocolate with a blanket from the closet. I sprint down the hallway to the front door, and I open it, not at all surprised to see Pop standing there with a small, black pipe in his mouth.

"Hey, hey, what are you doin' in here, kid? Open up this door and let me in. I gotta grandbaby to see."

"Pop, the baby's not due for a couple of days. What are you doing down here?"

“Oh, Dee and I decided to come on down early so we can be here the minute the kid pops out. So where is Chicken? Is she ready? Let’s get this show on the road.”

I smile and shake my head as Pop enters the doorway. He is wearing a black pinstriped suit; his feet are covered in a black pair of Stacy Adams. Pop is a short little man with jet-black, curly hair, huge dimples, and a smile that has an unusual affect on women. That smile is probably the reason for Dee’s and my existence. I hate going out in public with Pop because he draws the attention of every female in the room. Even as a little kid, I remember sitting beside him in a local sports bar, watching him talk crazy to every female that was bold enough to come in his face. I admire my father because all he ever did was talk. He loved and respected my mother so much that he never messed around on her. I guess she didn’t know how to appreciate a good man.

I watch Pop walk around my apartment like he owns the place, and I can’t help but laugh. He stands in the refrigerator door and cracks jokes about the bottle of mayonnaise that has been there for at least three weeks. His eyes fall on Chocolate’s bottle of V8, and he smiles to himself.

“Where’s my doll face?” He winks before closing the refrigerator door. “Have you kissed that pretty lady for me today?”

“Why don’t you kiss her yourself, Pop? She’s in the back room. I’m sure you both would enjoy that.”

Pop gives off this certain aura when it comes to pretty women, and Chocolate is no exception. She thinks the world of him.

“She’s here?” He flashes his winner’s smile. “Then in that case, I think I will.” He winks again and lets out a loud roar of laughter.

“Pop, where’s Dee?” I interrupt his endless fit of cackling.

Pop slaps his hand across his forehead and mumbles something under his breath. “I forgot about that kid. She’s out there messin’ around with some guy down the street. I swear, they can smell her a mile away.”

I frown. I hate the idea of my baby sister gaining instant attention from strangers.

“Pop, who is she with? I don’t know any of these guys around here.”

“Hey,” Pop shrugs. “Don’t ask me. He could be the President of the United States for all I care. You gotta face reality on this one, kid. Dee’s a looker, just like her mama.”

“How’s she doing, Pop?”

“Same old Dee,” Pop says with a faraway look in his eyes. “She’s still as cold as always.”

“I wish she wasn’t like that.”

“Hey, the kid can’t help it. That’s how she was raised.”

I don’t particularly like where this conversation is going, but I have to ask one question.

“Pop, does she still...is she still having nightmares about the fire?”

Pop laughs a little. “Do you?”

I don’t answer him. He sighs.

“Don’t ask questions you already know the answer to, kid. It only causes trouble for us. All of us.”

I look up from my hands as India enters the doorway. A smile spreads across her brown face.

“Hey T,” she grins and flashes a small piece of paper in her hand, “I’ve got those digits.”

“You need to keep your mind off those little boys and in your books where it belongs. What’s getting into you girl? Ever since I moved away from home, you’ve been acting fast--”

“Whatever, Trevor. Maybe some other female, but not me. Not India Johnson.”

I tease her a lot, but I know that deep down, men are last on India’s mind. As a matter of fact, most guys, in addition to females, are intimidated by her beauty and independence. India is exceptionally attractive, and it’s been that way since she was a little girl. She has long, black hair, dark, almond-shaped eyes, and a cute, little cleft in her chin. Most of her peers either hate her or seem to be too shy to talk to her. As a result, India grew up a lonely child, spending most of her time with Pop and me. This was OK because it made our bond as a family even stronger. Pop, Dee, and I have been inseparable from the very beginning. We rely on each other for strength, especially when going through hard times.

“So, what’s been going on sister?” I ask her as we sit down on the couch. “Have you broken any hearts lately?”

“Nah,” she sticks her tongue out, “guys don’t like me. I mean, they like me, but it’s more like a physical thing. All they see is the house I live in.”

“Yeah, that house seems to be getting a little bare lately because this skirt is way too short--”

“Trevor, stop it!” she yells as I playfully tug at the bottom of her skirt.

“I’m just kidding. You and Chocolate...you two are just alike. You both share the same philosophy on men.”

“Chocolate.” Dee smiles. “I haven’t seen her in awhile.”

“She’s in the back. She should be awake by now--”

“Hey honey!” Chocolate calls out to Dee from the hallway. India runs into her arms willingly. “And Trevor, keep my name out of your mouth. It’s too early in the morning to have Chocolate on your lips.” She walks down the hallway and winks in my direction.

“There’s my doll face,” Pop says as he gives her a hug. “How are ya sweetie?”

She kisses him on the cheek. “Just fine.”

“Sweetheart, how many times do I gotta tell ya? It’s OK to call me daddy.”

“No thanks, old man. Trevor’s my daddy. We wouldn’t want to make him jealous, now would we?”

“You think you’re being cute, don’t you?” I frown to cover up the embarrassment on my face.

“I know I’m cute. You made that known last night.”

“Chocolate, go home.” I watch Pop’s eyebrows rise. “You’re creating suspicions--”

“Hey,” Pop shrugs his shoulders, “what you kids do behind closed doors is your business. All I know is I gotta grandbaby, and with that grandbaby comes a mama, ya hear?”

“Pop, it’s not like that between Chocolate and me--”

“You know what Trev,” Chocolate says, “I’m on my way out. I’ve got a lot to do today.”

I know she feels the tension that is rising between Pop and me, so I kiss her on the cheek and let her go.

“Love you babe,” I say as she heads for the door.

“Chocolate, can I go with you? I don’t feel like staying here with these two.”

Chocolate turns around and sees India’s pleading eyes.

“Sure hon, if it’s OK with Pop and your overprotective brother.”

“Fine,” Pop mumbles under his breath. There is a rough edge to his voice, and I know that he is upset.

After Chocolate and Dee leave, I heave a sigh. The silence between us is unbearable, so I ask him, “What’s going on?”

He just shrugs and slumps down on the couch next to me.

“I just hope you know what you’re getting into kid.”

“What do you mean, Pop?” I ask the dreadful question, but I know very well what he means.

“Ah, come on baby boy. We’ve been through this a zillion times. What you’re doin’ to Chicken ain’t right. It ain’t right to Chicken, and it ain’t right to that baby.”

“Pop, I don’t understand--”

“Hey, don’t give me that crap,” he says sadly. “I’m your Papa. I know you. I used to change your diapers, sonny. You can’t get nothin’ past these eyes. I know you have feelings for Chocolate. I mean, what man with a decent pair of eyes wouldn’t? She’s a looker if I’ve ever seen one.”

“It’s obvious, huh?”

“To me. But I’m your Papa. I know these things. All I’m sayin’ is, be careful, son. I know you’ve got feelings for Choc, and feelings don’t go away easy. But you gotta baby growin’ inside of Chicken. Your seed. Your flesh and blood. And there ain’t nothin’ more important than family. You understand me?”

Yes, I understand him, but I’m not sure that I agree. Pop stayed with mama all those years, and it caused a lot of problems for us. Maybe if he had left sooner, I wouldn’t be haunted by the past, and Dee wouldn’t be having nightmares. I listen to him talk for a while, and I watch as he drinks a shot of whisky before taking his afternoon nap on the living room couch.

An hour later, Chicken calls, and I meet her on the track field. She is dressed in a red and black windsuit, and her belly sticks out under the zipped-up jacket.

“Hey you,” I say as I kiss her on the cheek. “It’s about that time, huh?”

She leans against the bleachers. “Yeah,” she says sadly.

I stare at her for a while and watch as tears form in her eyes. I have never seen her like this. Chicken usually appears to be so independent and strong.

“I’m just...I’m just scared, that’s all.”

“Chicken,” I take her in my arms, “don’t be scared. To tell you the truth, I’m a little scared too! This baby is a part of me, and I want to make the right decisions.”

“I just didn’t expect it to be this way,” she says, tears flowing down her cheeks.

“Trevor, I’m about to have a baby! I’m about to have a baby, and I’m not ready. A child needs to be in a stable environment, not a single-parent home. I made a big mistake. This is not turning out the way I planned...I mean...I should have been more careful.”

“Hey,” I say as I wipe away her tears, “our baby is not a mistake. Chicken, you’re just getting cold feet. Everything will be OK. This is going to be a great kid. With looks like mine and a name like Pop’s, we can’t lose.”

“I hope you’re right.” She smiles a little.

I hope I’m right too.

We walk around the track a couple of times, and we talk about everything, but mostly about the baby. I can hardly believe that in a couple of days, we’re going to be parents. Sometimes I wonder what kind of father I’m going to be to my child. I don’t want to be too strict, but I don’t want my child to get away with murder, either. In some ways, I want to be just like Pop. He is a great father, but sometimes he can be obnoxious. He says exactly what he thinks, and sometimes his words leave permanent scars. He means well, it’s just that he can be such a loud mouth.

Chicken stops walking and begins to clutch the bottom of her stomach.

“Wait a minute,” I panic.

“Trevor, relax, it’s just a contraction.” She laughs at me. “I thought you were supposed to be the strong one.”

“Well, yeah,” I stick my chest out, “that was before you started holding yourself.”

“Whatever.” she says. “The doctor says that light contractions are normal during the last stage of pregnancy. When they start coming closer together, that’s when we need to worry.”

“Well, look. I don’t feel comfortable with you being out here. You need to go home and sit down.”

“Hey, I know you’re about to become a daddy, but you can’t tell *me* what to do...”

She stops in the middle of her sentence and holds her stomach once again.

“OK.” She leans against the bleachers. “I’ll take your advice this time.”

“Chicken, wait.” I place my hand on her stomach. “What if this is it? Let me take you to the hospital.”

“I’m fine. You can walk me to my car. I just want to lie down. I’ll call you later.”

“Girl, don’t have my baby out here on this track field--”

“Trevor, look. Just walk me to my car. I’m going to go home, lie down, and if anything happens, I promise, you will be the first to know. Is that fair enough?”

“OK,” I say uneasily. I walk her to her car, and I make sure that she gets home safely.

On my way back to my apartment, I run into India and Chocolate. They are sitting outside the door, looking up at the stars. The two look so much like sisters.

“Hey, what are you two doing out here? Pop wouldn’t let you guys in?”

“You know how he is, Trev,” India rolls her eyes. “Once he’s asleep, he’s out like a light.”

I open the door to my darkened apartment, and India enters gratefully. Chocolate lags behind. An awkward expression covers her face.

“You comin’ in?” I brush my fist against her chin.

She backs away from me and shakes her head. I frown. Whenever Chocolate becomes silent, something is seriously wrong.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” she shrugs.

“Chocolate, I know you. Don’t give me that--”

India comes back to the door. “T, where are the towels?”

“Just a minute sweetheart,” I say to her. “Chocolate--”

“Hey, it’s nothing serious,” her lips say, but there is sadness in her voice. “I love you.” She looks directly in my eyes and touches my face before she turns and walks away.

India stands in the doorway, and we both watch Chocolate walk away.

“I hope I didn’t interrupt anything,” she says in a voice too old for her age.

“Nah,” I shrug, “I know Chocolate. She’s probably going through something that will be gone tomorrow.”

“You don’t know her as well as you think,” India mutters under her breath.

“What?”

“Nothing. Where are the towels?”

We both enter the apartment and see Pop sitting straight up on the couch. He is sound asleep with his black hat covering his face and his feet propped up on the coffee table.

“I can’t believe he slept through your knocking,” I say to Dee. “I guess some things never change. Pop!” I yell, slapping him across the legs. “Pop, come on, wake up. The bed is all yours old man.”

“What, what!” he bellows. “Can’t a man get any sleep around here?” He rises and grumbles under his breath. “Darn kids.” He mutters down the hall and closes the door to my bedroom.

When Pop and India come to visit, I usually let Pop have my room, and Dee and I sleep on the couch. Most of the time, we end up talking all night. Just as I am falling asleep, India enters the den wearing red pajamas and smelling like a mixture of peaches and strawberries.

“You can’t go to sleep on me,” she says. She joins me on the couch with a brush in her hands. “I’m restless, so you have to stay awake.”

“I guess.” I try my best to open my eyes again.

She pushes me a little. “Come on T, wake up.”

“I’m trying Dee, but dang, baby, the bed is calling.”

“Whatever. You better stay up with me.”

“You know I’m going to anyway. Here, let me brush your hair.”

“How was your day?” she asks me innocently.

“Great for the most part. I spent most of the afternoon talking to Pop, and I went walking with Chicken for a while.”

“What was she talking about?” India turns up her nose.

“Dee, stop doing that.” I run my hand over the ugly face that she is making. “Don’t be ugly like that. I thought you liked Chicken.”

Dee just shrugs. “I thought you liked her too.”

“You know what? Your mouth is getting to be a little bit too smart.”

“Come on, Trev, I’m seventeen years old. You guys think I don’t know anything. I know you don’t like her the way you used to. You’re falling out of love with her.”

“And who told you that?”

“Nobody had to tell me. I can look at you and tell when you’re miserable.”

“You think you know so much.”

“I do when it comes to you. We’re practically twins. And besides, I think you and Chocolate would look good together.”

“Well, I don’t think so.” I try to conceal any facial expressions that would cause her to think otherwise.

“She makes you happy,” Dee shrugs.

“Yeah, she does. I need to call her to make sure she made it home safely.”

I pick up the telephone, and I try to ignore Dee’s knowing eyes. On the other end of the line, Chocolate’s answering machine picks up.

“Choc, hey, it’s your boy, Trevor. Just calling to make sure you made it safely. I’ll talk to you later.”

I hang up the phone. Usually, Chocolate will pick up the phone for me. Something is definitely going on.

“I wonder what’s wrong with her?” I mumble out loud.

“Maybe she just wants what’s best for you,” Dee says. She looks into my eyes with the same intensity that Chocolate displayed only hours ago.

We drop the subject of dating and catch up on old times. It is nights like these that I really miss having Pop and Dee around. The three of us used to stay awake for late night talks all of the time. After awhile, India’s brown eyes begin to drop, and she yawns and lies her head against the back of the couch.

“Dee,” I ask as she is drifting off to sleep, “what do you think is wrong with Chocolate?”

She thinks for a while before saying, “I noticed that she was really quiet today, and it all started when Pop made that announcement about you guys doing things behind closed doors. I think his insinuations hurt her feelings.”

“Pop and his big mouth. Anyway, I hope she doesn’t stay away for too long. I hate seeing her upset.”

“That’s because you like her.”

“Who likes her?”

“You,” Dee says sternly. “You like Chocolate.”

“Dee, we’re just friends.”

“Sometimes friends make the best lovers.”

“And how would you know that?” I raise my eyebrows suspiciously.

“I don’t,” she giggles. It is obvious that I have embarrassed her. “And I didn’t mean it like that. But Trev, I really think you guys belong together. I’m right about this. It’s in my gut.”

“Yeah,” I say as I rub her on top of the head, “you and your gut feelings.”

“But you know,” she says sarcastically, “I’m only seventeen, so I’m probably wrong.”

I tickle her. “Goodnight Dee.”

We both fall silent, and before long, I look over and see her chest rising and falling in a breathing pattern that is so much like my own. I kiss her on the cheek and close my eyes as I feel her head fall upon my shoulder.

Hours later, I am awake again. India is curled up beside me in a fetal position, and tears are streaming down her face.

“Get off of me!” she yells in her sleep. “Mama, get off!”

I bury my face in my hands as tears begin to form in my eyes.

“It’s hot in here! Papa!” she desperately calls out in her sleep. “Papa, please help me! I’m scared! Papa, I need you.”

Before I have a chance to wake her, Pop is already there. He pulls India into his arms. His image of coolness is gone, and his suave disposition is now that of a loving father.

“Shh,” he whispers in her ear, “It’s OK. Everything is alright as long as Papa’s around. You got that kid? You’ve got your Papa for life. Papa’s not going anywhere.”

He kisses her tears away with a brush of his lips, but it doesn’t help any. She becomes hysterical, and she sobs in Pop’s lap like a five-year-old girl I knew long ago. Pop doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to because I look into his eyes, and I see what he sees...

*Mama is standing in the middle of the den, a bottle of kerosene in one hand and vodka in the other. She is all over the place, yelling and screaming.*

*“Evander, you can’t leave me like this,” she sobs. “What am I supposed to do now, huh? What am I supposed to do without you?”*

*“I gotta go Eve,” Papa says sternly. “This ain’t no way for these kids to be growin’ up.”*

*“But I’ll stop,” she sobs, falling down on her knees. “Evander, listen. You’ve gotta believe me.”*

*“Eve, you’ve been sayin’ the same thing for years. Nothin’s changed. I’m sorry. My kids ain’t growin’ up like this. We gotta go.”*

*“Evander Shai Johnson, I will set myself on fire if you leave. So help me, I will!”*

*“Do what you gotta do, Eve,” I hear Papa say as my beautiful mother pours kerosene all over her body.*

*Tears begin to form in his eyes. Papa places his hand on my shoulder, and I’m not scared. As long as Papa is around, everything is alright.*

*“Trevor, go get Dee. We’re leaving now.”*

*Mama shakes her head at me; tears are streaming down her face.*

*“Don’t do it baby,” she calls out to me. “I love you. You don’t wanna leave your mama, do you?”*

*I shake my head, and I start to cry. I love her, but I know in my heart that I don’t want to stay.*

*“Go and wait in the car, son,” I hear Papa say. I glance at my mother one last time and turn away.*

*“Fine!” I hear her yell. “Leave me! Go ahead and leave! You can go if you want to! You can go if you want to, but you can’t have Dee...”*

I blink. The phone is ringing, and in the distance, I hear Pop yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Hey, we’ve got a baby, kid!” he says to me. “We’ve got to get to the hospital. Chicken’s about to drop the bundle. I knew my grandbaby was comin’ today! I could feel it in my gut. Hold on namesake. Your granddaddy’s on the way!”

I laugh at his excitement, and we head for the hospital.

Two hours later, I am standing in the nursery, unable to believe my eyes. In my arms is the smallest, tiniest little body I’ve ever seen

“Hello, Shaira Evan,” I whisper softly as I touch the small black ringlets of my daughter’s hair. “I’m your daddy. I’ve been waiting for you to get here. Look, so many things have been going on since I’ve found out about you. Everyone has something to say about how you should be raised. Maybe we should have been more careful by you, but to look at you now, a whole half of myself...I know that you are not a mistake... I’m no good with promises, kid,” I say in a voice just like Pop’s, “but I promise that I will always b here for you no matter what, OK?”

Her eyes begin to close again, and she lets out a little yawn. I smile and that yawn as an OK.

### KISSES AREN'T CONTRACTS

It is close to five, and I am sitting here at my desk thinking about Chocolate. I have not seen her in a week, and I'm aching all over to hear her voice. This past week has been busy for the both of us. She has been traveling back and forth to Tulsa to visit her mother, and I have been spending my afternoons with the baby. Chocolate is a great part of my life, and I'm really starting to miss being in her company.

Business is really slow today, so I've spent most of the afternoon hanging out in here, staring out the window at the slight drizzle that falls on the streets below. The view is beautiful from up here, so I turn my chair toward the window and stare at the blue-gray clouds. It is the beginning of autumn, and the leaves are falling off the trees, leaving them bare and ready for winter.

I feel like doodling, so I open my desk drawer and pull out my drawing pad and a pencil. I have been taking art classes for about three years, and I have gotten pretty good at drawing people. Inside, on the second page, is my drawing of Chocolate. Her chin rests on her hands, and her long hair falls in ripples around her cheeks. Her dark eyes dance, and she wears a slight smile. I stare at the picture for a while and I tap my pencil on the desk. My mind wonders back to the day she told me that she was going out with Ben.

Ben, of all people! I try not to think about their date and I return to my drawing. I add more definite strokes to her hair.

My telephone rings, so I pick up the receiver, surprised to hear Chocolate's voice.

"Hey honey," she says as she turns up her radio in the background. "I've got something I want you to hear."

My ears fill with Aaron Hall's "I Miss You". Chocolate sings to the top of her lungs; her raspy voice blends in with the voice of the artist. Chocolate is no singer, so the thought of her serenading me is extremely sweet.

After the song is over, I laugh and say, "I miss you too."

"Where have you been?" she asks me. "You know I can't live without you."

"The question is where have *you* been? How is your mother?"

"She's...not too well. But, it's OK. I'm dealing with it."

"Are you sure because if you need anything, you know I'm here, right?"

"Trevor, I know, and I don't want to talk about her."

"OK, we don't have to."

Chocolate is so aloof and is not used to opening up to people. I know she's breaking down inside, but she's too full of pride to show how much she's hurting.

"How's the baby?" she asks me.

"Growing by the day. She's so beautiful. When she's in my arms, nothing else matters."

"That's nice." She sighs. "Hey, are you coming over today?"

“OK. Whose turn is it to buy take-out?”

“Yours,” she says, “and I want Chinese food.”

“Chocolate,” I growl, “I can’t stomach the stuff.”

“Well, I suffered through barfburgers and barbecued dogs, so I think you can stand a night of shrimp fried rice.”

“Whatever, girl. I guess I can eat Chinese tonight. For you.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Don’t be funny.”

“Ha ha ha.”

“Anyway, I’ll be over in an hour. Is there anything else you want me to pick up?”

“Yeah, bring me a V8.”

When I reach her apartment, she greets me at the door with a big hug.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispers as I hold her close.

“I’ve missed you too.”

We step inside her doorway, and I look her over. She wears red, plaid pajamas, and her long hair falls on her shoulders.

I touch her face. “You sure you’re OK?”

She stares back at me with tired eyes. “Yeah. Now that you’re here, I’m doing great. Come in. I’m starving.”

“Oh, so I’m only good for a meal, huh?”

“That’s right. I like my men in two places: the kitchen and the bedroom.”

She cracks me up, and sometimes I just sit and wonder where the words that flow so freely from her mouth come from. She's hilarious, and I've missed her company

We both enter the kitchen, and I watch as she bounces around the table and tastes everything. She finally settles in a chair next to mine and props her leg up against the table.

"So, how was your day?"

"Just fine. Business was a little slower than usual, but overall, the day was wonderful. And yours?"

She dismisses me with a wave of her hand and mumbles, "It was alright."

We both fall silent, and I hesitate before I ask my next question.

"How's Ben doing?" I give her a sideways glance.

"You're being funny, aren't you?"

"No," I lie, "I haven't seen him lately, and I thought that maybe you would know since you guys are dating and all."

"Trevor," she laughs, "we are *not* dating. Why would you even think that?" She raises her eyebrows. "Did he tell you that we're dating?"

"Of course not." I admit truthfully.

"Trevor, we just went out together."

"But Chocolate, I thought you didn't like Ben."

“I didn’t. I mean, I don’t! It’s just that...he showed up at my doorstep with a dozen white roses, told me that I was beautiful, and asked me to have dinner with him. How could I resist? He was so sweet. He made me feel special.”

“You are special.”

“Thanks. Anyway, he’s a sweet guy and all, but he’s not my type.”

“Chocolate, I have had it up to here with you and dating. What *is* your type?”

“I’m not exactly sure of what I want,” she admits, “but I know what I don’t want. I don’t want a liar. I don’t want someone who is not dependable. I don’t want someone who constantly asks but never gives. I guess I just want that person to love me the way that I would love them. Someone who makes me laugh and can put up with my wacky personality.”

