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DEDICATION

“...He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, *and* established my goings...”

-Psalm 40:2 (KJV)

This book was dedicated to my wonderful mother and the rest of my family and friends who support me as I follow my dreams, no matter where they may take me.

PROLOGUE

August 14, 2014 – On a warm and sunny summer day like today, I can think of about fifty other things I'd rather be doing than writing in a journal. It's just that my Wicked Foster Mom took away my phone and unhooked my cable. So, it's either write in this journal or take a nap—and I ain't sleepy. I've been in this new foster home for less than 24 hours and I'm already on punishment!

All I did was say, "There's no way in hell I'm going to church with you!"

And she said, there's no way in hell she's going to allow me to disrespect her in her own home on day one. She had to set me straight or this thing would never work.

My bad, allow me to introduce myself. My name is LaToya Cherise Young—though I'm considering changing my last name. I figure the Young's dropped me, so I should drop their stupid name. I'm not a Muslim, so I can't call myself LaToya X. How about LaToya Y? As in: Y was I born? Y am I here? Y did you let this happen to me, Lord?

I'm sixteen and this is my seventh foster home since being placed in foster care five years ago. Man, it really has been five years since the "night in question!" That's what they called it in court: The night in question. The night my whole world changed. The night I was saved and forsaken all in one shot. The night Tamika (my mother) celebrated her 30th birthday by throwing a pajama party in our basement. Imagine, 20 grown folks boozing and boppin,' sweating and stinking up their silk pj's, with *The Cha-Cha Slide* blasting in the background. I was hoping somebody would call the police and shut that mess down. No such luck.

That was also the night when Tamika's live-in boyfriend, Mr. Rick, decided to creep into my bedroom for one more piece. It wasn't the first time. More like the 51st time (I lost track). I stopped trying to fight him. Stopped trying to figure out how to let my mother know. She was too busy spending his

money to notice that her only child was having nightmares, fighting in school, and went from an A/B student to a solid F overnight. She was too much “in love” to notice that her man was slipping out of her bed and into her little girl’s bed in the middle of the night. On the night in question, she noticed.

He told her that it was all a big misunderstanding. He must’ve had too much to drink at the party and fell into my bed by mistake.

“Yeah, I was on top of her, but I thought she was you, baby,” he pleaded his case, practically in tears. “You know, I’d never do something like that if I was in my right mind, baby. I love that girl like she was my own.”

I guess we all define love differently. For me, love meant losing everything. For Mr. Rick, it meant taking what you want, when you want it, however you want it. For Tamika, love meant standing by her man. I still can’t believe she bought his crazy story. But she obviously wasn’t the only one. The jury believed him too. Well, part of the jury. We had a hung jury. The D.A. didn’t think there was enough evidence to try him again. Which is why Rick is still living with Tamika in his beautiful Mt. Airy home and I’m in foster home #7. Lucky #7!

I started out in foster care, trying to make the best of it. “Yes ma’am, no sir, please and thank you’s.” Waking up early to get my chores done. I just wanted them to like me. Now, I don’t give a damn. Don’t get me wrong, not all of my foster parents were evil. Just half of them. The first one, Mrs. Reddick, was about a hundred years old and smoked three packs of Marlboros every day. She cussed like a sailor, and her hands were rock hard, like she had been pounding bricks all day. I learned this on the day she thought I stole her cigarettes (I didn’t). She slapped the cigarette taste out of my mouth anyway. I didn’t even try to run from her. I ran to my social worker instead.

The next two foster homes were really nice, but by then I was already jaded. I was mad about everything. Y me! All I ever wanted was to be normal. I didn’t care how nice my foster parents were, how big their house was, or how much stuff they bought me. I just wanted to be in my own home, in my own messy bed, hanging out with my own crazy friends. And I didn’t care who knew it. Once I stopped caring, it was all downhill from there. Drinking, smoking, cussing, sneaking out, sleeping around. Been there done that. I probably invented at least three new sins the Bible never even thought of.