“In other words, someone like me, right?”

“Maybe.” She winks and runs her hand over the top of my head. “We’ll see.”

“Chocolate, don’t get offended when I ask you this, but are you sure you’re OK? You look so tired, and I’m concerned about you.”

She runs her fingers through her hair, and tears start to gather in her eyes.

“No, Trevor, I’m not OK. My mother’s dying. She’s dying, and there is nothing that I can do about it.”

“Chocolate, don’t give up on her yet. Your mother’s a fighter. Where do you think you get your power? She can handle it.”

“Trevor, I would like to believe that. Really, I would, but I have to face reality. Mama had a stroke. She’s suffering paralysis on the left side of her body. And besides, even if she pulls through, her life will never be the same again. Trevor, she won’t be able to do much for herself anymore.”

“How’s your father taking all of this?”

“Not too well,” she answers as long, overdue tears stream down her cheeks. “Daddy’s disabled, and Mama’s doing her best to take care of both of them. They are so dependent on each other...Anyway,” she forces a smile, “I’m tired of talking about it. Thanks for listening.”

“You’re welcome hon.”

“I need a drink,” she says with a sigh. “Let’s go to Snoopie's and get drunk.”

“Chocolate,” I laugh, “you’ve never been drunk a day in your life. What are you talking about?”

“Trevor, I’m serious! I need a drink. Come on, life’s been hard this week. And you like me better when I’m tipsy anyway.”

I look at her knowingly, and she grabs me by the hand.

“Come on, Trev. Don’t be such a weenie. Let’s go! I’m just going to have a couple of drinks and beat you in a game of pool.”

“Whatever.” I say.

“Don’t worry daddy,” she says as she kisses me on the cheek. “I’ll behave.”

“You better.”

The minute we enter Snoopie's, heads turn in Chocolate's direction. "Shoop" blasts in our ears, and I watch as she sashays over to the bar wearing a skinny silver halter and a pair of black pants. Sammie, the bartender, recognizes her as soon as her hands reach the counter top. He is a heavysset, dark-skinned man with huge Louis Armstrong cheeks and a voice like thunder. He grins, displaying two, gold front teeth.

"Hya sweetheart," he says to her, "what can I get ya?"

"For starters, an Amaretto sour and a Long Island ice tea." She winks. "But you know I'll be back later."

"And your gentleman friend?"

"Oh, he doesn't drink," she says as if I'm vocally challenged. "He's a weenie."

"Hey," Sammie says, "keep bringin' him around here, and he'll be able to hang with the best of 'em."

We walk around the smoky, dim room for awhile, and we soon settle at the pool table. I lose the first couple of games to her by luck, and soon after, the alcohol in Chocolate's system begins to kick in. She laughs for no reason, sits on the table, and tries to make shots that are nearly impossible.

"Hey hon," I say lovingly, "let me drive you home. It's getting late."

"Trevor, come on," she says. "We just got here! Come on, dance with me."

"Chocolate, you know I can't dance."

"Come on, I'll teach you."

"I'll dance with you! You're the prettiest little thing I've seen all night!"

We turn around and face a skinny Caucasian male. He wears a plaid gray and white button-down shirt, some too-tight blue jeans that display all of his manhood, and thick, framed glasses. On his face is a goofy grin. I have to admit, his self-esteem is amazing.

“Sure!” she exclaims.

As the guy walks over and takes her hand, she turns toward me and giggles. “I’ve never danced with a white boy before!”

I watch as the two gain instant attention from everybody in the room, and I can’t help but admit something to myself. Nothing says sexy like Chocolate on the dance floor, even if she dances with an offbeat white boy. I sit back and watch her drag people onto the floor with her. Chocolate is so irresistible that eventually she gathers about fifteen people to do the Macarena with her and her newfound partner. After the dance is over, I grab her by the hand.

“Come on, showgirl. Let’s go home.”

“OK, daddy.”

On the way to her house, we stop at a gas station. Chocolate’s stomach feels queasy, so I spend about twenty minutes walking around outside while she uses the bathroom.

When she comes back to the car, I give her a big hug.

“How are you feeling?” I ask as she lifts her head off my chest.

She smiles wearily. “Like a champ.”

It is a quarter till one, and I glance at her. She has somehow managed to fit her whole body in the passenger’s seat.

“Trevor?” she asks in a foreign voice.

“Yeah babe?”

“I’m scared.”

I turn away. I hate to see tears in her eyes. “I know. I can tell.”

“How?”

“By the way you were carrying on at the bar.”

“Was I awful?” She cringes.

“No. Just a tad bit more flirtatious than usual. But hey, that white guy you danced with? You made him one happy sailor.”

She laughs; her head tilts back in a way that only belongs to her.

“Chocolate, listen. I know you, and I know how destructive you can get when situations are not perfect in your life. Tonight was the perfect example.”

“But I had fun, though,” she winks, “and you had fun watching me. I saw you checking me out.”

“All of the time, baby. I only have eyes for you.”

We both enter her apartment, and I wait for her on the living room couch. She comes and sits beside me; she wears those red, plaid pajamas again.

“I’m so tired.” She runs her fingers through her hair. “Everything is happening too fast for me.”

“I know it has to be hard watching your mother suffer. I had to go through it, and”- -

“Trevor, I don’t want to talk about it. I just want to let you know that I love you. You’re my best friend in the whole world, and I would be so lost without you...”

She begins to sob uncontrollably, and I take her in my arms and try to comfort her.

“I love you too,” I whisper, “and I’m really sorry you have to go through this.”

We sit here in silence for awhile. After the fresh tears on my shoulder finally cease, she lifts her head and looks into my eyes.

“Thank you for letting me use your shoulder as a snot rag.”

“Anything for you.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Of course.” I kiss her on the cheek.

“Then stay with me tonight. I don’t want to be by myself. I might self destruct.”

“I believe it.”

We spend the rest of the night watching *Indecent Proposal* and talking about how people will do anything for money.

“Chocolate, I have an indecent proposal for you. How would you like to sleep with me for a million dollars?”

“Honey, throw in two mill, and I’ll think about it.”

“Hey, it will be deposited in your bank account tomorrow.” I lie on top of her.

“Trevor, get up!”

“What about Ben? How much could he pay you to sleep with him?”

“Nada.” She sticks her tongue out. “I wouldn’t sleep with him for fifty million.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“Wait a minute.” She is angry now. “Trev, it wasn’t even like that.”

“My, aren’t we getting defensive all of a sudden. What, do you have something to hide? Did something go on between you and Ben that you’re ashamed of?”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” She throws pillows at me. “You’re obnoxious.”

“I try to be.”

We stop talking for awhile and stare at the ceiling.

“Chocolate, what happened on your date with Ben?”

“Why? You are so nosey.”

“You’re my daughter. I have the right to be nosey.”

“Nothing...happened. We went out to dinner, saw a movie went for a walk in the park, and that was it.”

“That was it?” I raise my eyebrows. “No kiss goodnight?”

“If you must know, he did kiss me goodnight.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet.”

“Whatever, Trevor.”

“You know what?” I try my best to frown. “You are not right.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You barely know Bengée, and you kissed him in one night. We’ve been best friends for three years, and you haven’t kissed *me* yet.”

“Aw, baby,” she says in a mushy voice. “Are you jealous of Bengee? Do you want mommy to give you a kiss too?”

“Hey, I’m just sayin’ it’s not fair, that’s all.”

“Well, you know my philosophy on kissing,” she says. “Kisses aren’t contracts.”

“Yeah, I know,” I sigh. “A kiss from Chocolate is on the same level as a hug or a handshake.”

“That’s right, “ she says matter-of-factly.

“So, kissing is not at all intimate with you?” I ask.

“As of now, no. Kissing is becoming less and less intimate. Even good friends exchange kisses.”

I grin and take advantage of the moment.

“Have you ever wondered what it would be like to kiss me?”

She becomes silent, and I wait for her answer.

“Yes,” she finally says, “but then I start thinking about that pair of crusty lips on your face and I quickly change my mind!”

The fact that she laughs really upsets me. I’m trying to be serious, and she’s making a joke out of my feelings. It doesn’t take her long to realize that I’m upset. She places her hand on my face and looks into my eyes.

“I hurt your feelings,” she says in a kind voice. “I’m sorry...”

I am so close to her now that our noses brush against each other. It startles her for a moment.

“Trev, I...this is really awkward.”

“Just pretend that I’m Ben.”

“You are so silly.”

Her hand reaches up to touch my face as our lips meet in a long awaited kiss. She is being playful at first, but after awhile, our kiss becomes serious. Before I have a chance to think, she pulls away from me.

“What was that?” She runs her hands across her lips. “Where in the heck is my best friend?”

She stands and attempts to rise from the couch, but I pull her back down beside me.

“Chocolate, look.” I take her hands in mine. “It’s not that serious. I just wanted to know how it feels to kiss you, that’s all.” I pause. “Are you mad at me?”

“No,” she calms down, “as a matter of fact, it felt...it felt right.”

Now *I* feel awkward, and we both look away from each other. Chocolate goes into shy mode, lowers her head, and bites her lip nervously. The look of confusion on her face matches the emotions I feel in my heart, so I decide to call it a night and go home.

As I step into my darkened apartment, my telephone rings. I pick up the receiver, and I listen to Chicken talk about everything except the baby.

“Chicken, how’s my baby?” I rub the back of my neck. I’m not really interested in the intimate details of her personal life. “How’s Shai?”

“She’s great. She missed her daddy today.”

“I’ve missed her too.”

“We’ve been trying to catch up with you all day,” she says casually. “Where have you been?”

“Hanging out with Chocolate.”

“Chocolate,” she says with a bitter chuckle, “I should have known.”

“Chicken, look. I am not in the mood.”

“I can’t believe that you would rather spend time with her than with your own daughter. If you think that I am going to raise our child by myself then you” - -

“Stop it! Chicken, do not bring out baby into this mess. You know this has nothing to do with Shai or Chocolate!”

“She’s the reason we’re not together!”

“Chicken, that is not true. You know that’s not true. Our relationship has been falling apart for months.”

“Whatever, Trevor. I see you two together. She practically throws herself in your face!”

“Chocolate isn’t even that type of female.”

“Well, I’m about to find out what’s going on since you’re not telling me what I need to know. I’m about to go and talk to her.”

“Look. That would not be a wise idea.” I think about Chocolate’s fiery attitude. “You don’t know her as well as you think.”

“Do you love her?”

“Chicken”- -

“Do you?”

“That’s really none of your business.”

I slam the phone down and let out a groan. Chicken really gets under my skin, and it’s been getting worse since Shaira’s birth. She is constantly in my business and tries her best to keep tabs on me. There is nothing more that I would rather do right now than to call Chocolate and listen to her wacky jokes, but even now I can’t do that because of that kiss. I take a long shower and stretch out on the couch. The sounds of Brian McKnight fill my ears.

“When I look into your eyes,” I sing along with the music, “then I realize that all I need is you in my life...”

About an hour later, someone knocks, but I don’t feel like answering. It is Chocolate. She opens the door; her body is still covered in red pajamas. I sit up, and I don’t say a word. She has the strangest look on her face.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she says innocently. She sits beside me on the couch. “I hate it when there’s distance between us.”

“Me too.” I kiss her on the cheek. “I was missing you already.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Who taught you how to kiss like that?”

“Greg Williams, tenth grade. He taught me a lot of other things too.” She winks and lets out a loud laugh.

“Chocolate,” I shake my head, “are you telling me that you’ve been getting busy since the tenth grade? You were just a baby.”

“Hey, I may have been a baby, but I learned some skills.”

“You’re hilarious.”

“Maybe one day I’ll teach you something.” She grins.

“Really?”

“Maybe. They say I’m a great teacher.”

“Who says that? Ben?”

“No!” She pushes me off the couch. “I told you, nothing happened between us. And why are you so concerned anyway?”

“I don’t think you wanna know.”

“Yep.” She nods her head assuringly. “I think I do.”

“If I tell you, you promise you won’t get all shy on me?”

“Cross my heart.”

“Chocolate,” I say shyly, “you’re my heart. I love you, and I don’t...I can’t stand the thought of you playing with anyone else, or teasing anyone else, or kissing anyone else...I’m rambling. I guess what I’m trying to say is...being with you feels so right, and my heart is telling me that maybe...this could be it this time. I’ve been looking all over for someone special, and you were right here under my nose...”

“Shh,” she whispers and places her finger over my lips. “Trev, I didn’t plan on feeling this way either, but that kiss was so special. I...I guess what I’m trying to say is...” She places her hand on my face. “I really love being with you.”

“I love being with you too. You’re so beautiful. From the very beginning I thought you were. I love everything about you. I carve your smile, the bend of your hair, your very presence, the little tilt in your head when you laugh...”

“Stop rambling and kiss me.” She giggles.

As our noses brush against each other once again, the playfulness is gone. She doesn’t pull away from me, and this time, there are not awkward feelings between us.

## ON THE COUNSEL OF BARTENDERS

It is a little after ten, and I am pacing the floor nervously. It is our one-month anniversary, and I am waiting for Chocolate to arrive at my doorstep. The social aspects of our lives are extremely different, so instead of arguing over what to do today, we decide to each do something we've never done before.

We flipped a coin to see which half of the day we would be in charge of, and lucky Chocolate got the night. There are limited activities to do during the daytime in Great Falls, so I took her to see an off-Broadway production of The Colored Museum and then to my favorite restaurant. I had so much fun watching her in the theater. She laughed so hard during "The Hairpiece", and I loved seeing how Miss Roj's performance drew her into the stage.

I told her beforehand where I was going to take her, but when I asked her where she was taking me tonight, she smiled sweetly and said, "You'll see."

I hear a little tap at the door. I open it and cannot believe my eyes. She stands before me wearing a brown satin dress that plays with the top of her knees with these tiny spaghetti straps that scream, "I look even better off her shoulders." The back of the dress is cut low to the hips, hinting at the little Hershey kiss tattoo in the small of her spine. Her

long, dark hair spills around her shoulders. I look into those dreamy eyes and she grins deviously.

“Congratulations, Chocolate,” I say to myself. “Thanks to you, I have just received the lust-of-the-year award.”

“This is for you,” she says. She hands me a single, white rose that she has behind her back.

“Thanks,” I whisper softly. I step out of the doorway to place the rose on my coffee table. I come back to her and take her hands in mine. “You look...breathtakingly beautiful.”

“And so do you,” she says sweetly. “Anyway, let’s go! I’m anxious to show you a good time tonight.” “And just where are we going anyway?” I ask as she takes me by the arm.

“Am I overdressed, underdressed, what?”

She looks at my black slacks and shirt and the red and black vest that I’m wearing.

“You,” she says as she kisses me on the lips, “look delectably handsome. Don’t worry! You’re dressed fine. Except for maybe the second place we’re going, but don’t worry. I’ve got it all under control.”

She winks at me as we walk outside. She opens the passenger seat to her silver Eclipse.

“Get in. You won’t be disappointed.”

After driving around for about twenty minutes, we pull up outside of this place called Shays.

“Chocolate, what is this place?”

“It’s a dance club, Trevor.” She rolls her eyes. “Come on. Get out.”

“No way,” I say. I shake my head. “Chocolate, you know I can’t dance.”

“I can’t help it if you landed on tails,” she says to me solemnly. “I get the hours of ten until, remember? And besides,” she continues to turn on the charm, “we promised that we would try something different today. I want you to dance with me. Please honeybunny? Please?”

It really burns me up that she can get her way with me in most situations. “Fine,” I mumble. “Just...don’t get mad if I step on your toes or embarrass you or--”

“Trevor, relax,” she laughs. “We’re going to have fun.”

We exit the car, and before I know it, we enter the crowded club. The whole place is darkened except for the three dance floors, each complete with a huge disco ball in the ceiling and dancers waving their hands in the air.

“Come on Trevor, let’s dance,” she says. She leads me up the small steps to the dance floor.

I feel really claustrophobic because people are all around me sweating and dancing to the beat of this loud, bumping music. Chocolate sees the look on my face and laughs.

“It’s house music. Don’t worry. It gets better.”

I know I look like a total idiot, but I allow Chocolate’s carefree and daring ways to rub off on me. Three songs later, I lose all self-consciousness.

“You’ve got it, baby,” she says as she turns her back on me and winks. I can’t believe I let her talk me into this, but actually, I’m more relaxed now than I’ve ever been.

Toni Braxton's "You're Making me High" fills the air, and she stares at me with those beautiful eyes.

"What's the matter Trev?" She dances in front of me. "Don't you wanna touch me?"

Chocolate, baby, if you only knew. Sometimes I don't understand her. She creates all of this sexual chemistry between us, and yet she gets all shy on me if I make advances toward her in that way. In my younger days, I would have called her a tease and went on about my business, but now it's sort of a challenge. We haven't made it to that level in our relationship yet, but she always keeps me wondering what it would be like if we did.

"Come on baby, don't be shy."

She takes my hands and places them on her hips. The minute I take her into my arms, I totally forget about my surroundings. I completely lose sight of everything except for the supremely beautiful figure in front of me. The once smoke-filled atmosphere is consumed with Chocolate's Georgio Aire, and the rambunctious voices around me are now being replaced with the soft whispers of my lady's hair. Her hair tickles my face; the smell of her skin intoxicates my lungs. Her beautiful shoulders brush against mine as her arms wrap around me, and her fingertips play with the back of my neck. I have been around many seductive women in my life, but Chocolate has this sexual aura about her that just won't quit. I don't have to say anything to her. She notices that my touch is a bit foreign, so she pulls away from me.

"Hey," she says quietly, "maybe we should take a break."

"Cool."

I sigh and leave the dance floor, and I take a seat at the bar.

“May I have a cranberry juice please?” I call to the bartender.

“Sure thing, man.”

After he serves this blond lady at the end of the bar, he comes over.

“Thank you,” I say and take a sip of my drink.

I turn my attention back toward the dance floor. I watch Chocolate dance with this tall, slender guy in a black muscle shirt and snug blue jeans. I’m not upset, it’s just that she’s my girl now, and I don’t know if I’m comfortable with other guys drooling over her. I can’t help but notice how her head tilts back in a laugh. Her very presence is so provocative, and she doesn’t even know it.

“Is that your girl?” the bartender asks as he points toward Chocolate.

“Yeah, that’s my lady.”

“She’s definitely a keeper,” he says knowingly. He wipes off the counter with a small, white towel.

I rise and head toward the dance floor; I bump into people on my way up the steps.

“Trev, you ready?” she calls to me.

“Sure. Let’s get out of here.”

In the next few minutes, we head toward the parking lot.

I sit still in the passenger’s seat with my hands behind my head.

She glances at me and says, “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Trevor, whatever. Don’t play with me. I know when something’s on your mind.”

“You’re right,” I finally admit. “It’s just...you know you’re sexy, and you do these little things that make a guy curious, you know?”

“So, you’re saying I’m a tease, huh?”

“Not exactly a tease”- -

“Whatever. I know how your sick mind works. I am not trying to tease you, believe me.”

“Yeah? Well, what if I want you to?”

“Baby, if I was teasing you, believe me, you would know. And besides, you couldn’t handle me, anyway.”

“That’s what your mouth says. How about letting me find out firsthand?”

“Trevor, is that an offer?”

“Hopefully one you can’t refuse.”

“Well, sorry, I’m going to have to.” She rolls her eyes.

At first we were playing around, but now our conversation has become serious. We look away from each other not knowing what to say. I can’t stand the growing tension between us, so I finally break the silence.

“I’m sorry if I offended you, but”- -

“No offense taken.” She sighs. “You’re a man just like every other.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“A lot of men think that women dress a certain way or say certain things just to turn them on.”

“So you’re telling me that you wore this dress tonight showing off that little Hershey kiss in the small of your back and you didn’t expect to get my attention? Chocolate, I don’t buy that.”

“I wore this dress tonight because I look good in it, I love the way it feels against my skin when I dance, and it doesn’t wrinkle easily.” She winks at me.

“Chocolate, baby, you can’t ...expect a man to not think about sex when you carry yourself the way that you do.”

“Oh, so you have a problem with the way that I carry myself?”

“Chocolate my girlfriend disappears, and my best friend with the foul mouth returns.

“Chocolate, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I didn’t think so,” she snaps coldly, “because whatever it is that I’m dishing out, you’re eating it by the plateful. And it must taste pretty delicious because you can’t seem to get enough.”

I can help but laugh because she is telling the truth.

“I pulled *you*, remember?”

“Yeah lady,” I say. “You did pull me.”

“And don’t you ever forget it.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Of course not,” she says seriously. “You’re a man. Besides, I noticed that look in your eyes. You were bound to try one way or another.”

“So, how are my chances?”

“Um...slim to none.”

“Not a chance huh?”

She looks at me uncomfortably and stops the engine of the car. “Trevor, listen. This whole sex thing...it’s a pretty big step for me.”

“Why?”

She lowers her head.

“Chocolate, come on. We share everything, but you always get shy on me when it comes to your body. What’s the big deal? Is it me?” I grin slyly. “Is it my shoe size? Hey, just because I wear a size ten”--

“Trevor, stop it.” She laughs. “It has nothing to do with your shoe size. I’m just...I’m just scared.”

“Scared of what? Of me? Chocolate, you don’t have to be afraid of me.”

“I’m not afraid of you, but...I am afraid to let you get close to me.”

“Why?”

“Because how do I know that eventually you won’t leave?” She pauses. “Trevor, all of the men who have made a significant difference in my life have left me. First my grandfather died of cancer, then my father...”

“Your father? But I thought”—

“Paul is my stepfather. He’s raised me since I was twelve years old. My biological father died when I was nine. And now that my mom is sick, I’m afraid that I might lose him too. What if she dies and he starts treating me differently? What if he never really loved me at all? And then I’ll have no one...”

“Chocolate, you’re not the only one who is afraid. I’m scared too. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. I know that you love me, and I love you, but how do you know when it’s meant to be?”

“I wish I knew.”

“Well, there is one thing that I do know. I know that I love you, and I’m not going anywhere.”

She lowers her head again.

“Hey, look at me. I’m not going to leave you.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

Suddenly, a calmness comes over her. She looks at me.

“We’re here,” she says quietly. “I hope you like it.”

We exit the car, and I look around me. I leave her for a second and walk a little further.

My hands run over the bars of an old, rusty swing set.

“A park. Chocolate, how did you know?”

“I remember once you told me that your friends would invite you to play baseball with them, but you couldn’t because you had to go home and take care of Dee...growing up

the way that you did...you missed out on a lot of experiences that most of us take for granted. We used to chunk rocks at each other and push one another in the swings, but you and India never got that chance...you have made me so happy since the day I met you, and I just wanted at least one of your dreams to come true..."

I feel like crying, but she has already beat me to it.

"I love you, and I'm thankful that God has placed you in my life."

"I love you, too."

I take her in my arms. No one has ever done anything like this for me before. I knew that she cared about me, but I didn't know that her love for me ran this deep. My childhood is full of haunting memories, and she has managed to pull from that ugly heap of skeletons something beautiful that I can hold on to for the rest of my life.

"I also bought you a gift," she says and hands me a large, white box. I open it and find a baseball glove, bat, and ball, all autographed by David Justice.

"No way. Chocolate, how did you do this?"

"Hey, I have to use my good looks for something." She smirks.

"Girl" - -

"I'm kidding. So, are we gonna play, or what?"

"You're challenging me to a game of baseball?"

"That's right. I have a bat, a ball, and two gloves in the trunk. Unless, of course, you're afraid of getting beat by a girl."

"Oh, I doubt that."

“So, you accept the challenge?”

“You’re on, lady.”

I love Chocolate so much because she has totally forgotten about her looks just so she can play with me. She stands outfield on the pitcher’s mound, and she has kicked off her shoes under a huge pine tree. There is a look of intensity in her eyes as she pitches the ball. After she catches my first three hits, I know that I’m in for it. She hits fly balls way into the outfield and walks the bases as I run for the ball. We play a standard nine innings, and she ends up beating me.

“You cheated lady,” I say as I struggle to catch my breath. “Is that a trick glove or something?”

“Silly rabbit, tricks are for kids.” She runs her hand across my head. “I beat you fair and square, and you know it.”

We stand still for a while and take the cool, night air into our lungs.

“Smells like rain,” I say and stare at the gathering clouds.

“Yeah. Ready to go?”

“Nah.”

“I didn’t think so.”

We spend the next hour playing on the monkey bars, the slides, and the merry-go-round. We decide to leave the seesaw alone once Chocolate falls into some gravel and scrapes her knee.

“Ouch.” She sits on the ground and inspects her knees. “That kinda hurts.”

“Let me see baby.”

I bend down and wipe away the little specks of blood that gather at the base of her scraped knee.

“All better?” I kiss the spot tenderly.

“You know it.”

I stand and lift her by the hands.

“I never would have fallen if you hadn’t pushed me off.” She kicks gravel at me.

“I did not push you.” I kick gravel back at her. “I can’t help it if you’re clumsy.”

“I’m not clumsy,” she pouts. “You just don’t play fair.”

We save the swings for last. At first, we have a contest to see who can swing the highest, but once I start to win, Chocolate cheats by bumping into me. When I hurt myself by crashing into the poles, she sticks out her tongue and jumps out of the swing. I chase her around the park for a while. When I finally catch her, I pull her into my arms.

“Now who’s not playing fair?” I place her in a headlock.

“Trevor, stop! I’m tired. Don’t you see my red flag? Come on, man. Let me up!”

I let her go, but surprisingly, she wraps her arms back around me. Her playfulness is gone, and her sensuality has returned in full force. She has this uncanny ability to go from playful to provocative in a matter of minutes. She is unbelievably close to me; her nose brushes against mine.

“You think that was fun?” she asks. “Maybe you’ll get a chance to play with me again someday.”

“Vertically, or horizontally?”

“You are so silly.”

As she kisses me, tiny drops of rain fall between our lips.

“Chocolate,” I say in between kisses, “you’re going to ruin your dress.”

“Shh,” she whispers, “don’t stop. Who cares about the dress?” She grins. “I wore it for you anyway.”

“I knew it.”

The tiny droplets of rain become a steady shower. As we stand here, I begin to taste a mixture of this fresh rain and our tears. We don’t have to say anything. As we wipe each other’s tears away, I can’t help but recall something the bartender told me tonight.

Chocolate really is a keeper. All that matters is being in her arms at this exact moment, and for once, everything in my life feels right.

## AS LONG AS POP'S AROUND

In the middle of the day, India calls. She never calls me during my office hours, so I know that something is seriously wrong.

“Dee, hi,” I say as she finally picks up. “My secretary told me that you called earlier. Is everything OK?”

“Everything’s fine,” she says weakly. “I just wanted to hear your voice...”

“India, tell me the truth. I hear worry in your voice. Something’s wrong.”

“Pop is at it again. It’s...it’s almost October 8<sup>th</sup>, and” - -

“Dee, where is he now?”

“I don’t know,” she sobs. “He wasn’t here when I went to bed last night, and I haven’t seen him all day.”

“India, it’s twelve thirty in the afternoon. You should be in school.”

“I’ve been so worried about Pop that I couldn’t concentrate. I just...he’s my daddy Trevor, and I don’t know what I would do if something happens to him. Can you come home? Please?”

“India, I always do. Listen honey, don’t worry about Pop. I’m sure he’s fine. Just go back to school, and I’ll be there as soon as I can. Promise me you’ll stop worrying.”

The other end of the line is silent.

“India, promise me.”

“I promise.”

“That’s my girl. I love you. Everything’s going to be just fine.”

I hang up the phone. Every year around this time, India and I never know what to expect from Pop. I stare at my desk calendar as my eyes fall to the top of the page. October eighth. The memory is so vividly etched in my mind that I could easily draw a circle around it. I am very upset with Pop’s behavior. I can take his constant mood swings, but Dee doesn’t deserve the worry that he’s putting her through. She’s just a kid, and she has already been through enough pain in her life. It’s so funny how someone deceased can have an effect on your life. After all these years, mama’s memory still comes back to haunt us.

I cancel all of my appointments for the afternoon and go home to change. As I am getting ready to leave, Chocolate knocks at my door.

“Hey, beautiful.” She greets me at the door with a kiss.

“Hey, love. What’s going on?”

“I was about to ask you the same question.” Her eyes become puzzled as her hand comes up to touch my face. “Trev, what’s wrong?”

“India called earlier.” I pull away from her. “Pop has disappeared, and she’s worried. He...he gets like that during this time of year. I guess after all these years, he hasn’t gotten over the fact that my mother...she’s...So, I’m going home today. I promised Dee that I would find him.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” she asks.

“You would do that for me?”

“Of course I would.”

I think about her offer for a moment. “No,” I finally say. “Things might get a little ugly.

Thanks for the offer though.”

“Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?”

“Yeah,” I say wearily. “Wait up for me.”

“Sure thing.”

She stands in my doorway and waves a final goodbye as I speed off down the road.

The minute I turn the corner, millions of thoughts begin to creep up in my mind. What if I don't find him? What if he's had an accident somewhere? What if he's dead? Dead like her. I push these series of questions to the back of my mind and turn my thoughts toward my sister. I love that girl with all of my heart. It's not fair of Pop to leave her alone like this. We were all hurt behind mama's death, and we should draw strength from each other.

It is nearly three o'clock when I finally reach my hometown. Just looking at these neighborhoods brings back all kinds of fond as well as horrible memories. I turn down Cadel street and head toward the high school. The minute I pull up to the front of the building, I see her. She walks home; Her head is lowered, and her bag is thrown lazily across her right shoulder.

“India!” I pull my car into a nearby parking lot.

“Trevor!” She runs to my car and opens the passenger’s side. She gives me a huge hug.

“I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.”

“So, have you heard from him?”

I look into her eyes. They plead with me.

“Dee, I just got here.”

I watch the dismayed look on her face.

“Oh, OK.” She faces forward and her familiar coldness returns again.

“India, he’ll show up.”

She nods and turns away.

We ride in silence. As I pull into our driveway, my heart drops. The dirty, wooded porch and the yellowish-brown drapes in the kitchen window begin to torment me.

“It’s always hard for you to come back here, isn’t it?” She asks more of a statement instead of a question.

I nod.

“I can tell.”

“But I would face this house a million times for you.”

She finally looks at me.

“Come on, kid.” I rub my hand over the top of her head. “Let’s get out.”

We enter the house, and she goes to the back to change clothes. She returns wearing a pair of black windpants and a huge, Red Sox t-shirt. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail.

“I had to get comfortable.” She sits down on the couch and snuggles next to me.

“So, how has my baby sister been?”

“OK,” she replies.

“I noticed that you were walking by yourself today,” I begin carefully. “Are you making any new friends?”

“Trevor”- -

I throw up my hands. “Just asking.”

“Actually, I do have one friend. Her name is Tracey, and we’ve been hanging out together.”

“That’s cool.”

“She’s a Christian, and I go to church with her sometimes.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Church?”

She pushes me a little. “Trevor, stop it! It’s not that bad! And besides, I’ve never really had a friend before, so when she invited me to go with her, I couldn’t resist.”

“So, how is church?”

“It’s OK. I love the choir, and the youth minister is pretty cool. It’s also really nice to watch the people. Sometimes they rejoice, and other times they lift up their hands and cry. It’s really very beautiful. Trevor? Do you believe in God?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought about that before.” I look at her strangely. “Why, do you?”

“I don’t know. Possibly.”

“Sometimes I think I do,” I finally admit, “but then I wonder, if God really does exist, why does he allow all of these terrible things to happen?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

India informs me that she hasn’t eaten all day, so we take over the kitchen and make homemade hamburgers and French fries. For some odd reason, Dee has to cook with the radio on. We fry potatoes with the sounds of Destiny’s Child blaring in our ears. A little bit of oil begins to pop in the skillet and causes a small grease fire. India screams. I quickly put the fire out and take her in my arms.

“It’s OK, baby,” I say as I hold her close. “Everything’s fine now.”

“No it’s not Trevor! I am so tired of living my life in fear. When is it all going to end?”

“I don’t know Dee, but I wish it would end, too.”

After we get some food in our system, we go out and look for Pop. We search all his usual hangouts, and still, we find no sign of him.

I’m a little apprehensive about asking my next question.

“India, do you want...we could go and look in...maybe he’s at her grave. We could”-

“I don’t care,” she says sternly. “I just want to find him.”

Our journey to the cemetery is extremely uncomfortable for me. I look over at India's pained face, and I begin to wonder if this is a good idea. She slumps down in the seat; tears fall down her cheeks.

"Do you want to get out?" I asked her.

She says no, and her eyes become dark.

My heart stops with the engine of the car. The whole atmosphere falls silent, and darkness of the oncoming night hovers over us like disturbed spirits of the past. As I draw closer to the small plot of land where my mother lies, memories begin to rot in the bottom of my stomach. My eyes are fixed on the marker, and against my will, I return to October eighth, twelve years ago...

*Papa stands in the graveyard, and tears roll down his face. The story of mama's death made headlines in all of the local papers, so several people with cameras and notepads are all around us.*

*Papa's eyes burn a hole into the back of my neck. "What happened?" They scream and, beg me for an explanation.*

*I harden my heart. I won't tell. Too much is at risk. India and I can barely handle knowing...I look down at the five-year old who holds my hand. She isn't crying. At such a tender age, she is so cold. My eyes fall on the short, scorched, black hair that used to touch her shoulder blades. I can't help but notice the scar that stretches across the back of her neck, and her skin still smells like burning flesh. Her flesh. Images of a burning*

*body surface in my mind, and my eyes become as cold as India's as I watch my mother's casket lower into the ground...*

India calls to me from the car, and we ride home in silence.

Once we reach the front door, Pop answers. He holds a shot of whiskey in one hand and a brown, rimmed hat in the other. India falls into his arms.

"Papa!" She holds him close. "Where have you been? I was so worried."

Pop dismisses her with a gesture of his hand. Instead of consoling her, his attention turns toward me. He is drunk. I can tell by the glassy look in his eyes.

"What are you doin' here, kid?" he slurs. "You should be at home takin' care of my grandbaby."

"Shai's fine, Pop," I say to him. "I came up here because I was worried about you."

"Worried about me?" he asks in disbelief. "You have no reason to worry about me. Evander Shai Johnson always handles his business."

"Pop, you know what I mean! This happens every year! You always become distant around the time of her death."

"Is there anything wrong with wantin' to be by myself?"

"It is when you leave for hours at a time and you don't tell anyone where you're going! You had India upset. Pop, she was so worried about you."

"Trevor, you don't have to take up for me."

“That’s right,” Pop says angrily. “Every time this kid’s got trouble, you’re always jumpin’ in. It’s time for you to let her grow up. She’s not that five-year-old kid anymore. She’s childish enough as it is...”

I don’t have to say anything else because India’s dark eyes are stormy.

“And what exactly do you mean by that?” She boldly stands up to face Pop. “I’m immature because I was worried about you? Forgive me for being concerned about my own father!”

“Come on Dee, you know what I mean. All of this. The nightmares, the constant fear...grow up. You’re not a baby anymore.”

His words truly hurt her, and I reach down to touch her face. “Dee, it’s the alcohol talking. He didn’t mean it.”

“Yes I do!” he yells. “I can’t get a decent night’s sleep because she’s up every hour”-

“Can’t you see?” She sobs. “Can’t you see what she’s doing to us? Even in death, she’s tearing us apart”- -

“You leave Evelyn outta this! If it wasn’t for you two, she might still be here!”

“I can’t believe you still love her! After all she’s done to us, you still love her! You think I was too young to remember, but I do! I can recall everything! I remember the hell she put you through. I remember how she used to beat up on you and throw things when you wouldn’t give her money to buy alcohol. I remember how she used to beat Trevor for his lunch money when he was in the seventh grade.”

Her eyes become soft as she places her hand on his shoulder.

“Papa, remember how we used to sleep together? You would take Trevor and me in your arms and tell us that as long as you were around, everything would be OK. You took care of us. Why won’t you let us take care of you?”

“You don’t understand my struggle,” he mumbles.

“*Your struggle? Your struggle?* You didn’t feel the heat from the fire. You didn’t watch her burn.”

Her words cut through all of us.

“India, stop.” I plead with her.

It’s too late. Pop is in a rage; his voice booms like thunder.

“But I watched your eyes,” he says coldly. “I watched you stand in that front yard and stare in satisfaction as everything that I worked hard for burned to the ground.”

“We loved her, too!” she cries. “We loved her, too! Why are you treating us this way?”

“Because I’m sick of starin’ into your face and seeing her! You two are always complainin’ about the fire and watching her burn. Well, I have to live with her everyday by lookin’ at your face!”

“Do you think it’s been easy for me? I hate myself because I look like her! I am constantly in her shadow. I can’t sleep at night because she shows up in my dreams, I don’t have any friends because everyone thinks I’m weird, I hate looking in the mirror because she stares back at me...so stop wallowing in self-pity,” she says bitterly.

“You’re not the only one with a struggle.”

Before I have a chance to stop him, Pop grabs her. He slaps her forcefully across the face and shakes her by the shoulders.

“Don’t you dare talk to me that way!” he bellows. “I am your father!”

“Are you, really?” she cries and pulls away from him. “I wouldn’t know. Your beloved wife seemed to think otherwise. Or perhaps you’ve forgotten. Maybe you’ve forgotten the whole reason why the fire started in the first place...”

*“Evelyn, let the child go!” Papa reaches for Dee.*

*“Don’t come near her!” She jerks India around like a ragdoll in her arms. “Or I’ll set her on fire too! I swear I will! You can take the boy,” she nods at me, “but this is my child. My child.”*

*Papa makes another attempt, but mama is too quick for him. She pours the rest of the kerosene all over my baby sister’s hair and lights the match in the pocket of her apron.*

*“You think I’m playin’? Come near her again, and I’ll blow her up.”*

*India and I begin to cry at the same time.*

*“Papa!”*

*“Eve, don’t do this,” he pleads. “She’s our baby for christ’s sake.”*

*Mama just laughs; her high-pitched shrills fill the air.*

*“Is that what you think? You think she’s our baby? Look at this child’s face!” She grabs Dee harshly by the chin. “Look at her! Do you see an ounce of Johnson in her? She looks exactly like me! She looks exactly like me and her father...”*

India slumps over on the couch, and sobs fill her throat. I try to comfort her, but she pulls away from me. I sigh as she runs from the room.

“Pop.” I begin but can’t finish.

“I don’t wanna hear it, kid.”

I heave a sigh and travel down the hallway to my sister’s room. She packs her clothes in an overnight bag; her face is heavy and worn.

“I can’t take this anymore Trevor.” She faces me and wipes away her tears. “I am so tired of living my life in the past. I’ve go to get out of here.”

“Dee, where are you going to go?”

“I’m spending the night with my friend Tracy. Tomorrow, I’ll figure out what I’m going to do.”

“India, Pop...he needs you.”

She shrugs. “No, he doesn’t. I’m the whole problem. I look just like her, and he can’t stand being around me anymore. I’m just...what is happening, Trevor? We used to be so close. You guys were my world. Everything that I’ve ever done was for you. I thought he sincerely loved me Trevor, but now I see that I’m nothing but a replica of her in his eyes. What’s wrong with me? I don’t have any friends, everyone thinks I’m weird...now my own father hates me.”

“Dee, he doesn’t hate you.”

“Yeah, he does. I’ve always been more of a burden than a blessing.”

“India” - -

“It doesn’t matter,” she says. “I don’t need anyone to love me.”

“India, stop it. Everyone needs love. I love you. I love you Dee, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“Yeah,” she says coldly. “That’s what he said, too.” She picks up her overnight bag and heads toward the door.

I can’t stand the thought of being in this house without her, so I tell Pop goodnight and head home.

It is around three o’clock in the morning when I arrive at Chocolate’s doorstep. She greets me with a hug, and she wears those red, plaid pajamas.

“You’re awake,” I whisper. I am so grateful for her warm, inviting arms.

“I told you I would wait up for you.” She winks. “Come inside.”

I enter her doorway, and we settle on her living room couch.

“So,” she begins carefully, “how was your trip?”

“A disaster.” I cover my face with my hands. “India and Pop argued the whole time.”

“Was it that bad?” She cringes.

“Yeah. He...he slapped her across the face. Pop has never paced his hands on either of us before. That really surprised me.”

“How’s she taking all of this?”

“Not too well.” I sigh. “India...she really loves Pop, and he severely hurt her feelings.

I just hope she doesn’t shut us out. We’re all she has in the world, and I don’t want her to feel abandoned...”

Chocolate stares at the look in my eyes and becomes troubled.

“Trev, why don’t you stay with me tonight? I’m not sure that I’m comfortable with you being by yourself.”

I accept her offer.

In the middle of the night, Chocolate’s tender voice awakens me.

“Trev,” she says to me. “Trevor, sweetheart, wake up. You’re hurting me.”

I loosen my arms from around her back, and I can’t control the tears that are streaming down my face.

“I...I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“It’s OK. It was just a dream. You can go back to sleep now.”

I cry myself to sleep in her arms as thoughts of India and Pop cloud my mind. Although we experienced a great deal of strain on our relationship today, something in my entire being is telling me that this is only the beginning.

## RHYTHM OF TAMBOURINES

I wake up Sunday morning, get dressed, and pull my navy blue jacket over my shoulders. I haven't seen my sister in months. Ever since she's decided to become a Christian, she's been acting different.

"She's never here anymore," Pop said to me yesterday. "She's always spending time at that darn church. It's like she doesn't even need me! She barely talks to me. I didn't mean to hit her that day. I promise! She's my little girl. I never wanted to hurt her..."

My hands formed a fist and I had to bite my tongue to keep from screaming. "Maybe if you'd stop reminding her of the past we wouldn't be losing her!" I wanted to yell. "Maybe if you would use your words instead of a fist as a form of discipline she would still be around! Maybe if you were there you would understand why she has the nightmares. She was just protecting you..."

I said nothing. I can only imagine the loneliness that he is experiencing. India is the everlasting love in both of our lives, and I know that he is extremely lonely without her. As I leave my apartment and open the door to my car, a spirit of grimness overwhelms me. Pop may not be concerned enough about India's newfound faith to take action, but I

refuse to sit back and let her slip away from me. Our hearts are bound together, and I don't feel whole unless she's close to me.

I called Tracy's mom earlier in the week to find out the name of the church that she attends. Apparently, India talks about me all of the time because the soft-spoken woman knew exactly who I was. She gave me very specific directions and informed me that the services begin at twelve noon. India doesn't know that I'm coming, and in a way, I'm happy she doesn't. I want to see exactly what's causing her to draw away from her family.

I pull up outside of what looks more like of a community center instead of a church. It is brown, wooden, and situated behind a huge supermarket at a busy intersection with wide, stone steps that lead to glass double doors. The parking lot is full of busy people scurrying to get past those steps. I let out a loud sigh and follow their lead.

Just as I enter the building, two women clothed in red dresses greet me. "Welcome to our church!" They exclaim, wearing warm and earnest smiles. "We hope that you are blessed by the service on this morning."

Soft organ music rings in my ears as I walk down a side aisle. I ignore the gazing looks of the people around me. Their stares are not judgmental; I just feel slightly uncomfortable about being in this new atmosphere. I quickly glance over the congregation. I don't see India anywhere, so I settle in a pew close to the front of the church.

"Praise the Lord, everybody!"

“Praise the Lord!” The congregation replies to the voice. Many stand to their feet and begin to clap their hands.

“Praise the Lord, everybody!” The voice replies again. “We are about to begin our praise and worship service. And it’s oh, how I love Jesus...”

An attractive lady stands before the congregation with a microphone in her honey-colored hands. She is so beautiful, and it seems as if the other ladies in the church carry aspects of her beauty as well. She stands before us in a cream-colored suit, and her tanish-gold hair is piled to the top of her head in short, curly tendrils. She wears an air of royalty, and her skin is so radiant that it reminds me of a peach in its season of ripeness.

She continues to sing; her darkly rich voice fills the room. I don’t pay attention to the words that she sings. Instead, my attention turns toward the congregation. They receive every word that proceeds from her mouth. Her voice brings about some type of comfort that I cannot see with my natural eyes. People cry for no reason, and many stand to their feet and slowly lift their hands. I smile as I think about the conversation India and I had about this church. She was absolutely right. This *is* a very beautiful experience.

The lady begins to sing a number of fast songs, and the congregation rejoices. Even the babies happily play their tambourines like little tinkling toys to the rhythm of the music. It’s not necessarily the melody that appeals to me, but it is the words to the songs that she is singing.

“If your soul’s not anchored in Jesus, you will surely drift away...”

“I went to the enemy’s camp, and I took back what he stole from me...”

I spot India. She sits three rows in front of me, and she has completely lost herself in the service. She sings along with the congregation; her hand clapping blends in with the rhythm of their tambourines.

Before I know it, I clap along with everyone else. I can't really carry a tune, except maybe when I'm in the shower, so I don't even try to sing the songs. I'm content with just being here.

India glances over her shoulder and sees me. I wave shyly because I'm slightly embarrassed about my free-minded behavior. To my surprise, she begins to cry. She excuses herself from her row and makes her way toward me. In a few seconds, she is in my arms.

"God really answers prayers," she whispers through her tears. "I prayed that you would come this morning, and here you are. I feel really tingly on the inside. Something great is about to happen..."

I don't know how to take the statement that she has just made. I only came here to understand the reason behind her strange behavior. I refuse to believe that some divine authority has placed me in this service today. It all seems too much like a fairytale.

India takes my hand in hers, and we settle back in the cushioned pews.

"That's the first lady," she whispers as she turns her attention toward the front again.

"First lady?"

"She's the pastor's wife. Her name is Carlene Malone. She's pretty, huh?"

"Yeah." I sigh. Pretty is a definitely an understatement for this lady. "She's gorgeous."

“And there’s the pastor.”

Everybody stands as Pastor Malone enters the pulpit. He’s a short, little man with two distinctive, black moles on his left and right cheek and another above his right eyebrow. He wears a long, royal blue, clergy robe with white crosses down the front, and simple black shoes cover his feet. He takes these first steps into the pulpit with such assurance and affirmity, much like a king does as he stands before his throne. It seems as if there is an inevitable wind that pushes him. It is the same wind that whispers through the congregation as Carlene sings.

He gets down on his knees, places his hand to his forehead, and earnestly fills his facial expression. He prays. He blocks out all of the sounds around him as he focuses in this invisible God. Soon after, he rises from his knees. He settles in his seat; his eyes scan the congregation. They rest upon me. I clear my throat, shift in my seat uncomfortably, and then, turn away.

It is almost as if the Pastor has brought an ever present being with him because the people begin to worship their God in a slightly different manner. The choir, whose singing was an array of hand clapping and instruments, has now become caught up in this new atmosphere that the pastor has brought in. Tambourines begin to cease, soft whispers replace shouts unto God, and hand clapping becomes uplifted hands. I’ve never seen anything like this before.