The thing that got me kicked out of my last foster home, actually started three foster homes ago. My foster mother back then was Miss Irene, a forty-five-year-old schoolteacher who *lived* in the church. Even though I had been molested, Miss Irene still thought of me as a virgin. She actually believed me when I would tell her that I was studying Biology at my friend Suzie’s house until one in the morning. I didn’t even have a friend named Suzie. Never in her wildest dreams, would Miss Irene have imagined that I was doing Reverend Fredrick’s baby boy, Tyreese.

Anyway, one night, the reverend and first lady were out of town at the Annual Convention. Tyreese snuck a bottle of communion wine from the church and invited me over. Halfway through the bottle, Tyreese broke out the video camera. The same camera his dad used to tape his sermons. I thought he was crazy.

By the time we finished off the rest of that bottle, I was dancing to R Kelly in Miss Irene's leopard print teddy. I didn't know I could get my body to move like that. Actually, I don't remember any of it. The only reason I know what I looked like was because good ol' Tyreese posted it on the internet. Poor Miss Irene nearly ended up in the hospital from all the fasting and praying she did. They removed me from her house when she tried to give me an exorcism.

Even though the whole video disaster nearly killed Miss Irene, it turned me into an instant celebrity. At school, in the mall, everywhere I went, boys were coming up to me and asking for my autograph and my phone number. I felt like a movie star. I wasn't always treated like a movie star. The girls were always getting in my face, calling me out my name. I knew they were jealous, but that didn't mean I had to take it. If they stepped to me, I stepped harder. I was moved three times over the next year and a half. Which is exactly why they moved me out of the city to Norristown. A place where, hopefully, no one has heard of me or my little home-made music video.

So here I am. In a brand-new foster home, in a brand-new town. I haven't seen my mother at all in the past year. Well, it's kind of hard for her since she doesn't drive and she hates the bus. Usually, Mr. Rick is her chauffeur, but there's a restraining order out against him—he ain't allowed to get within one thousand feet of me. I guess that makes me feel a little safer. Who am I kidding? The truth is, I don't know why my mom stopped visiting. And at this point, I don't care. I'm too pissed with my mom to miss her. But sometimes, when I first wake up in the morning, it feels like nothing's changed. I'm still at home with my mom, and this nightmare never happened. Then, when I hear a stranger's voice telling me breakfast is ready, I know the nightmare lives on. My mom never cooked breakfast.

Oh well, I'd better go to bed. Miss Meagan, my social worker, woke me up at seven in the a.m. to get me over here. She's a tiny little White girl, who barely looks old enough to drive, not to mention have been to college. She's nice, though. We really talk about stuff—though I don't tell her everything. And we usually get along great, but this time was different. The whole way over to Wicked Foster Mom's house, Miss Meagan was quiet, like she had a lot on her mind.

"This is it, Toya," she finally said to me, when we pulled up in front of the house. "There won't be any more foster homes for you, after this one. So, if you can't cut it here, I'm afraid your next stop is a residential facility." I didn't know what that meant, but I knew it wasn't good. In my mind, I saw a place

with metal bars and padded walls. A place where instead of hot meals on plates, we'd eat cold cheese sandwiches on plastic trays. And instead of warm beds, we'd sleep on old musty cots with no blankets. This is my last chance at a home. Lord, help me!

CHAPTER 1

A chocolate brown Cabbage Patch doll I got five Christmases ago and a picture taken at the family reunion six years ago, were pretty much all the mementos I carried with me from my life pre-foster care. I put the doll on the bed on top of the fluffy purple comforter and gently set the picture on the nightstand. Standing there for a moment, I thought, “So, this is my new room.”

It was a nice room. I had my own TV, a laptop on the desk, African art on the walls and a closet big enough to hold the entire Junior Miss Department at Macys. I only had one suitcase. My last foster mother gave most of my clothes away to her own granddaughter.

“I paid good money for that stuff,” I heard the woman say the night before I left. “I’m not letting that little tramp leave with my money on her back.” As if the State hadn’t given her the money—most of which she kept for herself and bought me clothes from the thrift store instead. But, whatever, that was all over with now. My new foster mom said she would take me shopping—and the word “hand-me-down” was definitely not in this woman’s vocabulary.