Pastor Malone takes a cordless microphone from one of the men sitting on the front row. He laughs as if to say, “I know something that you don’t.”

There is something so familiar about this man, but I've never even seen him before. Something about him reminds me of my childhood, not the traumatizing times of my mother, but the peaceful, loving times that seemed so rare for us.

I stare at his wife again. The two could pass for twins. Physically, they look nothing alike, but yet they seem to be the same person. They have the same mannerisms, gestures, and posture.

The choir sings two beautiful songs—a fast, upbeat number that has everybody clapping and a nice, slow ballad. They sing about Jesus and how he “did it” just for them. I glance over at India, and I see tears roll down her cheeks. One of her hands is in mine; the other is lifted. Just watching her is stirring up a foreign emotion within me.

The pastor begins a sermon on living in the past and how the devil uses past events to keep us in a stagnant position. I'm feeling slightly uncomfortable. It is almost as if the man is holding a mirror in front of me and is forcing me to evaluate my life. Could he possibly know our background?

I look over at India again. She just sits here with her hand over her mouth, and her eyes are focused on the pastor. There is a deep longing in her eyes that I've never seen before.

After his message, Pastor Malone comes down from the pulpit and invites people to Christ. I don't quite understand this process, but I am intrigued as two of the men from the front row place chairs at the end of the altar. The pastor extends his hand and tells the congregation that it is never too late to give their lives to Jesus.

Pastor Malone also asks people to come down for prayer, and I watch as several ladies carrying small, blue cloths stand on either side of the center aisle.

India stands and wipes tears from her eyes. She is the first one in the aisle, and it seems as if the pastor is waiting for her. Once she reaches the front of the alter, she lifts her hands and lowers her head.

“I am so sick,” the pastor says to the congregation, “of the devil telling this baby that she is not loved. Sweetheart, you are much loved by the Father. He sees the hurt and the pain that you have been carrying around all of these years.” He laughs a little. “The Holy Ghost says no more. Today is going to be a new beginning for you. No more. He is setting you free from the spirit of torment that has been on your life since you were five years old. God is going to use you to bring the rest of your family to Christ...”

India screams, and I watch as the pastor pours a strange substance in his hand prays for her. When he places his hand to her forehead, she falls to the ground. I stand up to see what has happened, but the women in the aisle are on their knees covering her with those blue cloths.

The pastor prays for the others in the aisle; some walk away, some dance, and others fall the way that my sister did. I am very concerned that something has happened to her. I glance at the front of the alter, but she is no longer on the floor. The first lady’s arms are extended, and India hugs her willingly. I watch in awe as she holds my sister as if she was her own daughter. Both cry, and India allows her to wipe away her tears.

After church is over, the pastor greets us. He comes over and shakes my hand.

“God bless you, son,” he says and stares at me with an unusual type of intensity. “Come and worship with us again real soon.”

“Sure.”

The ride home is extremely quiet. Usually, India talks a mile a minute, but now she just sits here with a dazed look in her eyes. Once we pull into the driveway, she glances at me.

“Are you coming in?”

“I had planned on it,” I admit. “I...I sort of want to talk to you.”

“OK.” She shrugs.

We exit the car, and I watch as she brushes past Pop on our way into the door. They barely speak to each other.

“Hey Pop.” I give him a hug.

“Hey, sonny. How’s my grandbaby?”

“Shai’s fine.”

“What brings you here?”

“Well,” we sit on the couch, “I decided to go to church with Dee this morning.”

Pop groans. “Oh no. Not you too, kid.”

“Pop, I just wanted to see what it was all about.”

Pop sniffs. “You wanna know what it’s all about, huh? I’ll tell you what it’s all about. This church business is a bunch of crap. That girl’s gettin’ involved in a cult, I tell ya.”

“It’s not a cult, Pop.” India walks into the kitchen wearing a pair of gray sweatpants and a white t-shirt; her hair is pulled back into a ponytail. “And you shouldn’t talk about something that you don’t understand.”

“Oh, I understand perfectly,” Pop continues. “I’ve heard about this guy. He doesn’t even live here, and he decides to start a church in our town. Most of his members are young people. Young girls probably.”

“You don’t know him,” she says.

“Maybe not,” Pop smirks, “but I know you. I know that things have changed since you’ve been going to that church. You’re never here anymore, your head is constantly in that darn Bible, you’re always walking around with those headphones on you ears...I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

“You know what? You don’t know me anymore Pop, and you can’t change who I’ve become. I am a new creature in Christ.”

“I thought I raised you to be level-headed. You need to stop all of this mumbo jumbo about a God that doesn’t exist. Where is he? What’d he ever do for me?”

At first he speaks to her in a mocking tone, but now his demeanor become serious.

“When my Eve lay in that hospital bed with all of those bandages, did he save her life? No! When I struggled all those years to take care of you two, where was he then? You don’t appreciate nothin’ I’ve done”- -

“You can live in the past all you want,” she says as tears stream down her face, “but something has changed on the inside of me. All of my life, I’ve lived in fear. I was

afraid of mama, I was afraid of what people thought of me, I was afraid that you guys would leave me..." She looks at us accusingly. "And you did. You did leave me. Trevor, you moved away, and Pop's heart turned against me. I've felt alone for years. I needed a sense of stability in my life, and I've found that in the church. Since I've accepted Jesus as my savior, I'm no longer scared, and the nightmares have stopped."

Her last statement has caught my attention. "The nightmares have stopped? Dee, are you serious?"

She nods and leaves the room.

I barely hear Pop tell me to talk some sense into her. I only focus in on her last statement. The nightmares have stopped. I walk to the end of the hallway and knock on her door. She sits on her bed and holds a large pink-and-white rabbit in her arms.

"Can I come in?"

She looks up. "Sure."

I enter the room and rub the back of my neck. "Dee," I say as I sit down on her bed, "we need to talk."

"About what?"

"You know what this is about. This has nothing to do with you and that church. This is about what's going on between you and Pop."

"Oh, so everything is my fault, right? It's my fault that I look like her, it's my fault that I've actually found meaning in life, it's my fault that he hit me"- -

“Dee, you know what I mean. I don’t agree with the way that he treated you either, but he’s still your father. Don’t give him the cold shoulder. Believe it or not, he does care about you. He just doesn’t...express himself very well.”

“Trevor, I...I know that he loves me. It just gets hard sometimes. I had this whole superhero image of him, and now...I have to realize that he is flesh and blood like the rest of us.”

We fall silent.

“So,” she says to me, “did you enjoy the service?”

“Dee, I...”

She laughs.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t know. It was just...overwhelming. There were just so many things that I didn’t understand.”

“Elaborate, brainyack.” She runs her hand over my head.

“When you...when you fell. What happened? I mean...what did it feel like?”

“It felt...” She becomes quiet as if searching for the right words to say. “It felt weightless. It’s something that I can’t control. It feels like I’m fainting, but it’s comforting. I just...closed my eyes, and before I knew it, I fell limp in the alter workers’ arms.”

“Those are the ladies with the cloths?”

She nods.

“The pastor...you didn’t...you didn’t tell him what happened. You didn’t tell him about the fire, did you?”

“No, but...he seemed to know, didn’t he?”

I nod.

“He does that sometimes. It’s like...he knows situations in our lives before we even speak about them. The Holy Ghost tells him I guess.”

“The Holy Ghost?”

“Yeah.”

More silence.

“Well,” I say, “I need to head home, so I’ll let you get some rest.” I kiss her lovingly on the forehead.

“Trevor?”

“Yes?”

“Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?”

I sit in the chair beside her bed. “Sure.”

She stretches out on the blue-green comforter, and I run my fingers through her hair as she closes her eyes.

“Dee?”

“Yeah?”

“One more question. The first lady...when she hugged you...what did that feel like?”

“It felt...it felt like mom. Like she used to be. When she was pretty, and loving, and...and young.”

“I thought so.”

I sit here until she falls asleep, and I can't help but notice the changes in her sleeping pattern. She lies in one position, and it seems as if the babiness is removed from her face. For the first time in years, she sleeps in peace.

As I kiss her on the cheek and head toward the doorway, I'm not quite sure what to believe anymore. The logical part of me wants to agree with Pop, but something deep within won't let me forget the experience that I had in the church service this morning. I can't shake the intensity of the pastor's eyes, the praises of the people around me, or Carlene's beautiful voice. If there is a God, if my attendance at that church today was by divine appointment, he has definitely found a way to get my attention.

## LEAVING

My heart beats with every swipe of the windshield wipers. The people gather like vultures hovering over the night sky. They hold their breath as her feet touch the pavement. She is able to walk by herself. She is unaware of the cold wind that blows through her dress. She wears no jacket and is oblivious to the mist that falls softly against her cheeks. The attendant offers her an umbrella; she doesn't acknowledge him. She walks forward; her heels dig into the cracks in the sidewalk. They whisper as she goes by, but none dare touch her. She continues forward. Her lips press together.

"Marie, you have our sympathy."

"Marie, your father's in our prayers."

"Marie, she's in a better place."

"Marie, Marie, Marie..."

Her name blurs as she enters the church, and everyone's attention turns toward the family car again. The attendant lowers his head as he lifts her father into a wheelchair.

"Marie's his only child."

"He's not well."

"Barely seventy-five."

"She looks just like Em."

Organ music fills the room, and everybody sits. We try, try to ignore the dark casket at the front of the church.

“Marie.” Our eyes cry; our necks strain to get a closer view.

“Marie.” Our hands tremble and fidget with the soft, pink programs.

“Marie.” Our ears listen and wait to hear her acknowledge our presence. She doesn’t. She doesn’t cry, she doesn’t move, she just sits.

I look at her. She wears a solid, black dress that buttons to the neck, and her long, dark hair is pulled back into a bun. Dark glasses cover her eyes.

“Marie,” the ceiling fan blows.

“Marie,” the light fixtures throb.

“Marie,” whispers the black organ keys.

I cover my ears. This is a different place, a different time, but yet...

“Marie,” I whisper.

Marie. The only daughter of Paul and Emily Harrison. Marie, who moved against her parents’ wishes from Tulsa to Great Falls. Marie, who took full responsibility for the burial of her mother. I wonder if she knows, if she can feel the people gazing and whispering. I lower my head. I feel like a spectator, helpless like one of them.

“Are you a friend of the family?” An attendant stands next to me. “You may view the body if you’d like.”

I stand and follow the other people who have formed a line against the side of the church. Many express their condolences as they walk past. She is frozen. She doesn’t

even bother to wipe away her tears. I look at the man in the wheelchair. He wipes away her tears and holds her hands in his.

I stand in front of the casket and look down at the face of the woman who gave birth to her. She wears a navy-blue dress with white lace at the top. Her salt-n-pepper hair plays gently with her earlobes. Emily Harrison was beautiful. She's gone, and now, she'll never know. She'll never know her grandchildren, she'll never taste her daughter's wedding cake, I'll never have the chance to express to her how much her daughter means to me...

I glance down at Chocolate. She knows what I'm thinking because immediately she begins to sob. I sit beside her and I take her in my arms. I feel the vultures' eyes on me. They wonder, ponder over how I got to her. I ignore their gazes and take one of her hands in mine. Her father takes the other, and we sit through the rest of the service in silence.

I've been watching her sleep for the past two hours. After she finally changed her clothes, I convinced her to lie down. Several people have been by the house to bring covered dishes and to express their concerns, but the constant talk about her mother only makes her pain worse. I try to help her father with the stream of visitors and keep an eye on her at the same time. Three hours have past, and she lies here dormant in a fetal position. I frown as she jumps in her sleep.

“Daddy?”

“No baby, it’s me.”

“Trevor, don’t leave me.”

“I won’t.”

I rub her on the back until she finally drifts off to sleep again.

Paul is in the den. The people are gone now, and he has wheeled himself to the patio door. I join him, and we both stare into the night. He doesn’t say anything or acknowledge me. He just nods and continues to stare. I feel slightly uncomfortable, so I turn and walk back through the slim hallway that leads to Chocolate’s bedroom. My pager goes off, but I ignore it.

I look around me. The walls are pink and covered with several old certificates. I run my fingers along old, first place spelling bee ribbons and swim meet trophies. My eyes fall upon a photograph attached to the dresser mirror. She has to be no more than fifteen; she smiles back at me behind thick, framed glasses. She was still beautiful.

I turn around as she sits up in bed. She notices me staring at the picture and grins.

“Contacts.”

“I never noticed.”

I make my way over and lie next to her. “Are you OK? Are you holding up alright?”

“As best as I can.”

We both lie still and listen to the sounds of the night; our bodies create eerie horizontal shadows on the wall next to us.

“Nights are easier,” she whispers, “because she doesn’t leave me. She’s still here. But when I awake...she leaves. She’s gone again.”

She pauses before saying, “My daddy likes you.”

I raise my eyebrows. “How do you know?”

“You’re the first guy he’s ever allowed in my room.”

“He’s too old to do anything about it now.”

“Are you kidding? He’s not too old to use a bat.”

“Well in that case, I’m leaving.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“I won’t.” I sigh. “I’m so tired. I just want to lie here and”- -

“Fall asleep.” She finishes my sentence.

We face each other, eyes half-closed, not wanting this moment to end.

“Trev, I...”

“You can’t go back to sleep because it’s too quiet.”

“Sing to me.”

“Sing what? Chocolate, you know I can’t sing.”

“Sing that song that you always sing when you’re in the shower. Don’t be shy. I just want to hear your voice.”

She closes her eyes. I clear my throat and shift in the bed uncomfortably.

“Come on, Trev,” she pleads. “I’ll start you off. There will never come a day,” she sings, “you’ll ever hear me say that I want and need to be without you...”

“Baby just hold me. Simply control me. ‘Cause your arms, they keep away the lonelies...”

My pager goes off again. Chocolate opens her eyes as I look at the facing.

“It’s Chicken. She’s been paging me all day. I guess I ought to see what she wants.”

I search her eyes for a reaction. I don’t receive one. She just shrugs as I leave the room.

I don’t pay attention to Chicken’s broken sentences. All I hear is the word convulsion. Convulsions. Convulsions. My baby is vomiting and having convulsions. My imagination races as I speed down the highway. I see my daughter laying on a cold floor, her body shaking violently as a sticky, white film slides down her mouth. Why is this happening to her? Does she have a disease? Will she die? Is this hereditary?

“Please God,” my heart screams. “If there is a God, please don’t let my baby die.”

I speed past the city lights, past the winding highways, past the other cars at a narrow intersection. I pull up outside of Chicken’s apartment complex and meet them in the parking lot. She exits the car with Pop and Dee; Pop holds sleeping Shaira in his arms.

“Is she...”

I try to catch my breath, but the words don’t flow from my lips. Chicken looks at me and turns away; Pop does the same.

“Dee, is she...”

“She’s fine, Trevor.” She hugs me. She takes my hand in hers, and we follow Chicken and Pop into the apartment.

Pop takes Shaira to the back room, and Chicken sits on the couch with her face in her hands.

“Chicken, talk to me. What’s wrong with Shai”- -

“Do you have any idea of how scared I was?” she screams at me. “Trevor, I am so tired of doing everything by myself. You are never here when I need you!”

“Chicken, what did you expect me to do? I got here as fast as I could!”

“Well, that isn’t good enough. I thought our child was about to die, Trevor! I thought she was dying, and you were out playing around with your little girlfriend! Trevor, look. What you two are doing is none of my business. Yes, I’m still in love with you, and yes I want to be with you, but my child’s life comes before our relationship. We have problems between each other, but I thought that we could put our issues aside when it came to our child!”

“What did you expect me to do, Chicken? Her mother’s dead for Christ’s sake.”

“Her mother’s dead, but our baby could have died.”

“But she didn’t! She didn’t die, so stop nagging me about it! You know, I don’t understand you! I’m trying my best to be a good father to my child. How was I supposed to know that something like this was going to happen!”

“I didn’t know that this was going to happen either, but it did, and you weren’t there!”

“I was there for you when you decided to have her, whenever she needs something I get it for her, what else am I supposed to do?”

“This is not about money Trevor, this is about time. I did not create her by myself, and I will not raise her by myself.”

“So what do you want, Chicken? Do you want to get married? Yeah, let’s get married and Shai can watch us argue and fight like Pop and Ma used to do!”

“Now that’s enough.” Pop enters the den. “This ain’t got nothin’ to do with Eve and me, and you know it. Don’t try to blame your mistakes on us. I told you from the very beginnin’ to leave that broad alone. Now look where it’s got ya? Your own child sick and you’re out with her”- -

“I learned from you Pop! Where were you when Ma was sick, huh? You practically threw her into the arms of that other man!”

“You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about”- -

“No, you don’t know! You have no idea because you weren’t there...”

*Thump. He drops her on the floor again. They tumble down the stairs with child-like laughter. His fingers bleed and she has a cut above her forehead, but both are too intoxicated to notice. He roughly pushes her on the bottom step; she doesn’t mind. His fat stubby hand reaches up her thigh and leaves bloody fingerprints down her left calf. They both begin to drunkenly hum a tune that is only recognizable to them.*

*“Dance with me!” He pulls her up by the arms, and they twirl, twirl around the room like handicapped ballerinas. He loses his tie, her dress falls to the floor, but they both seem to keep a firm grip on the bottle of gin...*

“Trev, come on,” India calls to me. “Let’s walk.”

I wipe my eyes and follow her outside of the door. For a while, we don’t say anything. We just take in the foggy autumn air.

“How’s Chocolate?”

“She’s...coping. Dee, it was a different place, a different time, but yet...”

She nods.

“Shai’s fine,” she assures me. “The doctors don’t know exactly what’s wrong with her yet. They said it could be a number of things...Trevor, why don’t you come to church with me Sunday?” she asks quickly. “I know that you are under a lot of stress, and I think” - -

“Dee, I really don’t want to hear this now.”

“Well, OK.”

I’ve hurt her feelings. She shrugs, and we continue our walk in silence.

### THIS LOVE THING

Pop yells in my ear and tells me that I should have taken his advice from the very beginning. Although my ear is pressed against the receiver of the phone, I don't hear him. All I can think about is Chocolate and the fact that she's been here a whole week without even calling me.

"I told you this was bound to happen! Chicken and a beautiful lady like Chocolate just don't mix. You need to make a decision, sonny boy. Chicken is the mother of your baby and the mother of my grandbaby. Losing her would be losing family. I say dump the dumb broad. It's time for you to piece this family back together again."

"Chocolate's not a broad, Pop."

"Lady, broad, they all look the same when the lights go out. Listen. Shai is the issue here. I know I've instilled in you the importance of being a good daddy. With all of the mess your mother put you through, you outta want to be there for that baby."

"So what am I supposed to do, Pop?" I yell. "Am I supposed to let the lady of my dreams walk out of my life because of Chicken? I can't be with her because all we ever do is fight. I refuse to have Shai grow up watching Chicken and I argue like Dee and me had to do with you and Ma."

“All of these years and the truth is finally coming out. Didn’t I teach you nothin’ boy? I worked my rear end off to keep you and Dee together. That was the only reason I stayed with Evelyn as long as I did. That was the only reason, and you know it. I tried to keep you two together as best as I could, and this is the thanks that I get? Evelyn was sick, but she loved you two. I tried to stay with her to keep our family together. I just wanted you and Dee to grow up like normal kids.”

“Normal?” I ask disbelievingly. “You call living with an alcoholic mother normal?” I am in a rage as painful memories from the past come back to haunt me. “Part of our daily routine was watching her turn up a bottle of gin in front of the TV until she passed out on the living room couch. Dee and I had to carry her to the bedroom and put her to sleep. I can still remember our struggle up the hallway, mama’s body crashing against our backs. Or how about the times when you worked late and she was supposed to pick us up from school? We had to walk home in the rain, afraid to take a ride from anyone because they would ask us too many questions.”

“I would have left sooner,” Pop says, “but you know I couldn’t have. She wasn’t gonna let Dee go. She loved that child heavy, and when you love somethin’ like that, partin’ ain’t easy.”

“So you waited until the fire,” I say angrily as tears well up in my eyes.

“Oh what,” Pop hisses through his teeth, “so you blame the fire on me? I was on the outside of the house. You are the only one who saw what really happened...”

His words spit at me, and I hang up the phone. Tears fall from my eyes.

Every aspect of my life is going downhill. This thing with Chocolate is really worrying me. She's been here a whole week since her mother's funeral, and she hasn't even called me. I understand that people grieve in their own way, but I'm her boyfriend. I don't know why she still has a difficult time opening up to me.

I hate it when there is distance between us, so I grab my keys and head toward her apartment. Strangely, when I reach her door, it is open. She packs away boxes; her long, dark hair brushes her shoulder blades as she carries an oversized duffel bag to the couch. She turns around. Her eyes become soft as she spots me in the doorway.

"Uh...hi," she mumbles and quickly turns away from me.

"Hi yourself."

I come over to her, and I can't help but notice how she involuntarily moves away from me.

"You OK?" I brush my fist across her chin.

"Sure," she answers in a voice I've never heard before. "I'm fine, and you?"

Her countenance is like ice which reminds me of the conversation I had with Pop. The minute she refuses to look into my eyes, I know that something is wrong. I walk shyly over to her, and I rub the back of my neck nervously.

"Chocolate," I begin, "I want to talk to you."

"So talk." She continues to fumble with the clothes in the bag

“Chocolate, look. I...things have not been the same since your mother’s funeral, and I need to know what’s going on--”

“The same on your part, or the same on mine?”

She finally looks into my eyes. There is a dullness there that I’ve never seen before.

“Trevor, you can’t expect me to be the same after I suffered through a major loss like that. Maybe in your little world everything works out for you, but that’s not the case in mine.”

“Baby, where is all of this coming from--”

“I’m just...I’m really tired and there are a lot of things in my life that I’ve been thinking about lately, and I’ve been debating over what to do.”

“Well sweetheart, you’ve been here for a whole week without calling me. Why? I want to be here for you.”

“Do you really?” she asks. For the first time, I see doubt on her face.

“OK,” I sigh, “I feel like there are some things that we need to get out in the open. Now what did you mean by that? You know that I’m always concerned about you.”

“Oh really, Trevor? Well, you have a funny way of proving it. “Chocolate, baby, what are you saying? You know that you are a very important part of my life.”

“Yeah. The part that falls right under Chicken and your baby.”

“Oh, so *that* is what this is all about.” I am angry now. “Chocolate, you know how important Shai is to me. I’m sorry that I had to leave you, but she was having convulsions! I wanted to be there for her--”

“Trevor, do you have any idea how that made me feel when you walked out on me the day of my mother’s funeral? Do you have any idea? Of all the people in the world, I just knew that you would understand my pain. Especially after the way you consoled me when I first found out that she was sick. Bravo. You deserve an Oscar for that one.”

Her words cut through my heart, and I actually feel the manifestation of physical pain in my chest.

“I can’t believe that you think I don’t care about your mother’s death. I thought you knew me.”

“Yeah, I thought I knew you, too.”

I calm down and look around me. Boxes are scattered everywhere.

“What’s all this?” I ask her.

“Boxes.” She rolls her eyes. “If you must know, I’m moving.”

“Moving? Chocolate, why?”

“Daddy needs someone to take care of him. I am all that he has, and there is no way I’m sending him to a nursing home. So, I’m moving back home.”

“This is just great.” I throw up my hands. “You were going to move all the way to Tulsa and not tell me? Chocolate, that is so selfish--”

“Well now you see how I felt when you left me!” she yells as tears stream down her face.

“Oh, so now were playing games, huh?”

“No,” she snaps coldly, “that’s Chicken’s job.”

“I cannot believe that you were just going to leave without saying anything.” I shake my head disbelievingly. “Baby, don’t you know that I love you? How could you do something like this to me?”

“Why does everything always have to be about you Trevor? What about *me* and how *I* feel?”

She places her hands over her face. Her eyes are cloudy and red.

“Our whole relationship has been all about you and being strong for you and understanding your pain. I was there for you when Chicken found out that she was pregnant, I was there for you the first time you looked into your baby’s eyes, I stuck by you when Pop made rude insinuations about our relationship...Do you know how much that hurt me? Your father made me feel like I wasn’t good enough for you! He made me feel like I would forever be in Chicken’s shadow. When you were having nightmares about the past, it was my arms you cried in...and then the one time I needed you, you turned your back on me.”

“But...the only reason I left was because of Shai. She...she was having convulsions, and all I could think about was something happening to her! Chocolate, I just want to be a good father--”

“But what about being a good boyfriend? I am so tired of being juggled between Shai and Chicken and your past. Trevor, I have feelings, too. I’m tired of you leaving early when we’re hanging out together. I’m tired of Chicken calling just as you’re telling me how much you love me. I’m tired of seeing the soft tears that fall from your eyes as you

dream about the past. I guess I just want you to love me with no strings attached.”“Well, that’s impossible because as long as I am living, those three aspects will be a part of my life.”

“Then,” she says and shakes her head, “I can’t love you. I can’t love you like this.”

“Chocolate, I thought you understood--”

“I do, Trevor. Do you really think that I would be here this long if I didn’t? My problem has nothing to do with understanding you.”

“Then what *is* the problem, Chocolate?”

“Chicken’s been calling me, Trevor. She called me right after you left me on the day of my mother’s funeral. She was talking trash about how she will forever be connected to you. And you know what? She’s absolutely right.”

She turns away from me and wipes tears from her eyes.

“Chocolate--”

“No!” she yells and pulls away from me. “Love is not supposed to be this way! Why is it that every time I’m in love with someone, it’s a struggle--”

“But we can work this out.” I say to her. “Don’t give up on us yet--”

“Trev, I’m tired. I’m tired of being the strong tower of this relationship. I quit.”

“Chocolate, baby, wait.” I say passionately. “Don’t do this to me.” I take her face in my hands and wipe away her tears. “Chocolate, I love you. You remember how I told you that I can’t live without you? I meant that. I don’t want to lose you.”

“I don’t want to lose you either, but--”

“Then you don’t have to.” I am near tears. “I love you. I love you, Chocolate.”

“I never doubted the fact that you love me. It’s just...in this case...love isn’t enough. I need something more. I need stability. I need the assurance that you will always be here for me, and right now...we just don’t have that. I’m tired of warring against you. I can’t deal with this situation anymore. I can’t deal with it, and I can’t deal with her...”

“So this is it?” I ask. A lump forms in my throat. “We’re breaking up?”

She doesn’t say anything. She stares at the ceiling and folds her arms across her chest.

“Yeah, we’re breaking up.”

I head toward the door and turn around. I run my hand over my face. “I thought you were the one, boo.”

“Yeah,” I hear her whisper as I leave, “me too.”

As I walk back toward the street, my whole body becomes numb. It’s not until I am in my car that tears actually fall down my cheeks. I can’t believe that I let her slip right through my fingers. She was absolutely right. I *was* being selfish. I never once thought about how she felt when I left her the day of her mother’s funeral. And she *has* been there for me. When I thought that I couldn’t make it, she was always there to give me advice. I couldn’t even be there the one time she needed me most.

I pull up outside of Chicken’s apartment complex, and a feeling of hopelessness overwhelms me. My whole life is becoming one big blur; it’s hard for me to imagine the importance of living anymore.

I knock on the door. Chicken answers. She wears a soft-blue robe, and she frowns when she sees the look on my face.

“Trevor, what are you doing here? It’s one o’ clock in the morning.”

“I need to see my baby,” I mumble. I know that she probably thinks I’m crazy for showing up here, but I don’t care. “I know that she’s asleep, but I just...I just want to see her.”

She looks into my eyes and says, “sure.”

I sigh and walk past the den and kitchen and down the slender hallway that leads to my daughter’s room. She lies on her stomach in her crib, and she has her left thumb in her mouth.

“Hey beautiful,” I say softly. I run my hands across the top of her head. “Boy, are you a sight for sore eyes.”

She jumps a little as she feels my hand stroking her cheek.

“I’m sorry, baby. Daddy didn’t mean to scare you. I just...things are getting hectic around here. You know, I thought I had this love thing figured out. My relationship with your mom, Pop and Dee, and now Chocolate...I’m starting to wonder if true love really exists. I’m just tired of losing those I love over the decisions that I make in my life. You are my only source of stability, and even that’s on shaky ground...”

I look up, and Chicken stands over me. Her countenance is unusually reserved, but when she realizes that I am aware of her presence, her hardness returns.

“Boy, are you going for the depression of the year award?”

She smirks and folds her arms across her chest. I say nothing. I feel coldness growing in my heart again.

“Where were you?” she asks. “I tried to reach you earlier.”

“I was out.”

“Out where?”

“At Chocolate’s.”

“I should have known.”

“What did you say to her?”

“To who?”

“Don’t play with me Chicken. I can’t believe that you called her like that. You *know* her mother just died.”

“I did it because you lied to me,” she hissed. “You told me that your relationship with her was strictly platonic--”

“Chicken, it was! But you can’t...you can’t control who you fall in love with. You of all people should know that.”

“But she took you away from me!” she cries. “What was I supposed to do, Trevor? You don’t think that I knew you were interested in her? Even when we were together, I knew that I could never compare to her. You never looked at me the way that you look at her...and after...I thought that...after I gave you a baby- -

“After you gave me a baby? What are you saying?”

“I was losing you!” she yells. “I was desperate. I thought that maybe...if...if we had a baby, you would still be here. But your beautiful best friend saw right through me, didn’t she? What did I *do* that was so wrong? I just wanted us to be together.”

“Chicken, we will never be together! You got that? You’ve been lying to me this whole time, telling me that Shai’s conception was an accident--”

“But Trevor,” she cries as she touches my face, “please don’t be mad at me. I love--”

“No! You don’t love me!”

Shaira is crying now. She crawls to the bars of her crib and pulls herself up. I turn my back on them as Chicken tries to comfort her. I always told myself that I would never argue in front of my children, and here I am doing the same thing that used to scare me as a child...

*“Papa!” Dee yells as Mama grabs her by the arm. “Papa, help!”*

*“Evelyn, it doesn’t have to come to this.” I hear Pop say. “Let the child go.”*

*“This is my child.” she says firmly as she holds on to Dee. “You can go if you want to, but you can’t have her.”*

*With one loud chuckle, she drags my screaming sister into her bedroom and closes and locks the door. Papa is in a rage. He bangs on the door so hard that he makes imprints in the wood.*

*“You stay here,” he says to me. “I’m gonna see if I can get through the window.”*

*I look at his face, and for the first time in my life, I see fear in his eyes...*

The second he leaves, I smell smoke. I can see light form under the door, and I hear my sister's horrible screams. I kick open the door. Heat from a growing fire burns my skin. No time, no time...

I am not at Chicken's place anymore. I am outside running toward my car, running for the one person who always understands me.

"Dee," I say into my cell phone, "everything is... my life is falling apart. Listen, I know that I don't...you said that God stopped you from having nightmares about the past. Do you think He could help me?"

I close my eyes and listen to my baby sister's tender voice as she prays for me. As she whispers her soft cries to the Lord, all of the hurt that I've felt today begins to lift.

### FRONT OF THE ALTAR

I'm not sure of anything anymore. I thought that Chocolate was the lady that I want to spend the rest of my life with, but I was wrong. I thought that if I suppressed the truth about my mother's death, I would forget. Instead, the memory comes back to be in a flood and pours down like a hailstorm in the corners of my mind. I'm tired of this. If I don't get any peace soon, I'm going to go crazy.

I walk up the stone steps; something inside of me yearns to be beyond those huge doors. If I could feel the serenity that I felt when Dee prayed for me. If I could just fall on my knees and imitate the people that were in that worship service, maybe this abstract God will feel sorry for me and hear my cries.

I enter the church; an unusual quietness comes over me. The sense of serenity overwhelms me, so I fall to my knees and allow my surroundings to comfort me. Before I can control myself, I begin to sob. I cry out for Chocolate, for my mother, for Pop and Dee's relationship. I cry out for my baby and the fact that she'll never experience the security of living with both parents. I also cry out for Chicken. Because of Chocolate, I now know how it feels to be in love with someone you can't be with. And she gave me something that Chocolate didn't-a part of me.

I can't cry anymore. Memories begin to flash through my mind. I see myself as a little boy following my mother around the house. I can smell her perfume. As she bends down to kiss me, her dark hair tickles my face. I see Chicken. Her belly sticks out under a pair of blue windpants. She allows me to kiss her stomach; her fingertips come to rest on the top of my head. I see Pop and Dee. She has had another nightmare, and Pop takes her in his arms and kisses her tears away. I see myself look into my baby's eyes, and I am able to hold her for the very first time...I see Chocolate. She laughs. Her head tilts back in a way that only belongs to her.

I want these memories to last; I want to hold on to them forever, but they begin to fade and are replaced by a faint yet audible voice.

"You can experience this love again on a greater level. Surrender your heart to me. My love is eternal..."

It startles me, so I quickly rise from my knees.

As I turn to leave, I hear a soft voice come from the front of the church. I walk down the middle aisle to get a closer look. At the altar sits a young woman. Although her back is turned toward me, I can still see a distinct shadow of her face. She cries, but her tears are not like mine. She speaks in what sounds like a foreign language, and her hands are lifted. She is pregnant, and from the size of her middle, she is due very soon. I stand and watch her for awhile because I'm not ready to go just yet. Maybe she can help me. Maybe she can tell me about the voice that whispered in my ear.

"Excuse me, Miss?"

She turns around and wipes tears from her eyes.

“Hi.” She smiles and reaches for my hand. “I’m sorry for being in here. Our church is locked up for the night, and I needed to lie on an alter.”

“Oh no,” I say and quickly run my hands over my eyes. I don’t want this total stranger to see my tear-streaked face. “I’m not in charge here. As a matter of fact, I’m not even a member of this church...”

“Oh. Are you saved?” She looks into my eyes, and I can tell that she is genuinely concerned.

“I...I don’t know,” I admit as I sit next to her. “I don’t know anything about God really.”

“I understand. Well, I’m saved now, but before, I was confused about the whole thing also. I never knew that Jesus loved me.”

“Is that him?” I point to the figure hanging on the cross above us.

She nods.

“What does...what does he sound like? Because as I was sitting back there, I could have sworn that I heard someone speak to me...I know it sounds stupid, but” - -

“No,” she answers, “it’s not stupid.”

I just shrug.

We fall in silence and allow the darkness and comfort of the sanctuary to sooth us. After awhile, my eyes fall upon her stomach.

“Twins,” she says.

“May I?”

“Sure.”

“Hey, little ones.” I rub the form of her expanded middle. “Boys?”

“A boy and a girl.” After a moment, she speaks again. “Do you have any kids?”

“One. A little girl. Shaira Evan. Her mom and I...we made some mistakes with her. We’re not together, and I hadn’t exactly planned on raising a child in an unstable environment.”

“I...understand,” she stammers. “My babies’ father and I are not together either. He left me earlier this year. He doesn’t even know that I’m pregnant.”

“Well, don’t you think he has the right to know? I mean, these babies are his own flesh and blood. You have to tell him.”

“I can’t,” she says sadly. “I can’t tell him because he’s dead.”

“I’m...I’m so sorry.”

She just shrugs again. “It was hard at first, but I’m able to deal with it now. Jesus has drawn nigh to me. *He* is the father of these babies.”

“You say that with such confidence. How can you believe so strongly in a God that you can’t see?”

“In a God that I can’t see?” she asks in disbelief. “Look around you. His presence is in every aspect of mankind. He is gracing us with his anointing right here and right now. Don’t you feel it? Isn’t there a reverential presence in this room that makes you want to lie prostrate in front of this cross?”

I don't say anything, but in my heart, I know that what she is saying is true. I felt it when I went to church with India, I felt it when she prayed for me, and I definitely feel it now.

I look up at the huge figure on the cross before me. Nails are driven through his wrists, and blood appears to drip from his side. On his head is a crown of thorns. Just looking at this image is stirring up a strange emotion within me.

"Tell me about him."

"You honestly don't know?"

I feel embarrassed, so I stare at the floor.

"No, don't." She lifts my head. "I would love to share Jesus with you."

I listen as the lady tells me about Jesus, the Son of God, being born of a virgin to take on the sins of the world. She explains to me the significance of the cross and how Jesus' blood paid the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. It all sounds so unbelievable. How can someone be born of a virgin and die for the sins of the world?

"Our duty is to give our lives to him so that he can use us for his glory. Once we accept him, we have to live according to his word." She places her hand on The Holy Bible. "Do you understand?"

I nod.

"So, how about it?"

"How about what?"

"Are you ready to give your life to Christ?"

“I...I don't know. What do I have to do?”

“Well, Romans 10:9 says that if you confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you shall be saved.”

“That's it?”

“That's it. I'll pray the prayer of faith with you if you want me to.”

This whole conversation defies all logic, but deep down, I know that this is what's been missing from my life.

“I uh...I'm new at this prayer thing.”

“It's OK.” She takes my hands in hers. “I'll help you.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. She doesn't rush me; she gently rubs my hands.

“Jesus,” I begin, “I don't really know you, but I..I can't..I can't do this,” I finally blurt out.

“I'm a little nervous about this thing too,” she says shyly. “Maybe if I pray for you, you'll become more confident, OK?”

“Well...OK.”

She takes my hands in hers and closes her eyes. I watch as she prays for me. There is something so beautiful about her. I can't put my finger on it, but it's definitely not physical. She has a full, rich beauty that extends far beyond outward appearances.

We talk a little longer, and she gives me a hug before she turns to leave. I watch her walk away, and I definitely know what I have to do.

The next morning, I come back to the same church and I give my life to Christ. As I walk down the aisle to the front of the altar, I keep wanting, needing to see the eyes of that lady, but she is nowhere to be found. She helped me to make the most important decision in my life, and I don't even know her name.

## BOOK TWO

### CLEANING OUT CLOSETS

In my dreams, I feel his presence. He comes home carrying a brown paper bag full of spices and seasonings from the grocery store around the corner. He greets me at the door with a kiss; his arms wrap around my body. I return his kisses with my own. I smell his cologne, I welcome his large inviting arms, and I feel the roughness of stubble against my cheek. But I am not dreaming anymore, and his presence is no longer here.

I open my eyes, sit quietly in the bed, and I wait to hear something, anything that holds a sense of security for me. Instead, I only hear piercing wind. Wind that subtly sings the soft strains of death. I pull my knees closer to my body; sobs feel my throat. It has been three weeks since his death, and already, it seems like forever. It was a little easier to deal with before. People were always surrounding me, laughing and talking about how things used to be. I'm all alone now, and the laughing has stopped. People have stopped calling, and I have to force myself to make it through the day without breaking down. If only he hadn't promised me. He told me that we were going to be together forever and have two, maybe three, kids. Now look at me. I'm a widow at the age of twenty-four. So much for promises.

I feel retching movements begin to form in my stomach, so I rush to the bathroom before I become sick on my bedroom floor. I have been sick periodically since his death,

so the violent churning in my stomach comes as no surprise. After I feel better, I rise from the bathroom seat and stare at my reflection in the mirror above the vanity. I stand here in a huge, red Atlanta Braves t-shirt, and my reddish-brown hair falls around my face. My eyes are swollen shut, and my face is flushed. I don't even look like myself anymore. When Damien died, so did a very important part of me.

I return to my bedroom and sit still for awhile. I listen to the wind blow in ripples against my windowsill. As I stare at the ceiling, tears form in my eyes again. Everything around me is so unfamiliar. I'm scared of each day because I must face each one by myself. My body trembles as I rise from my bed and make my way to the front door of my house. It is just before dawn, and as I stand in my front yard, my hair tickles the back of my neck. I close my eyes and allow the rising sun to engulf me like an old friend. I love the sun. It never changes and is a symbol of the consistency that I so desperately long for again. I open my eyes and look around me. Madison Hills is a beautiful residential area with long, winding streets and tall oak trees that reach toward the heavens. This is the perfect place to start over. A half smile spreads across my face as I walk to the end of the yard and remove the huge, yellow "For Sale" sign from the ground.

"Whatever Damien and I had in the past is over." I tell myself out loud. "This is my home now."

I turn away from the street and walk back inside of my new home. I stand in the doorway and look around; a bitter taste of unfamiliarity fills my mouth. Everything in my new home is warm and inviting, yet the emotions I feel towards my atmosphere are

strangely distant. On the surface, it is my dream home. To my left is my office, which contains rows and rows of sketchbooks and art supplies that I have used while teaching painting at a magnet school. To my right is my huge, spacious kitchen with the winding counter top. I'm not much of a cook, but if I ever become good at it, I'll need a large area to express myself. My den contains a completely furnished living room set with dark hues of brown and orange.

Quietly, I walk over to the mantle above my fireplace. My eyes are drawn to a portrait of Damien and me. The background is dark, and our faces are pressed against each other. As I take my hands and run my fingers along his painted face, my heart begins to ache. He was so beautiful. Damien was dark-skinned with thick kissable lips, perfectly shaped eyebrows, and a shiny bald head that I loved to run my fingers over. On the day we took the portrait, he was coming down with the flu. It was nearly impossible to set up another appointment, and Damien knew how important this portrait was to me. He ended up going anyway just to make me happy. Our setting was so hilarious. We had to keep taking breaks because Damien's nose wouldn't stop running.

I run my fingers through my hair; painful memories flood over me. This portrait is the only item that I have besides my wedding ring that reminds me of Damien. About a week after he died, I was offered this job as an art teacher at an elementary school for the gifted and talented, so I left my family and friends behind, traveled three states away to Great Falls, and moved into this comfortable two-bedroom house. Damien and I had just

bought a house together, and I couldn't stand living there anymore. The very thought of sleeping in the same bed that he once slept in made me sick.

I turn away from the portrait, and my anger rises. His death was not fair. We were supposed to be together forever.

I've been here for two weeks, and I haven't done much exploring, so I decided that now is a better time than ever. I place white tennis shoes on my feet and walk out of my house. From my driveway, I see my neighbor's children chasing each other around the yard with water guns. Seeing babies and children is especially hard for me, but I quickly brush that pain aside. I have done enough grieving for the morning.

They stop for a minute as they see me leave. The oldest, a little girl around seven wearing several ponytails and pink overalls, waves at me. I smile and wave back. Her little brother just stands there and watches. As I pull off down the street, I see him from my rearview mirror. He waves.

I stop at a red light and search through my CDS. I look for anything that will make me feel better. I threw away the songs that remind me of Damien a long time ago so that I don't have to worry about breaking down on the highway. I decide on Celine Dion's "Declaration of Love". I know that people in nearby cars are staring at me, but I don't care because they have no idea of the pain that I am going through. I sing to the top of my lungs and bounce around to the beat of the music. I'm not much of a singer, but I can carry a tune well enough to make it through a single song.

I don't have the slightest idea as to where I'm going, and I don't really care. Any place that keeps my mind off of Damien is fine with me. My first stop is the video store. I love all types of movies, but today I'm looking for something that will make me laugh. I look at their selection and frown. I travel to the cartoon section and decide on Felix the Cat and a series of Simpson and South Park episodes. This ought to do it. I stand in line for at least twenty minutes behind this huge Caucasian man dressed in all black who reminds me of a sumo wrestler. Then, I stand here for another ten minutes and fill out a membership card.

After I leave the video store, I decide to stop by the school and finish decorating my classroom. As I enter the huge double doors, I receive many stares from other teachers. Some are probably staring at me because of the way that I am dressed. Others, no doubt, are amazed at my young appearance. It is so hard for the job market to accept a young, black career woman who has everything going for her. My very presence can be intimidating sometimes, and I actually enjoy it when people get all itchy around me. It makes me feel in control. These people just don't know. If sweats and a ponytail intimidate them, I hate to see them on Monday morning. They haven't seen anything yet.

I open the door to my classroom and frown. The day I moved to Great Falls, I dropped off a lot of stuff here. Now I have to face the consequences of cleaning it all up. I am here until about three o'clock in the afternoon before I am finally satisfied with the progress that I have made. All of my books are placed neatly on the bookshelf, and my desk is spotless except for a picture of my goddaughter Bella in a small, glass picture

frame. I jump up and down, feeling sweat run down my brow. It's really great to actually feel blood run through my veins again.

My stomach growls, which reminds me that I have no food in my refrigerator. I stop by the mall, pick up a copy of Iyanla Van Zant's In the Meantime, grab a gallon of Neapolitan ice cream, and I am on my way back home. The minute I turn into my new neighborhood, a great sense of satisfaction floods over me. This move was the best decision I've made since Damien's death. My process of healing has to begin somewhere, and what better place than in a new environment?

Once I turn my keys in the door, I am tripping over boxes. I haven't fully unpacked, but I'm too tired now, so these boxes will just have to wait. I feel sticky, so I place my ice cream in the freezer and hit the shower. Since I'm in here, I may as well wash my hair. After I become one with the hair dryer, I curl up on my living room couch with my new book and my ice cream. I don't even bother with a bowl because I'll have to dig around in boxes to find a clean one. Iyanla's books never cease to amaze me. This lady is my inspiration. When I think about her life story and everything she's been through, I know that I can make it.

The sun is finally going down, and I am halfway finished with this book. Iyanla is talking about how different rooms represent different levels in our relationships. I sit here and think about what room I'm in. I grin to myself. I'm cleaning out closets.

I place the book on the coffee table, turn on the television in my entertainment center, and press play on the VCR. I sit indian style, the theme song from "The Simpsons" fill

my ears. Five minutes later, I am cracking up. Nobody can make me laugh like Homer. Midway through Felix, I find myself drifting off to sleep. I am quite comfortable lying on my stomach with my right leg hanging off the edge of the couch. I have found that my best sleep comes after a long day of hard work. Maybe tomorrow I won't be so tired, and I can actually unpack.

Just when I feel myself drooling on one of my throw pillows, I hear the phone ring. I sit up and stare at the clock on the kitchen wall. It is twelve-thirty in the morning. Who could be calling me this late at night? The only person who has my new number is Marian, and she goes to bed as soon as the sun goes down.

"Hello," I say, barely a whisper. "Who is this?"

"Boy, what a way to greet your best friend," a raspy voice answers back.

"Casey, hi! I've missed you so much. How are you? How was your trip to Italy?"

"It was great, but it always feels good to be in the states. Anyway, I was very shocked to come home after three weeks and find a 'for sale' sign in front of my best friend's home and no new address or telephone number. I had to call Marian to find out where you were. I'm so sorry to hear about Damien's death. Why didn't you call me? You know I would have come back in a heartbeat."

"Yeah, well," I sit up and wiping tears from my eyes. "It's OK. Death is a part of life, I guess."

"But Miles, you know I wanted to be there for you. Why didn't you call me?"

"Casey, it's OK, really."

“So, how are you holding up? Marian told me you decided to move to Great Falls about a week after the funeral. She also told me that you left all of your belongings with her. She’s really worried about you.”

“Is she really?” I roll my eyes.

Casey just sighs. “It’s typical of you to shut everyone out. You can’t go through this type of pain alone. Marian loved Damien just like you did. You should find comfort in her--”

“Whatever,” I say painfully. “Can we please talk about something else?”

“I’m just concerned about you.”

“I know you are Case. It’s just that...talking about him isn’t making me feel any better. Let’s talk about you. How was your trip, and how is Bella?”

“Perfect,” Casey exclaims. “We had a great time...”

I try hard to listen, but Casey has opened up too many wounds. I draw my knees closer to me as I feel tears form in my eyes. Casey and I are too much alike, so I know that in a few minutes she’s going to realize that I’m crying.

“This is harder for you than it appears, isn’t it?”

“No, I’m fine, really. It’s just...taking awhile to get over the fact that Damien...he’s--”

“You don’t have to say it,” Casey says in a motherly fashion. “Listen, honey, you don’t sound very well. Maybe I need to come and visit you for awhile. Bella could stay at home with Bow, and--”

“Casey, you just got back in the country. There is no way that I could ask you to do that.”

“It’s no big deal. I’ll do anything for you.”

“Casey, you cannot tell me that you’re not tired after spending almost a month in a foreign country.”

“OK, so I’m a little tired,” she admits, “but it really doesn’t matter. This is about you and how you feel. If you need me, you know I’ll be on a plane first thing in the morning.”

We talk for about two hours, and I have to admit that if she was here, my grieving process would become a lot easier. I think about telling her this, but I quickly change my mind. I’m not quite sure I want her to see how much I’m grieving. I don’t have time to hear her teasing me about how skinny I’m getting.

“Miles, are you sure you don’t want me to come down?”

She pleads with me; I can hear it in her voice.

“I’m sure.”

“Alright. I’m about to put Bella to bed. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, OK?”

“OK.”

“Miles, remember that I love you, and there is nothing that I would not do for you.”

“I know Casey, and I love you too. I’ll talk to you later.”

I hang up the phone and slam my head against the back of the couch. Why couldn’t I just tell her how I really feel instead of pretending that everything is OK?

“Way to go Miles Frazier. Once again, you’ve let foolish pride interfere with logical thinking.”

I place my face in the palm of my hands and heave a sigh. Truthfully, I could use Casey’s company. Just hearing her voice tonight brought me so much comfort. I don’t even know why I didn’t tell her about my move or Damien’s death. I guess I just didn’t know how.

I stand, stretch, and turn off every light in the house before climbing into bed. It takes me thirty minutes to fall asleep, and when I finally do, I'm dreaming again...

*It is my wedding day. Damien is across the room talking to this tall guy dressed in a black and white suit. I can't help but notice how handsome he looks. It has nothing to do with the fact that he is dressed in a white tuxedo with a long tail. He just has this certain air about him that makes people want to be around him. He catches me staring at him and drags me out onto the dance floor. "Falling Into You" is playing, and he is spinning me around so fast that I become dizzy. His huge bellied laugh turns into my screams as my dream quickly switches. I am standing in the front of his casket, and the whole congregation holds their breath as I fall to the ground like a child. They feel sorry for me. I can hear their whispers as I cry. Their burning eyes fall on me, and I can hear their lips say, "that poor, young, widow..."*

I am awake and I run to the bathroom. Once I feel better, I open my small Bible in my nightstand and try to remember the Psalms that my mom used to read to me as a child. I read Psalms 27 out loud, and think about the last verse.

"Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart."

If I ever needed any strength in my life, now would be the time. I've never considered myself to be a religious person, but I fall asleep with that book in my hands.

### A GENTLE WIND

It is early Sunday morning, and I awake to small hands touching me on the cheek.

“God mommy, I forgot where the bathroom is,” Bella whines.

I look up into her face. She shifts from one foot to the other.

“God mommy, hurry!”

I jump out of bed, take her by the hand, and lead her into my bathroom. She smiles and closes the door behind her.

Apparently my telephone conversation with Casey was not enough to satisfy her need to check on me; as soon as I got off the phone with her, she went to the airport, bought two tickets to Great Falls, and now she and my beautiful Goddaughter Bella have become cohabitants of my new life without Damien.

I stare into the mirror with an irritated look on my face. I love Bella with all of my heart, but I am a little mad at her for waking me. Last night was the best sleep I have had since I’ve been here.

I yawn and leave my bedroom. Casey stands in the living room; her back is turned to me. She is on the telephone.

“Oh great! That’s the one I’m looking for,” she says excitedly. “Now, what did you say her name was again?...Excellent. Can you give me directions? I’m coming from Madison Hills.”

She motions for me to give her some paper, and I watch as she scribbles sloppily on the back of a torn envelope. Bella comes from the bathroom and joins me at the kitchen table for half of a cinnamon raisin bagel and a glass of cranberry juice.

“Excellent!” Casey yells and sits beside her daughter at the table. “I’ve found us a place to worship this morning.”

“Worship? Casey”- -

“Hey,” she says defensively. “It will do you some good. You need to be in a place where the power of God can be manifested in your life. That’s the only way you’re going to be able to speak to your situation and change your present state. Isn’t that right Bella?”

“Yep mommy.”

“Casey,” I groan, “do you realize how long it’s been since I’ve been to church?”

“Sweetheart, it doesn’t matter how long you’ve strayed. What matters is the fact that you’re coming back.”

“Casey, I,” I begin timidly, “I’m a little apprehensive.”

“Don’t be,” she says reassuringly. “Have I ever steered you wrong? Well, have I?”

“No.”

“That’s what I thought.” She winks.

“Since when did you become so spiritual?” I sigh and take a bite of my bagel.

“Since I’ve realized that I am nothing and He is everything.” She points to the sky and grins. “All my life I’ve been searching for something. I thought I could find it in Bow, in Bella,

in my job...there was this void in my life that nothing could fill except the love of God. After I developed my relationship with Him, everything else fell into place.”

I look into her eyes, and she takes me by the hand.

“You should try Jesus. Hey, you’ve tried everything else, only He won’t let you down. I’ve watched you build your hopes and dreams around Damien and your life together, but he was carnal sweetheart. He was flesh. God is a spirit. He will never leave you or forsake you. You need to build your hopes on things eternal girlfriend.”

“I hear you.”

“Anyway, I didn’t mean to go off the deep end with that. I just want you to know that God loves you, and He desires to use you. You’re special to him.”

She hugs me and stands to her feet.

“Come on Bell, let’s get ready for church.”

I sigh as they leave the table; a million thoughts cloud my mind. I believe in God, but I never thought that He could be the answer to all of my problems. I smile a little and think about the words that Casey just said. If God loves me so much, why did he take my husband away from me?

In about two hours, I ride down the highway dressed a solid cream suit. My hair is tucked simply behind my ears. I look over in the driver’s seat at Casey. She sings quietly to herself. Her voice is so melodious; the only words I can make out are, “you won’t leave the same way you came.” She catches my stares, and she winks at me.

We park outside of a huge modern church with a life center and childcare facilities. Casey steps out of the car and begins to talk to her daughter.

“Now, when we get in this church,” she says scornfully, “no talking, no moving around in the seats, and no asking for water. If you have to use the bathroom, you need to go now. Do you have to go?”

“No mommy.”

“Great. Now let me look at you.”

I watch as she ties the bow in the back of Bella’s pink and white dress. She takes her daughter by the hand.

“This service is going to be exactly what you’ve been missing,” she says to me. “I can feel it.”

I don’t know why I feel so strange, but the minute we enter the church foyer, I feel uneasy. It has been so long since I’ve even passed by a church, and the last service that I attended was my husband’s funeral. I look over at Casey. Her eyes are closed and her hands are lifted. She feels that I am watching, so she opens her eyes and takes me by the hand.

“You’re ready,” she says to me.

I don’t understand what she means by this, but I follow her into the church anyway.

Once we enter the doors, a feeling of peace overwhelms me. A melodious sound comes from the huge organ in the choir stand, and everyone stands to their feet with uplifted hands. I look around me. The whole church is wine-colored with high ceilings that form an oval. The windows are antique stained glass with images of angels blowing trumpets. The pews form a perfect semicircle on each side of the church and separate to form a long, center aisle.

In the pulpit stands a beautiful woman. She is dressed in a long, black clergy robe; cream crosses line the front. Her long, dark hair falls directly at the ends of her shoulder blades, and

her cheeks are streaked from the tears that fall from her closed eyes. He whole face is red; she speaks in a foreign language.

I want to ask Casey who she is. I look over, and Casey is in a world of her own as the whole congregation erupts into handclapping. People cry and shout out to God. The music stops. The only sounds that I hear are the cries of the people. Everyone's arms are stretched out wide. I think about how Casey and I played in the rain on yesterday. That feeling of freedom was nothing compared to how free this congregation feels. All that matters is being in this presence that is so unfamiliar to me.

I want to feel like all of the others around me. Just watching them, their uplifted hands, makes me want to worship this God that I left behind as a child. I slowly lift my hands as I hear the beautiful lady's voice.

"We welcome your presence oh Lord. Holy Spirit, we employ thee. We love you and adore you. We submit to your authority..."

Before I know it, tears begin to fall from my eyes. I become totally unaware of my surroundings; the only thing that matters is the feeling of comfort that I am experiencing now. The beautiful lady speaks again. She tells us that God is ready and willing to meet our needs, and all we have to do is tell Him exactly what we want. Before I know it, my mouth opens.

"Jesus, I know you're real," I whisper. "I've always believed in you. I've just strayed away. I'm so tired. I'm tired of crying, I'm tired of hurting, I'm tired of being depressed. I just want to be myself again..."

As the praises of the congregation get louder, a peace beyond my comprehension begins to flood through me. It's calmness beyond anything I have ever imagined. The more I cry, the

more the feeling overtakes me. I can't explain it, but it feels like someone is holding me. It startles me, so I immediately open my eyes. I look up and see the beautiful lady stare back at me. She smiles.

We begin to sing a number of songs, and everyone rejoices. The feeling of serenity that I have is so overwhelming that I sit down. Long overdue tears fall from my eyes. Casey laughs out loud.

“He’s awesome, isn’t He girl?”

Later in the service, Casey informs me that the beautiful lady’s name is Pastor Carolyn Mills. She is the only African American woman in Great Falls who pastors her own congregation.

“She spoke at this women’s conference in Indianapolis, and there was not a seat left in the house. Girl, I feel the presence of the Lord in this place. Don’t you?”

I don’t know exactly what she means, but I do know that I could stay here forever.

Pastor Mills gives a sermon on the peace of God and how it passes all understanding. I feel a lump form in my throat. I want this undying peace that she speaks of.

After her message, she comes down from the pulpit and opens the doors of the church. Twenty people give their lives back to Christ; the whole congregation begins to praise God. Pastor Mills then asks people to come down for prayer. Many crowd the center aisle, and she prays for each one individually. This is a rather lengthy process, but something inside of me will not let me leave.

After she finishes praying for her members, she looks directly at me.

“Is it O.K. if I pray for you?”

“Sure.” I am a little nervous about the eyes that follow me down the aisle, but a gentle wind draws me and beckons me forward. Once I reach her, she smiles.

“What’s your name?”

“Miles. Miles Frazier.”

“Hello Miles. All through the service, I could see the Lord dealing with you. I just want to pray for you, O.K?”

I shrug my shoulders as she takes my hands in hers and begins to pray. She tells me that this is the beginning of a new walk with God for me and that all of the pain that I have been going through is over.

“It’s high time for you to rise in Him,” she says to me. “Yes, sweetheart. You didn’t come here by chance. You belong to the Father. You’re his daughter, and you have strayed away long enough. You’re special unto Him, and He desires to use you in a mighty way.”

I return to my seat. Casey gives me a hug, and we listen to the announcements.

This church has so many auxiliaries; it’s hard to keep up with every function for the week. I watch as this elderly lady steps before the congregation. She wears a soft pink suit; her gray hair is pulled back into a braided bun. Her small, round glasses fall to the tip of her nose as she talks. She has a little trouble reading the sheet of paper that she holds in her hands, so she tosses it to the side and lets out a little chuckle. Her glasses fall to her nose again.

“I guess I forgot my good glasses at home this morning.” Her blue-gray eyes sparkle as she pushes those glasses back on her face.

I listen as she makes an announcement about a widow's auxiliary meeting on Tuesday. I lean forward and wonder if she's a grandmother. She's really cute, and her voice reminds me of a calm ocean.

"A widow's auxiliary," Casey nudges me. "Pretty neat, huh?"

After the benediction, people hang around and talk to each other. Several hug me and tell me that they are happy I chose to worship with them. Casey refuses to leave without speaking to the pastor, so I stand idly around as she tells Pastor Mills how much she enjoyed the service.

"You're pretty." Bella looks up at Pastor Mills with wide eyes.

"Thank you," the beautiful lady says. "And so are you."

"I know."

"Oh really?" Pastor Mills asks.

"Yes," Bella replies proudly. "Lots of people tell me."

The lady laughs and comes over to me. She gives me a big hug.

"God bless you sweetheart." She looks directly into my eyes. "Come back next Sunday."

I shrug.

"Come back. We would love to have you."

After church, we go back to my house and make an attempt at cooking chicken spaghetti. We use Bella as our guinea pig, and she finally stops frowning after our fourth try at making the dish.

"Is this better Bella?" Casey holds a forkful of our concoction to her daughter's mouth.

"Yep mommy."

Casey sighs. “Good because I was about to give up and go to the Cracker Barrel.”

“I just don’t understand it.” I shake my head. “We’re good at everything else. Why can’t we get this cooking thing down?”

“Because one can’t be good at everything.” She winks and begins to fix her daughter’s plate.

We sit on my living room couch after Casey lays Bella down for a nap. We both look like bums in sweatpants and t-shirts. Outside, the sun is going down, and I can’t resist opening the patio door to watch my neighbor’s kids play in their backyard.

“Kids,” Casey mutters.

“Sometimes that is what really bothers me about Damien’s death.”

“Well,” she grins, “you can have Bella if you want. She’s a handful, but she’ll keep you entertained.”

“Really?”

“Are you kidding? Bow would kill me. But hey, our next one you can have lady.”

“It’s a deal.”

We fall silent and watch the children run around in the yard.

“That’s the one thing that makes living without Damien so hard. He promised me that we would have babies.”

“Hey, promises are nothing but empty words said with passion, and coming out of the mouth of a man, they are bound to be broken. Don’t worry. You’ll have babies one day.”

“No way,” I say suddenly.

“Oh, what? You don’t think you’ll ever get married again?”

“Nope. I can’t suffer another heartache.”

“You’re not even going to date anybody?”

I shake my head stubbornly.

“Miles Frazier, you cannot tell me that you’re going to be a hermit for the rest of your life.”

“I’m serious Casey. One husband dying on me is enough.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Believe it baby.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Oh what?” I ask defensively. “Do you want it in writing?”

“As a matter of fact, I think I do.”

She hands me the same envelope that she used to write down the church directions.

“Fine,” I mumble and roll my eyes. “I Miles Frazier refuse to date anybody for the rest of my life.”

“And what do I get if you do?” Casey folds her arms across her chest.

“I’ll buy you a gallon of Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough.”

“It’s a deal.” She laughs and tears the piece of paper. “Girl, false oaths are of the devil.”

“Casey, you’re really serious about this God thing, aren’t you?”

She looks at me and smiles. “You better believe it. And from what I saw, you’re pretty serious yourself.” She winks and laughs. “I saw you getting your praise on today.”

“Nothing like that has ever happened to me before. It’s like...I totally forgot where I was.”

“How did you feel during the service?”

“Wow. I’ve never felt so free before. I don’t know. I just took a chance, and God ministered to me.”

“That’s because he knew what you needed. Miles, please don’t let this be the last time you attend a worship service. I just feel like the Lord has something special for you.”

“I guess.”

“I’m serious, Miles.”

“I know you are.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon watching the three movies that I rented yesterday, and we finish the gallon of Neapolitan ice cream. By the time night comes, I am exhausted and ready to turn in.

At about five o’clock in the morning, I am awoken by the soft whispers of my best friend’s voice. I don’t open my eyes, but I know that she is praying for me.

“Lord Jesus, please protect my best friend,” she says. “Let her come to the place in you where she realizes that you are her everything. I thank you for showing her a new way of worship oh Lord. I pray that you forever keep her. Let her come to love you like I do. I just loose angels around her to protect her from all manner of darkness that tries to come against her. Father, help her to realize that you are the love of her life...”

I can’t take it anymore, so I sit up in bed. She cries too, so we both sit here and sob in each other’s arms.

“I have to go now,” she says. “You take care, O.K?”

“Casey, you know I would have taken you to the airport. Why didn’t you wake me?”

“It’s no big deal. We called a cab. Isn’t that right Bella?”

The little girl stands in the doorway. She runs to me and jumps in my arms.

“Hey, don’t cry Bell.”

“But you’ll be all by yourself! God mommy, I don’t want to leave you.”

“God mommy will be O.K. Bella.” Casey grins. “She’s tough.”

“Right.”

I walk them to the door and watch as the taxi pulls off down the street. Bella’s tear-streaked face is pressed against the window. I return to my bed, and before I know it, a dream begins to take form.

It is cloudy. I run through an open field. I wear several items of clothing, and the same wind that beckoned me in church today begins to push me forward. As I run, I remove layers and layers of clothing. A light rain from the sky falls down on me. I feel like a ballerina as I twirl around and around in the rain.

My alarm clock goes off at seven o’clock, and for the first time since childhood, I fall to my knees and thank God for another day.

### WHERE HIPS COME FROM

I don't know if I'm running because I'm frustrated or because I'm picking up weight. All I know is that I've got to fit into my favorite suit again. I don't know why I've been craving pomegranates lately. Ever since I've discovered this small, grocery store about two blocks from my home last month, I've had to buy me some. Now, I've been eating them like a full course meal.

I pick up my pace as I run down the street in my favorite gray sweatpants; the sounds of En Vogue blare in my ears. I'm not doing anything different from my regular routine, I'm barely keeping anything down, so why do I still feel heavy?

I have been running like a madwoman every day for the past four months, and yet, I'm still picking up weight. I just stepped off the scale this morning. I've gained five pounds in the last two weeks. What is wrong with me?

I stop by the store, buy the forbidden fruit, and I walk the block back to my home. What is the point of tiring myself out if I'm just going to keep getting fat? I may as well eat a pack of chocolate-covered doughnuts and call it a day.

Once I reach my doorway, I head for the shower. I place my black suit with the white collar on my bed, and I imagine forcing my newfound hips into the skirt.

"Black is slimming," I say as I strip out of my clothes. "Let's hope it slims down this stomach of mine."

I step into the shower, and I allow the warm water to run over my body. Without even thinking, I glance down at my breasts. They seem fuller than usual, and my mind takes me back to my high school years when we used to joke about girls who were well endowed.

I step out of the shower and glance at the clock that sits on my nightstand. 9:10.

“Great,” I mumble. “I’m running late.”

It is Saturday, and usually I stay in the bed as long as possible, but I had to open my big mouth and tell LeDeena Bradlen that I would meet her for lunch today. I met her at church one Sunday, and since then, we’ve become close. I sigh. I feel like such an idiot. I could still be in my bed.

I place lotion all over my body and stand in front of the mirror to do something to this bushy mass of hair on my head. I then apply my make-up, and before long, I struggle in this black suit.

After I zip up the skirt in the back, I let out a loud sigh. I don’t look half bad. I’ve never really had any curves before; I’ve always been somewhat on the skinny side.

“Hey Damien,” I whisper as I look toward the ceiling, “I’ve got hips now.”

I grab my purse, my keys, and my shades from the living room couch, and I am out of the door.

As I drive down the street, “Independent Woman” by Destiny’s Child plays on the radio. This is my theme music. I turn up the volume and I substitute my name in the place of theirs. Shoot, these little girls just don’t know. *I* am the true independent woman.

LeDeena stays on the other side of town, so I hit the interstate and drive through thirty minutes of non-stop traffic. By the time I reach her exit, I have had almost three wrecks, been in two lanes of construction, and been honked at by a diesel going seventy in a sixty-five. I drive around for about ten more minutes and try to find a parking spot.

Once I reach her doorway, a strange aroma fills my nostrils. I can't quite place my finger on the smell, but it seems to blend in with the orange door and the humongous green plants at my feet. What is that smell?

Just as I raise my hand to knock, She opens the door. LeDeena stands before me in a thin, royal-blue leotard. Her hair is pulled away from her face and held together by a blue and white hairclip. I smile. She looks like a black version of Olive Oil.

"I knew that you would be late," she mutters. "That is exactly why I went ahead and ran my two miles this morning. Anyway, come in and sit down. Shalice will be over in a minute."

I enter her doorway, and I watch as she disappears up the stairs.

I sit down on the floor and look around me. LeDeena has no furniture. The whole room is full of majestic wooden statues; a small glass coffee table sits in the center of the room. The mantle above her fireplace is covered with several strange-looking candles, one of which is lit.

I stand, take a sniff, and begin to choke. So this is the weird aroma that was coming from the outside of the door.

"Well," LeDeena says as she walks down the staircase in a slinky, black skirt and an olive-colored blouse. "I see you've gotten acquainted with my new toy."

I turn up my nose. "What in the world is this?"

"It's called Wild Boar."

I can't help but laugh at the way she rolls her tongue. I try not to even think about why she would even own such a candle.

"Anyway dollface," she says to me, "Where have you been? I only see you on Sunday mornings, and you're dormant the rest of the week. What is going on with you?"

“Nothing really.” I shrug. “My students keep me busy, and I’ve been a little under the weather lately. I have to force myself to go to church on Sundays.”

“Apparently Sunday morning service is not the only thing you’ve been forcing yourself into.” She nudges me. “Yeah, I noticed those hips. You are workin’ that skirt girl.”

“Thanks.”

“Where in the heck is Shalice,” LeDeena mutters under her breath. “This whole ‘restaurant’ thing is her idea, and she doesn’t have the decency to be on time. I *swear* black people never cease to amaze me. I could have had three meals by now.”

I smile as my mind wonders to Shalice Martin. She is one of LeDeena’s colleagues, and I also met her at church. She is so sweet. I wonder how the two became friends. They are total opposites of each other.

LeDeena is a tall, lean little spitfire who will say anything. Shalice is a true lady. She’s quiet, reserved, and has a mothering spirit. Both entered into my life at a time when I needed some spiritual friends. We met one Sunday evening after bible study, got into a heated debate about Christians in the military, and since then, the three of us have been inseparable.

Just as we reach LeDeena’s green Altima, Shalice pulls up. She steps out of her blue Accord in a beige pants suit. Her long, dark hair fall around her shoulder blades.

“Hey Miles.” She greets me with a hug. “I know this one has been talking your ear off about my lateness.”

Before I even have a chance to comment, LeDeena jumps into the conversation.

“You’re right,” she snaps. “Black people are never on time.”

We pile into LeDeena’s car and boguard our way into midday traffic.

India Arie's "Ready for Love" plays on the radio, and I listen to LeDeena's voice blend in with the artists.

After the song fades, Shalice lets out a deep sigh and says, "Makes you want to be in love, doesn't it?"

Neither of us answers.

We pull up outside of Al's Bistro, which is one of Shalice's favorite restaurants. We are seated at the table near the windows, and soon after, I find myself dozing off as Shalice makes a comment about my outfit.

"Looks like you're picking up a little weight." She grins and winks. "But it becomes you."

"Thanks."

I'm not really in the mood for a full course meal, so I order a Caesar salad. LeDeena looks at me strangely.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Not really."

Half way through a conversation about gay rights, my mouth begins to water, and a familiar pit forms in the bottom of my stomach.

"Excuse me please."

I rise and ignore LeDeena and Shalice's worried eyes. I calmly walk away from the table, but as soon as I turn the corner and see the female bathroom sign, I run and lock myself in one of the stalls. My body trembles and tears sting my eyes as I see what is left of my lunch floating in the bathroom seat.

The sound of my alarm clock and a loud clap of thunder jolt me awake from sound sleep. It is 6:30. I must have hit the snooze button at least four times.

I try not to panic as I rise from the bed and hurriedly search my closet for something to wear. I feel sick again, but I quickly brush the pain aside and place a solid black pantsuit on my bed.

I jump in the shower and once again struggle to pull the pants over my hips.

I reach my classroom ten minutes late. My students have busied themselves with crayons and brightly-colored pieces of construction paper.

“Good morning class,” I say as I try to keep my composure. “Today we are going to...”

Everything blackens. My hands come to the temples of my forehead, and I hear my children scream as my body crashes to the ground.

## A CONSTANT REMINDER

“I need thee oh, I need thee. Every hour, I need thee...”

I lie here naked; my middle is exposed under a soft-blue, terrycloth robe.

“Damien, why,” I whisper. A stream of tears falls from my eyes. “Why did you have to leave me like this?”

My fingers tremble as they form a pyramid across the base of my stomach. I knew it was true even before I stepped into the doctor’s office. All this time I have been wanting, needing something tangible, a part of Damien I can hold on to forever, and now I’m indifferent.

I try to concentrate on the Lord; I try to sing the words that seem to flow so freely when I am in my prayer time, but somehow they don’t comfort me. Then images, images of Damien begin to resurface, and I cry so hard that I have to force myself to breathe. I thought this pain was over. I thought that my newfound love for the Lord would somehow erase Damien’s love for me. Maybe I’m really not saved. Maybe I don’t possess the faith that I thought I had.

“Oh, God, please. Please. Please help me.”

In the blur of my tear-filled eyes, I see the pomegranates sitting on the nightstand. Just looking at them makes me sick to my stomach because I’ve eaten so many within the last two months. I take one in my hands and smash it across the room. Glass from my bedroom window scatters everywhere. It scatters, scatters across the cold floor that seems to welcome it with open arms. This is my life, and the world invites me to crumble like this broken glass.

I try to rise from my bed, but the end of the telephone cord trips me. I wince from the pain of the glass that leaves open wounds to both my hands and forehead. In a second, I taste the blood that runs down my eyes. I try to wipe away that blood, but it only mixes in with the blood from my hands. Blood. The blood of Jesus on the cross begins to mix in with Damien's blood on the street. The blood of my babies. My hands involuntarily move down to my stomach, and I begin to stroke my abdomen. I leave bloody fingerprints across my navel. I want them. I want my babies so bad, but yet, I don't want them. I don't know if I could take him leaving me again.

I run my hands over my face and try to stop the blood, but it keeps flowing in a wave of crimson streams.

"Help me," I scream. I suddenly feel weak. I don't know if I'm crying because of Damien's memory or because of the physical pain that I'm experiencing.

"I can't take this anymore..."

My phone rings, and I pick up the receiver. I am unable to control my sobbing.

"I'm pregnant," I scream to the person on the other end of the line. "I'm pregnant and I don't know what to do..."

I drop the phone and begin to cry again as I listen to the pulsating voice of the operator.

Thirty minutes later, I feel hands stroke me on the face.

"Oh, Miles," a gentle voice says; she wipes my forehead with her hands. "Honey, you're bleeding. There's glass everywhere! What happened? You must have taken a pretty nasty fall..."

I fall limp and naked in LeDeena's arms.

"I'm pregnant," I continue to cry. "I'm pregnant, and I don't know what to do."

“It’s OK baby.” She pulls me closer to her. “It’s going to be OK. You’re a survivor if I’ve ever seen one. Everything will be OK. It will...it will...but first, we have to stop this bleeding.

I stand in front of the mirror in my gray sweatpants; my hand rests upon my stomach again. I can’t believe I’m pregnant. Me. Miles Renee Frazier. And not just with one baby, but with two. Twins. I smile a little and reach for the green towel that hangs on the edge of the tub. I feel a little silly, but I stuff the cloth into my shirt anyway.

“Believe me, it’ not going to be shaped like that.” LeDeena stands in the bathroom doorway and laughs.

“Forget you.” I chunk the towel at her. “In a couple of months, I’m going to look like a big, fat cow.”

“You already look like a big, fat cow.” She grins. “But don’t worry. Now you have an excuse.”

We both laugh, and I follow her back to my bedroom. She has already begun to clean up the glass and the specks of blood that are on the floor.

“I know I must have scared my students to death today. They probably think that I deserve the klutz-of-the-year award.”

I stretch out on my bed and stare at the ceiling.

“Yeah, I’m sure you did give them a pretty good scare.”

She places the broom against the wall and joins me.

After awhile, she asks, “Are you scared?”

“Yeah. I don’t know the first thing about babies. I never did any babysitting, and I’m the only child, so...I don’t know. Babies always make me slightly uncomfortable.”

“Tell me about it,” she agrees. “I hate holding newborns. I’m afraid that I’ll drop them or something.”

“You *would* think that.”

“Hey, you’re more of a klutz than me.”

“LeDeena?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“Anytime, girl.”

LeDeena’s brief moment of silence only lasts an hour. On my way into the shower, I hear her call Shalice and tell her the news. By the time I dress, Shalice stands in my bedroom with tears in her eyes.

“Miles,” she whispers and takes my hands in hers, “babies are a blessing from God. I am so happy for you.”

She hugs me, and I try not to fight back the tears that threaten to form.

“OK, break up the sob party,” LeDeena mutters. She places her right arm between us.

“Miles needs to eat right, and I’m hungry, so...I vote that Shalice makes her famous chicken quesidillas tonight.”

Shalice turns up her nose. “Don’t try to bring Miles’ pregnancy into this. You’re just hungry. That’s the reason you called me over here, isn’t it?”

“I see my plan worked.” She winks.

“Let’s just go to the grocery store before I change my mind.”

As soon as I step out of the doorway, a slight breeze leaves tiny hair bumps up and down my arm. I fold my arms across my chest and try not to think about raising two babies by myself.

Shalice notices.

“Are you OK?”

“Sure.”

We reach the grocery store, and Shalice decides to cook a full course meal. In about an hour, we sit down to quesidillas, enchiladas, and Spanish rice.

“You are truly talented,” LeDeena says through a mouthful of rice. “Your little tail needs to be a chef instead of a boring school teacher.”

“Hey,” Shalice says indifferently, “I happen to like my job as a boring school teacher.”

“Well, I’m just sayin’,” LeDeena continues. “You’re wasting your time. You know that cooking is your passion, so what is the deal?”

I watch the dismayed look on Shalice’s face and change the subject. I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but I know that the idea of becoming a chef makes her uncomfortable. We spend the rest of the night listening to the radio and talking about the birth of my twins. At midnight, I walk them to the door, they both hug me, and I am alone again.

My phone rings at exactly 1:57, and I try not to seem anxious. I wipe tears from my eyes and try shake the terrible dream that I’ve just had.

I was in the delivery room giving birth to my twins. The first was a girl. The second a little boy. My son kept growing and growing until he became the exact replica of my late husband. I became frightened and begun to run leaving a trail of blood down the hospital hallway...

I listen and wipe away tears as Casey talks about her day. I don't tell her that I'm pregnant right away; I'm not exactly sure how she's going to react at 2:00 in the morning.

"Oh my gosh," she yells into the phone. "You mean late as in late late?"

"Yep."

"Miles, are you crazy? Why didn't you mention this before?"

"Because I...I didn't think that it meant anything. I've had an irregular period since the day I started."

"So, did you go to the doctor?"

"Yes."

"And what did he say?"

"I'm pregnant."

She becomes completely silent, and I can only imagine the blank look on her face.

"This is all so sudden. How did this happen? Well, I *know* how it happened, but...I'm rambling. I guess what I'm trying to say is...congratulations?"

"But Casey, that's not all." My voice starts to crack.

"What's the matter?" she answers back; her voice is full of concern. "There's nothing wrong with the baby, is there?"

"Of course not."

"I didn't think so," she snaps coldly, "because I was about to start rebuking the devil"-

“Casey, I’m carrying twins.”

We both become silent.

“You know, I thought this was what I wanted. I’m not sad about being pregnant. It’s just that...I know it’s going to be hard enough being a single parent, but now I have to raise two babies by myself...I don’t know if I have that type of strength.”

“Well, this is when your newfound faith kicks in sweetheart. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. If he didn’t think that you could handle it, you would never have conceived. These babies are going to be such a blessing in your life. I can feel it.”

“But what if...what if they turn out to be just like Damien, and I have to live with a constant reminder of his death through the lives of my children?”

“But what if your children remind you of his life rather than his death? Don’t think about the negative aspects, but relay on the positive. You and Damien never had anything tangible to come out of your relationship, and now you’re being blessed with two whole halves of him growing on the inside of you. Have you told Marian?”

“Are you kidding? What am I supposed to say? ‘Hey Marian, how are you doing? Oh, and by the way, I’m pregnant with twins by your deceased son’.”

“Well,” she says, “maybe not in those exact words, but something to that effect. She deserves to know. After all, she is the grandmother.”

“I am so scared.” I finally break down in tears. “I don’t know the first thing about babies. I’m always sick, I’m having mood swings, I feel like crying for no reason, I passed out in front to my students today...”

“Welcome to motherhood,” she says amusingly. “No one knows the first thing about having a baby until they actually have one themselves. Poor Bella was nothing but an experiment for Bow and me. And you have an edge that we didn’t have-The Holy Ghost. We were not saved at the time of Bella’s conception, so we went about the worldly way of raising her. Sweetheart, you have the Holy Spirit to lead you and to guide you. And don’t worry about your children growing up without a father figure either. The Lord is a father to the fatherless. These twins are going to be so blessed.”

“I know,” I stammer. “I’m just a little scared.”

“Do you need me?” she asks solemnly.

“Casey” - -

“I didn’t ask you to ponder over the question. I just asked for a simple answer. Do you need me?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You better be.”

We talk until sunrise. I let out a sigh lie on my back, and fifteen minutes later, my eyes close and I fall asleep with my hands across my stomach.

## TEA WITH MS. RYANS

I am always slightly uncomfortable about coming here. The fragile, old woman on the other side of the door always greets me with a warm embrace, but I can't say the same about the rickety, wooden gate and the bellowing trees that tower over me like six grade bullies.

"Um...Ms. Ryans?"

When she expects me, she usually opens the front door the minute I step onto the porch. I knock again, and I hear a few movements on the other side.

"Miles, baby, come on in here. I could barely hear your pecking. Come on in darling. I made tea."

I step into the doorway and watch as she disappears behind the curtain that separates the kitchen from the den.

I take a seat on the couch and breathe deeply. The whole house smells of homemade muffins and peppermints. The house is small and much too crowded for its size, but all of the worn-out furniture and the dust-filled photographs would seem almost insignificant if a single item is missing. The coffee table in front of me holds several small, framed photographs. One, in particular, catches my attention. I've never noticed it before. It is a wedding photograph. I pick it up and run my fingers across the glass. The two stand proudly behind a simple, black backdrop. Neither is smiling. The bride is beautiful; she wears a simple white dress, and her hair falls in coal-black ringlets around her ears. He stands like a soldier-his chest out, his head back, his eyes proud.

Ms. Ryans enters with a small dinner tray in her hands, which holds two steaming cups of tea.

I smile as I think back to the day she approached me. I was sitting alone in service. After she read the announcements, she walked up to me, sat beside me, and placed her hands in mine. When service was over, she looked into my eyes and told me that we travel the same road. She handed me her number and walked away.

Since that day, Elle Marie Ryans has intrigued me. She never said anything; she would only look at me and nod. My curiosity got the best of me, so I finally called.

“Ms. Ryans, is this you?”

Her eyes become soft as she takes a seat in a brown, squeaky chair across from me.

“Yeah,” she answers vaguely, “that was me.”

“I take a sip of my tea and get comfortable on the couch because I know that I’m in for an interesting story.

“We travel the same road darling. I remember looking at you that Sunday, trying to find out the differences between your eyes and mine...I couldn’t find any.”

She leans forward and takes a sip of her tea.

“I was a child bride too,” she continues as her blue-gray eyes take us to another place. “But unlike you, I wasn’t in love.

I was the daughter of a farmer; He was a porter. That was considered a good job for blacks then, so when we met, my daddy was all for it.

‘Elle Marie,’ my father said to me, ‘he’s a good man. Let him take care of you.’

So, I did. I wasn't ready for marriage. I was just a baby myself. I didn't know nothin' about takin' care of no household. He musta picked up on it 'cause he didn't look at me the way he used to."

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out.

"He came home, ate supper, and retired to that old chair in the back. Everyday was the same. He'd come home, eat, and sit in that chair. I was nonexistent- like a candle that flickers out when the wind blows. I never knew what love felt like until...until the birth of my son."

She pauses; her blue-gray eyes glimmer with the setting of the sun.

"When I held him for the first time..." She nods her head. "My child...Larry's his name. He needed me. All I ever wanted was to be needed. I needed him, and he needed me.

It didn't matter anymore. It didn't matter that my husband didn't speak when I entered the room. All that mattered was my child. I put everything into him. He was gonna be everything I wanted and everything that my husband was not.

I taught him well. I taught him his manners, to be nice to people an always say thank you. I can still hear his little voice at the table...then winter settled in, and times got hard. My husband wasn't makin' the money that he used to. Larry kept complainin' about being sick. We all were, but it was harder on him 'cause he was just a baby. Couldn't fight off that cough..."

The sun disappears, and so does the glimmer in her eyes.

"We lost him. He was gone, and I didn't get to say goodbye. My husband made me leave the room, and as he covered my child with that white sheet. I never forgave him for that."

She pauses.

“Miles, sweetheart, you have a chance again.” She smiles weakly and takes my hands in hers. “God has given you another chance at love. Damien loved you, and now you must love your children.”

She hugs me, and I try to control my tears.

“Love hard, sweetheart,” she whispers.

I sit still and silent, numb as the day I found out about Damien’s death. Ms. Ryans returns with two more cups of tea. I don’t say anything. I watch quietly as she settles in her chair again. Her eyes return to me, and finally, we avert our gaze from the wedding photograph.

“You see sweetheart,” she says to me, “sometimes we can love someone so hard that when they leave, we don’t want to let them go. Their presence becomes a shadow that covers us, looms over us like seagulls across a dark sky. But we must survive. We must. Isn’t that right sweetheart?”

I smile. “That’s right.”

I spend the rest of the night helping her sew a quilt. It is a gift for my twins from the widow’s auxiliary of the church. Usually, the other ladies join us, but tonight, it’s just her and me. I watch her sew by candlelight; her small, swift hands weave in and out of the square patterns.

Each lady pieced together scraps from their own homes to make the quilting pattern have a personal meaning. Someone gave material from a christening gown; another gave scraps from an old graduation dress. Ms. Ryans sewed together pieces of a blanket that she’s had since she was little, and I added the blue robe that I wore when I first found out that I was pregnant.

“You know darling,” she says to me, “this quilt is coming along nicely.” She holds a side in her hands and runs her fingers across the colorful patterns. “But...it’s missing something. I think it needs a piece of *him* to make it complete.”

“Of Damien?”

She presses her lips together and nods gently.

“Perhaps your mother-in-law can help you find something. It’s been a while since you’ve talked with her. Perhaps this quilt will be the bond for both your hearts to mend.”

I don’t say anything. I just stare at the ground and fumble with loose threads on the quilt.

“Women these days are different,” she continues. She dismisses me with a wave of her hand.

“Why, back in my day, family meant everything.”

She takes a long look at me and sighs. “When my child died, I wanted to leave too. I wanted to pack my bags and start all over just like you did. But I couldn’t. I had to face my pain. Miles, baby, you can’t run forever.”

“I’m not running.”

I stand and reach for my purse on the floor; she takes me by the hand and half-smiles.

“You must go back there. For the sake of your children, you must go.”

“I loved him,” I whisper.

“I know it, darling. Now, you must love your children. Let them learn of the legacy that he left behind. Allow them to love him as you do.”

She stands and pats me on the shoulder before she turns to leave.

I don’t say anything, nor do I wait for her to return. I walk out the front door, past the rickety gate, past the bellowing trees that now bow down to me from the evening wind.

I sit on my living room couch with the phone in my hands. I've dialed the number two times already, and each ended with the irritating noise of a busy signal. I dial again. She answers on the first ring.

"Um...Marian, hi."

She is silent. After awhile, she speaks. "Hello Miles. Sweetheart, how have you been?"

"I'm fine. Listen, I was wondering if...I could come and see you this weekend. I know that I have been distant since Damien's death, and I'm sorry."

"Oh, honey, you know you don't have to ask. You're always welcome here."

"I have a surprise for you. I know that I should have told you sooner, but I just didn't know how. Please don't be mad at me. I'll explain everything this weekend."

"I'll be glad to have you sweetheart. I miss you and I love you."

I smile. "I love you, too."

## FRONT OF THE ALTAR

I wake up with severe pain in my abdomen. My contractions have been coming more frequently lately, and I know that I will not be able to go back to sleep.

I rise and throw on a pair of black windpants under my t-shirt. My babies are due in a week; I will be so glad when this is over. I am ready to see the faces of the two who are at constant war in my stomach.

It is 2:30 in the morning, and I leave my bedroom with running shoes in my hands. I try to sneak past LeDeena and Shalice who are asleep on the couch. Ever since I told them about my contractions, they have been following me around. If I wanted to share my space, I would have gotten myself a roommate.

LeDeena snores heavily, so I don't too much worry about her. Shalice, on the other hand, will wake up if I breathe too hard.

"Miles, what are you doing?" She sits up on the couch. Her hair stands on her head like black spiders. "It's not time yet, is it?"

"No, I'm just going for a walk."

"Miles, it's 2:30 in the morning."

"I know," I mumble. "Tell that to these two."

I ignore her voice of reason and leave the house anyway. It's a little chilly, and I leave the driveway with no particular destination. I think about taking my usual route, but then I remember Pastor Carolyn's message this morning.

"Don't be so set on one way of doing things; be flexible. Allow the Holy Spirit to have free course in your life..."

I turn around and walk in the opposite direction. I walk past Madison Hills and past the park. I feel myself get tired, and I look around to find a place to rest. There is a huge majestic church in front of me. It is made of gray stone, and the door is in the shape of cross. I wonder if it's open.

I shrug my shoulders and walk up the winding steps. Strangely, I feel the same presence that engulfs me when I am in worship service.

I open the doors and gasp. The church looks like a museum; there are antique wooden benches that sit on four legs, and a huge pipe organ situates itself in the corner against the wall.

A huge replica of Jesus on the cross compels me to the altar. It is an extension of the ceiling; the life-size sculpture seems to be the focal point of the entire gothic atmosphere.

Without even thinking about it, I fall to my knees. This image of Jesus causes Calvary to become real to me. For a moment, I forget about my situation. I forget about the fact that I'm a widow with two children, and I focus my attention on this cross before me. The figure actually has nails driven through his wrists and blood appears to drip from his side. I cringe and rub my fingers across my own wrists. It's hard to believe that Jesus went through this much pain for me.

I place my face in my hands and sob. I can't believe that I have been so ungrateful. All of this time, Jesus has been trying to comfort me, but I wouldn't let him.

“Lord, I’m sorry,” I cry. “Please forgive me for all of my sins. Lord, I thank you for my children. I know that you are the giver of life and my babies are a blessing from you...”

I feel the presence of the Lord come upon me like a wave; it’s stronger than I’ve ever felt it before. I feel compelled to pray, so I immediately begin to lift my hands. Before long, I find myself speaking in tongues. Someone else has entered the church. From the sounds of the footsteps and the heavy sobbing, the person is male.

Strangely, I’m not scared. I just continue to pray.

After a while, my prayers cease, and I feel someone stand behind me.

“Excuse me, Miss?”

I turn around to face him and wipe away my tears.

“Hi.” I reach for his hand and apologize for being here.

“Oh, no,” he says. “I’m not in charge here. As a matter of fact, I’m not even a member of this church...”

“Oh.” I pause. “Are you saved?”

“I...I don’t know,” he admits; he sits next to me. “I don’t know anything about God really.”

“I understand. Well, I’m saved now, but before, I was confused about the whole thing also. I never knew that Jesus loved me.”

“Is that Him?” He points to the cross above us.

“Yes.” I let out a deep sigh. “That’s my Lord and Savior.”

“What does...what does He sound like? Because as I was sitting back there, I could have sworn I heard someone speak to me. I know it sounds stupid, but...”

My mind takes me back to the very first time I heard the voice of the Lord.

“No,” I smile, “it’s not stupid.”

We fall silent, and I try not to react as his eyes fall on my stomach.

“Twins,” I say shyly.

He reaches his hands out. “May I?”

“Sure.”

He runs his hand across the span of my middle. His touch is so foreign; it’s been a long time since a man’s hands have touched my body.

“Boys?”

“A boy and a girl. Do you have kids?”

“A little girl. Shaira Evan. Her mom and I are not together, and I hadn’t exactly planned on raising a child in an unstable environment.”

“I...understand. My babies’ father and I are not together either. He left me earlier this year. He doesn’t even know that I’m pregnant.”

“Well, don’t you think he deserves to know? These are his children.”

“I can’t tell him because he’s dead.”

His face falls. “I...I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was hard at first, but I’m dealing with it. God is the father of these babies.”

“You say that with such confidence. How can you believe so strongly in a God that you can’t see?”

“In a God that I can’t see? Look around you. He is gracing us with his anointing right now. Don’t you feel it? Isn’t there a reverential presence in this room that makes you want to lie prostrate in front of this cross?”

I look into his eyes. He turns away from my gaze and lowers his head.

“Tell me about him,” he says quietly.

“You honestly don’t know?”

He lowers his head again; I lift his chin with my hands.

“Don’t. I would love to share Jesus with you.”

I explain to him the story of the Immaculate Conception and the significance of the cross. I also tell him about the bible and how it serves as the final authority in the life of a Christian.

“So, how about it?”

“How about what?”

“Are you ready to give your life to Christ?”

“What do I have to do?”

“Romans 10:9 says that if you confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you shall be saved.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. I will pray the prayer of faith with you if you want.”

“I’m...new at this prayer thing.”

“It’s OK.”

I take his hands in mine and I lower my head. He does the same, and I wait for him to begin.

“Jesus, I don’t really know you, but I...I can’t do this.”

“I’m a little nervous about this thing too,” I admit. “Maybe if I pray for you, you’ll become more confident, OK?”

I take his hands in mine and begin to pray.

“Father God, in the name of Jesus, we come before you oh Lord to say thank you for all that you’ve done for us...”

I find myself praying not only for his salvation, but for the salvation of his father as well. I think I’ve scared him because he opens his eyes and removes my hands from his. He looks away from me, and we sit for awhile in silence.

Long after I leave the church, I think about that prayer. The Lord has never used me to minister before. I smile. Tonight, I allowed the Holy Ghost to have free course in my life. Tonight, I helped to bring a soul to the kingdom, and I don’t even know his name.

BOOK THREE

## NOT AN ANGEL

It took me nearly a month to take it down; the imprint from the frame left a small, dark square on the wall in my hallway. It's begun to fade now, just as her memory fades in my mind. Every so often, something will remind me. Remind me of the times when she was one that I held dear. But she's gone now. She left me and never once looked back.

"Trev, you ready?"

"Yeah, I'll be out in a second."

I run my hand over the space on the wall that used to hold our image. An image that I thought would be there forever. I sigh. Forever always seems so familiar when you're in love.

"Hey Trevor." Soft, delicate hands come up to touch my face. "You look nice."

"Thanks. You ready to go?"

"Sure."

I sigh and take Jessica by the hand. After my church members found out that I wasn't married, some of the men suggested that I attend a singles seminar, and then, halfway between learning how to present my body as a living sacrifice and I Corinthians 7, I met Jessica Townsend.

She was sitting a row in front of me, and her face was all red because she couldn't stop sneezing. I handed her a Kleenex, and now she stands before me in a slinky, red dress that looks nothing like the dull, gray suit that she wore to the conference. I sigh. Ever since I've become a Christian, all types of women have been coming my way. It's not that I've given up on dating,

it's just that I haven't met anyone that I'm even halfway interested in. To tell you the truth, I'm getting tired of the whole 'let's go out' syndrome. I am so ready to be with one person again, but I'm not telling Jessica that.

We sit here in the darkened restaurant, and I try to pay attention to the words that spew from her lips. I frown and look over her shoulder. She doesn't notice.

A lady has sat down in the booth behind us. She struggles with a large, pink-and-blue cake and two screaming babies. Twins. It is their birthday, and I watch as the waiter sings happy birthday to the children. The little girl holds up three fingers. Three. The age of my daughter. Three years. It's been three years since I've been saved. Three year olds. They definitely would be three by now. The lady doesn't even turn around. If only I could get a glimpse of her eyes. Maybe...

"Trev, are you listening to me?"

"I...sorry, Jessica." I shift in my seat uncomfortably. "It's just...they are so cute."

I hear the lady call the little girl's name. Kamren. Names. Why didn't I ask her what she would name them? If only I could see her eyes...

Jessica talks again, but my mind returns to the night that I met her. I thought I stood to lose everything, but she helped me to gain all things. I've shared my story with everyone. My pastor, my new friends at the church, India...they all came up with the same conclusion. Maybe she was an angel. Although the idea of being visited by some heavenly being intrigues me, I would rather see my angel in a tangible form. I want to thank her for how she's changed my life.

"Mommy, that man is staring at me."

"Kamren, it's not polite to point."

The lady lowers her daughter's hand and turns around to face us.

"I'm so sorry," she apologizes. "Kids say the craziest things."

My eyes lower. It's not her, and I've just made a complete idiot of myself in front of a three-year-old child.

Jessica jumps as my cell phone rings. I look at the facing. It's Dee.

"Um, excuse me. I need to take this call."

I rise from the table and brush past Jessica and the lady with the twins.

"Boy, do you have impeccable timing," I say. "What's going on?"

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," she begins. "It's Sunday afternoon, so I just assumed that you were home. I was extremely surprised to find you out and about. If you're busy, I'll call back."

"No, no, don't do that. Listen. I could use some company. Why don't you catch the bus down here, and I'll take you back to school on Tuesday."

"Can I bring my dirty laundry?"

"Sure."

"I'll be there in a couple of hours."

I am a firm believer that every woman should have a sexy, black dress in her closet; I have two, and I don't know what to do with either of them.

I turn sideways and stare at my reflection in my full-length mirror. Thank God my hips stayed after I had my twins.

I blow my bangs out of my face and add a little lip gloss to my lips. I don't know why I let LeDeena talk me into this. She's not going to let me rest until I have dinner with this coworker of hers. She's been hounding me for weeks, and after much hassle and humiliation, I finally gave in.

I look myself over. I have definitely made the right choice for an outfit. The black knee-length dress with the low split says I'm sexy but not scandalous.

I try not to seem nervous as the doorbell rings. It's been ages since I've gone out with a man; I don't want to seem overly anxious.

I open the door and want to kill LeDeena.

"Dain?"

"Miles, hey! You're even more beautiful than Deena described."

He hugs me, and I cringe as I feel his stubby, little fingers on the small of my back.

"Let me look at you," he whispers. He holds my hands and stares at me like I'm a piece of venison.

No old school player, let me look at you. Dain has to be about 5'3 tops with a budding middle and a receding hairline. His personality *has* to be amazing.

"I can see that tonight's going to be an interesting night." He grins as he takes me by the arm.

"Interesting," I nod.

After dinner at this nice, low-key restaurant on the other side of town, Dain decides to take me dancing. My heart drops because dancing was one of Damien's favorite pastimes.

Looks really are deceiving; Dain may look like an ostrich, but he dances like a swan.

I laugh out loud as he spins me around several times. The dance floor is crowded and the band is so loud that I can barely hear myself think, but I allow myself to be swept away by the music anyway.

We dance to every song; Dain moves his body to whatever the band plays. I laugh. I haven't had this much fun in years. Dain is smart, funny, *and* he can Salsa.

"Come close to me baby." He pulls me into his warm embrace. Let's do some serious dirty dancing."

"You've got it."

He holds me closer and whispers in my ear. "You're a beautiful dancer."

"Thanks."

"So tell me, how can a beautiful, successful, sexy young lady like yourself be single?"

After I don't answer, he doesn't ask again.

"It's called death," my heart wants to scream, but I say nothing.

After one last dance, we decide to call it a night.

At the door, he gives me a hug and kisses me on the forehead.

"I really had fun tonight Miles. You take care."

"You too."

I watch him walk down the driveway, and I close the door behind me.

LeDeena waits for me. She sits straight up on the couch and folds her arms across her chest.

"Young lady, where have you been?" she teases. "It is 1:26 in the morning. You should be ashamed of yourself."

“Shut up, LeDeena.” I roll my eyes. “I ought to kick you for setting me up with the shortest man of the year.”

“Hey, the brother may be short in stature, but he’s tall in other areas.” She points to her pockets.

“It’s not about money, LeDeena.” I sit next to her on the couch.

“It’s not about *looks* either, Miles.” She pauses. “So,” she says apprehensively, “did you have fun?”

I begin to blush, and she laughs.

“So you *did* have fun. Ooh, girl, dish me the dirt.”

“I just...it’s been so long since I’ve been in the company of a man. Dain...he told me that I was beautiful, and he made me feel...I don’t know. He made me feel young and desirable again.”

“Reality check, babe,” LeDeena grumbles. “You *are* young and desirable. Girl, you’re barely twenty-eight years old.”

“Yeah, I’m twenty-eight years old with two screaming twins who have no father. I’m a walking charity case.”

“Miles, that is not true.”

“And how do you know?”

“Because I see the type of guys who are attracted to you. They are all successful and young.”

“Successful, young men who feel sorry for me.”

“I don’t think this has anything to do with the men,” she says matter-of-factly. “I think you just aren’t ready yet.”

I stand and stretch. “I don’t have time for this. I’m going to check on my babies.”

“That’s because you know I’m telling the truth.”

I leave the den and walk into my twins’ room. Both are asleep; Journey holds a small, bunny rabbit that I bought when she turned one, and Miles talks in his sleep. He’s a dreamer like me. I wonder if you can pass those types of gifts through the womb.

I reach for the anointing oil and pray over both of them before I return to the den.

“LeDeena?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t think I’m ready.”

I sit next to her again, and she doesn’t say anything. She waits for me to continue.

“I just..when I was with Dain, I felt like I was cheating on Damien. I know that sounds weird, but...”

“Just don’t rush yourself OK?” she says to me. “I’m sorry for pressuring you the way that I did. I just want to see you happy.”

“I know, LeDeena,” I hug her, “and I need to stop being so uptight. Damien’s been gone for three years, and I have to realize that he’s not coming back. I can either live the rest of my life by myself or be happy with someone else. It’s my choice.”

“And,” she begins carefully, “what do you choose?”

“I don’t know,” I sigh. “I want my babies to grow up with a father.”

“Of course you want that for your children,” she continues, “but what about you? What do you want?”

“I...I don’t know LeDeena. Can we please talk about something else?”

After she leaves, I travel to my babies' room. Sometimes it's hard to believe that I have two children. I run my hand over the top of their heads. They are both so very beautiful. It's so amazing how both of them are a mixture of Damien and me.

"I wish you could have known your father," I whisper.

There are several piles of clothing on the floor and a half-eaten pizza on a coffee table in front of us. She holds a carton of Minute Maid lemonade in her hands, and her head tilts back in a laugh.

"You are so hilarious." She smiles. "Thanks for letting me crash here."

"And for letting you wash your clothes, raid my refrigerator, and use my long distance to call that nappy-headed boyfriend of yours."

"Carlos is not nappy-headed." She pushes me. "And besides, I just wanted him to know that I made it here safely."

"I guess."

We fall silent as her eyes rest upon my sketchbook.

"What's this?"

"Dee..."

Her fingers are quicker than mine; she grabs the pad from the opposite end of the couch and begins to turn the pages.

"Dee, give that back."

She doesn't answer; Her eyes are fixed on my second drawing. She runs her hands across the page.

“It’s mom.”

She doesn’t say anything for awhile. She just half-smiles.

“You know, I haven’t seen her face since the nightmares. Of course, those images don’t leave, but this one...”

She runs her fingers across the page again; her eyes become puzzled.

“There’s...there’s another face in this picture...and the hair...all of it is not hers...Trevor, is the other image me?”

I don’t say anything. She continues to stare at the picture.

“Trevor, you think I’m like her too?”

I look into her eyes; she sighs.

“I know I’m like her,” she stammers. “I’ve known for years, and it’s not just my face either. I have her mannerisms. But...I can’t help the way I turned out. I can’t apologize for who I am.” She pauses. “Trevor, we...we never talked about what happened.”

“I know.”

“Do you want to talk about it? I mean, maybe if we talk about it, we’ll feel better.”

“Maybe.”

“Mom was so beautiful,” Dee breathes. “I wanted to be just like her. Remember how she used to sing us to sleep at night?”

I smile. “Yeah. She used to sing...what was the name of that song?” My mind takes me back to the days when everything was perfect.

“East of the sun and west of the moon, we’ll build a dream house of love dear...”

I lose myself in the moment and listen to Dee’s rich voice.

“You sound just like her.” I lift her chin. “I didn’t even know you could sing.”

She shrugs and looks at the floor again.

“Remember how mama would take us for ice cream in the mornings during the summer?”

“Yeah.” She giggles. “She would tell us not to tell Pop, and then he would take us for snow cones in the evening.”

“But then...” I don’t finish my sentence.

“Those were the times when Pop was more than a father to me. And my greatest fear...my greatest fear is that he’s...he’s not even my real father.

“Dee, mama said those things in anger.”

“We don’t know for sure.” She pauses. “Do you remember him?”

“Who?”

“The man she messed around with. Do you remember what he looks like?”

“Yeah.”

“Do I look like him?”

I hold her close to me. “You look just like her,” I whisper.

I can’t sleep. Dain’s face flashes through my mind every time I close my eyes. I smile. I really did have fun tonight. Why must I make everything be so complicated?

I pick up the phone and dial Casey’s number; she answers on the first ring.

“Miles, it’s...3:20 in the morning.”

“I know,” I sit up in bed, “but I really need someone to talk to.”

“OK, I’m up. Casey’s help line is open.”

“I...I did something stupid today.”

“What did you do?”

“I let this man take me dancing.”

“Can he dance?”

“Yes.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I just...Damien loved to dance, and *he* took me dancing, and he kissed me on the forehead, and” - -

“And you liked it.”

I bite my lower lip.

“Yeah, you liked it.” She laughs. “Finally, she realizes that she’s human.”

“Casey,” my face falls, “don’t tease me.”

“OK, I’m sorry. Miles, listen. You are a beautiful, vibrant, young woman. You can’t carry a sign that says, ‘If you’re male, get away from me’. That’s not healthy.”

I pout. “You don’t have to be so harsh.”

“You knew I would be harsh when you called. Baby, listen. I’m not trying to rush you into anything, but be open. I know you love the twins, but this is about Miles and what *she* wants.”

“I’ll try.”

“You better.”

I talk to her for about thirty more minutes before I decide to turn in.

“Dee?”

“Yeah?”

She is half-asleep on the couch; she stirs a little and covers herself with a dark-green blanket;

I lay my head against the back of the couch and close my eyes.

“Do you think she’s real?”

“Who?”

“My angel. Do you think she’s real?”

“I don’t know, but for your sake, I hope so.”

## SCENT OF A WOMAN

I turn up the radio in my kitchen and dance around to the beat of the music. My babies sit quietly at the table and wait for me to return. Monday is spaghetti night; this works out great because Tuesday is laundry day, and the children always end up making a mess.

Journey laughs, and Miles smirks as I return to the table with two small bowls.

“The spaghetti queen is here.”

They both clap their hands, and I take a bow.

I tuck a napkin under each chin, place one in Journey’s lap, and sit down at the table.

“Miles, it’s your turn to say grace.”

“Mommy, *you* do it.”

“What did I say? Stop clowning.”

He looks at me and lowers his head.

“God is great, God is good. Let us thank him for our food...”

“Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

I kiss him on the cheek and turn his fork around in his hands.

Just as we are settled, the doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it!” Journey yells.

“No, you sit still.” I imagine little, red handprints all over the doorknob. “I’ll get the door.”

I know I look a little grungy in old jeans and a huge t-shirt, so I'm a little hesitant about opening the door. I look through the little slot; it's Dain. I think that it's extremely rude when people show up at my house unannounced.

I tiptoe back into the kitchen and whisper to my twins.

"Babies, let's play quiet waters still waters OK?"

Immediately, they become as statues.

I let out a sigh of relief as I hear Dain's car pull off down the street.

"OK guys, game's over."

"But mommy, who won?" Journey whines.

"Me," Miles exclaims. "I didn't blink or anything."

"You have to blink or you'll die," she says proudly.

"Mommy, is that true?"

"Babies, just eat your food."

It is two-thirty in the afternoon, and Dee is still asleep. Her body is covered in one of my old, raggedy t-shirts, and her left leg hangs off the couch. I can remember a time when this girl couldn't sleep through the night.

"Dee, get up." I slap her across the legs. "Rise and shine. It's too late to be asleep."

She groans. "Shouldn't you be at work today?"

"Yes, I should." I sit her up on the couch and kiss her on the cheek. "But, I decided to take the day off so that I could spend some time with my baby sister."

"How sweet."

“Anyway, what do you want to do today?”

“Besides sleep?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t care. Why?”

“Well, since you’ve got this whole ‘I look like a ragamuffin’ thing going on, I thought that maybe we could rent a slew of horror films, scare ourselves to death, and get full off of popcorn and milk duds.”

“The refrigerator’s empty, huh?”

“You’ve got it.”

“Well, make sure you bring back *It’s the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown*. That is my all-time favorite horror film. And, I love my popcorn with extra butter.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah. Could you leave *now* so that I can get another hour of sleep?”

“Very funny.”

Mondays really are the best. Every Monday evening, Ms. Ryans comes over and stays with the twins. I am so thankful that God has placed her in my life because she’s always willing to help me in any way that she can. My children absolutely adore her.

Usually, I’ll take this time to paint and do lesson plans, but I really need to get out today. I change into a pair of boot-cut jeans and a t-shirt; the ensemble is complete with my short, leather jacket. I know that the weather is changing outside, but I grab my keys and leave the house anyway.

The wind greets me at the door, but I continue to walk. I know that I need some new art supplies, so I stop by the store and pick up a few paintbrushes. It's getting dark, and on my way home, I decide to stop by the video store. I walk around and browse through the sections for a few minutes. I don't quite know what I'm in the mood for, but I find myself looking through the horror films. Before long, I feel little hairs stand on the back of my neck. Someone watches me.

"Hey," a male voice calls out. "Nice night."

"Yeah." I glance in his direction and frown a little. He looks extremely familiar.

"What did you come to rent?"

I bite my bottom lip and stare directly into the eyes of the man I met in that church three years ago. I am at a loss of words. I thought that I would never see him again.

"Well, I was thinking about renting the Scream Trilogy, but it looks like someone beat me to it."

He flashes three movies in his hands. "I guess great minds really do think alike."

"I guess so. Anyway, I'll have to settle for something else"- -

"No, don't do that." He hands the movies to me.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Thank you." I extend my hand. "I'm Miles."

"I'm Trevor."

"Well Trevor, it's nice to finally know your name. Anyway, thanks again."

"Sure."

I turn away and walk toward the counter. Once I am out of the store, I want to kick myself. Why didn't I say something else, and why couldn't I tell him who I was? Does he even remember me? Maybe the night we spent together wasn't as special as I thought. For a brief moment, I think about returning to the store. Just as I turn around, we end up bumping into each other. I can tell by the look on his face that he remembers me.

"Uh, hi," she says finally. "I see we keep bumping into each other..." Her voice trails off and is lost in the atmosphere around us.

"You're the lady I met in the church that night three years ago," I say matter-of-factly. "I'm sorry. I didn't recognize you before. How have you been?"

"Just fine." She fidgets with the zipper on her jacket.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Uh, I see you're walking. Do you want me to give you a lift somewhere?"

"No, thank you," she says shyly. "I'm not too far from my destination."

"It's kind of chilly out here." I try to sound cool; I let this beautiful lady walk away from me once, and I'm not going to let her walk away again. "Can I at least buy you a cup of coffee?"

"OK."

She looks at me with those medium-brown eyes.

"Great. There's this coffee house around the corner."

"I know where it is. Come on. It *is* cold out here."

We walk back to the video store, and we stop at my car. I open the passenger's door for her.

“Thank you.”

As soon as she is settled, her eyes are drawn to a picture that hangs from my rearview mirror.

“That’s my baby.”

“I thought so.” She smiles. “Shaira, right? She’s so beautiful.”

I am impressed. It’s been three years since I’ve talked to her, and she still remembers my baby’s name.

She catches my stare and says, “I’m usually pretty good with names.”

“I see.”

As soon as we enter the café, butterflies turn in my stomach. Trevor’s aura is so familiar; his presence reminds me of a lasting love that was so long ago. I watch him; I am amused at the instant attention he gains from the people around us. He wears self-confidence like a three-piece suit.

“Your presence is so attractive,” I admit.

He pulls out a chair for me. “Thank you.” He pauses. “So Miles, where have you been for the last three years? I’ve thought about you from time to time.”

“I’ve thought about you too.” I brush my reddish-brown hair behind my ears. “It was such a shock to see you in the video store. I thought I would never see you again.”

“Me either. So, what can I get you to drink lady?”

I rest my hands on the table as the waiter comes to take our order.

After he leaves, I ask, “You didn’t recognize me at first. What made you remember?”

“The moment I saw you in the video store, I knew that there was something very familiar about you. Then, after you walked out the door, it hit me.”

“So you came looking for me,” I wink. “Why?”

I am slightly amused by the embarrassed look on his face.

“Because I just...that night meant everything to me. I was really going through a difficult time, and just having you there to listen to my problems really helped to heal my wounds. For a while, I thought...I thought you were an angel.”

“I thought the same about you. I was going through a difficult time too. You helped me to realize that I have purpose.”

“Who would have thought that we would meet up again in a video store? Maybe it’s fate. What do you think?”

“Maybe.”

We spend the next couple of hours talking about everything from Shaira, to Chocolate, to the birth of her twins. Miles and I are almost complete strangers, and yet in one night, we learned so much about each other.

“Trevor,” she finally says to me; she looks at her watch, “It’s really getting late. I have to go.”

“No wait!” I stand up beside her. “I’ll drive you home.”

“Trev, it’s not really that far.”

“But I want to.”

“OK.”

I take her by the hand, and in about five minutes, we pull into a beautiful residential area.

“Madison Hills.” I admire the beautiful houses.

“Yep. This neighborhood is my ‘starting over’ ground.”

I pull into her driveway. I try to think of something, anything that I can say. I don’t want to let her go just yet.

“Miles, do you consider me to be a stranger?”

She looks at me with a comical expression. “I don’t know. Why?”

“Because I don’t take strangers out for lunch, and I just wanted to know if you would have lunch with me on tomorrow.”

She smiles. “I would love to.”

I close the door and bite my bottom lip nervously. I must have a guilty look on my face because Ms. Ryans grins at me.

“Where have *you* been?” she asks. She folds a basket of towels that have been in my laundry room for weeks.

“I...I went for a walk and then I saw the man that I met in the church that night.”

“And?”

I smile. “And he asked me if I would have lunch with him tomorrow.”

“And you said yes, right?”

I nod.

“That’s my girl.”

I don't make it home until just after eight o'clock; Dee has not left her space on the couch. She has taken the liberty of ordering pizza, and once again, she drinks from the carton of Minute Maid.

"You give the term 'freshman fifteen' a whole new meaning." I sit down next to her and rumple her hair. "What is up with college kids and junk food?"

"For your information," she says, "I have been the same weight since my senior year of high school."

"Keep eating like this, and a lot's going to change."

"A woman," she says softly.

"What?"

"You smell like a woman."

"Not just any woman," I say. "Miles is her name. Miles Frazier."

Dee turns up her nose. "Interesting name," she mumbles.

"She's real, Dee."

"Who?"

"My angel. She's real, and I'm having lunch with her tomorrow."

## RAMBLINGS

I position myself in a small chair toward the back of the room; I know that I am about ten minutes early, but I just couldn't wait to see her again. She stands at the front of the classroom in a brown pantsuit; her reddish-brown hair falls around her shoulders. I watch her as she interacts with the children. Their little hands imitate hers as she draws several shapes across a canvas. She catches me staring and smiles.

"I'll be with you in a minute."

Her students quietly put their sketch pencils and pads away and line up at the door. She waves goodbye as the bell rings.

"Nice group of kids." I stand, walk to the front of the room, and take her hands in mine. "How has your morning been?"

"Just fine."

"You ready to go?"

"Sure. Where are you taking me?"

"To my favorite restaurant. You're gonna love it."

Trevor is absolutely right. I do love this restaurant. I love the fact that it's outside, especially on a day like this.

He looks around as if he knows what I'm thinking.

"It is a beautiful day," he says.

"Yeah. I'm glad you brought me here."

"Me too." He reaches across the table and takes my hands in his. "Miles, you are truly beautiful."

"Thank you."

"I have to admit something." He rubs the back of his neck and grins. "I haven't been completely honest with you."

"Trevor, you're blushing."

He looks down at the ground. "I just," he begins, "You have been on my mind for the past three years, and now, to see you here in front of me...you came to me at a time in my life when I thought that love didn't exist." He looks at me shyly. "After I found you, everything else fell into place."

"Trevor, what are you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying to say anything," he shrugs his shoulders, "except that I found you, and I don't want to lose you again."

Miles looks at me with the strangest look, but I continue to express my feelings. After awhile, she places her hand to my face.

"Trevor," she grins, "you're rambling."

"I...I know. I tend to do that when I am in the presence of a beautiful woman."

"You really think I'm beautiful?"

“Yeah.”

“Guess what?” She smiles. “I think you’re beautiful too.”

In one night, Miles changed my whole outlook on life. She helped me to realize that love is not found in one particular person; it’s in all of us, and we have to search our souls to find it.

You know, I said that I wanted to meet the person who came up with the saying, ‘love never fails’. I have, and his name is Jesus Christ.