Turned out she wasn’t the Wicked Foster Mom after all. Her name was Angeline Hughes—Miss Angie, was what she told me to call her. She looked like Mary J. Blige’s long-lost sister. All vogued-out, in her Marc Jacob jeans and a flirty pair of gold sling-back sandals, which I had seen Beyoncé sporting in last month’s issue of *Essence* magazine. Her honey blonde hair made her caramel skin glow beneath flawless make up. She had a big, booming voice that always let you know who was in charge.

Miss Angie owned a hair salon called, “Sassy’s” in the basement of her plush three-story home. It wasn’t some run-down doo-bee shop, either. Sassy’s was classy. Miss Angie had clients not customers. The place smelled like vanilla soy candles, not perm and burnt hair. She served her clients wine

and cheese; and the room was always filled with the classics: Stevie Wonder, Earth Wind and Fire, Teena Marie and, my personal favorite, Pattie Labelle.

Miss Angie also had a daughter, Chelsea, who was thirteen going on thirty-three. The first time she saw me, her face was all sloppy with tears of joy. "Welcome home, big sis," she cheered, then wrapped her scrawny, string bean arms around me with all the force of a Mack truck, causing me to stagger.

Chelsea was actually the reason I was in this house. One day, Chelsea started making noise about wanting to have a little brother or sister. Miss Angie knew she wasn't about to go back to changing diapers and feeding babies at three o'clock in the morning, but she recognized that her daughter really needed some companionship. Sometime before, Miss Angie had toyed with the idea of becoming a foster parent. Her mother had done it, off and on, for years. Now, seemed like the perfect timing: business was going well, and they had plenty of room. Besides, Miss Angie was anxious to share her thirty-eight years of wisdom to help keep some poor girl from making some of the same mistakes that she had made in life.

Unlike her mother, Chelsea was far from glamorous. She was a pretty girl, but her interests were apparently not in shoes and make up, but science and math. And judging by the frazzled ponytail that sat crookedly on top of her head, she rarely paid a visit to her mother's salon. Miss Angie permitted this outrage only while Chelsea was in the house. As soon as she stepped out the door, her hair had better be presentable or Miss Angie threatened to shave her bald. "You wear your hair right or you wear no hair at all," she would tease.

When Miss Angie first saw my hair, all she could do was shake her head. "Oh no, girl," she said, while playing in the long fuzzy braids that should have been taken out weeks ago. "I can't have you walking around with this ball of yarn on your head. I've got a reputation to protect."

Now, staring at my braids, in my new mirror, in my brand-new bedroom, I started to wonder when the hell I was going to wake up from this dream. Sometimes it felt like a dream, other times a nightmare, but never reality. One day I went to bed a normal girl, living with my mother in Philly. I was barely five feet tall, with big plaits and barrettes in my hair. The next thing I knew, I was five foot seven with hips and breasts and long stringy braids, living in a stranger's house, a million miles away from my mom. All because of Mr. Rick and his old nasty self.

"Toya!" The sound of Miss Angie's voice cut through the silence and snapped me out of my trance. I followed the sound of that voice to her bedroom. The woman was propped up on the bed, a silk scarf tied around her head. She had her glasses on and was flipping through a packet of papers. Her slender-framed, DKNY glasses made her look smart and sophisticated, though in her pajamas. *Even her glasses were cool*, I thought.

"You called me?" I said, leaning in the doorway.

Miss Angie read one more sentence then looked up over the rim of her glasses. “Yes. I was just reading your case history.” The case history. A single piece of paper typed up by some social worker that was supposed to sum up my entire life—my history. I started to read it once. I couldn’t get past the first line: “LaToya Cherise Young is a bright, energetic girl, who loves reading, music and going to school.” Wrong. Wrong. Wrong! LaToya Cherise Young is a very pissed off girl, who wants y’all to stay out of her damn business! After reading the first line I threw the case history in the trash. If the first line was a lie, I could only imagine what the rest of it said.

But now that Miss Angie was reading it, I couldn’t help but wonder what had been typed on that piece of paper about me. I’d done my fair share of dirt the past couple of years. I wondered if they put the internet incident on there. But Miss Angie didn’t mention the internet disaster. She went right for the meat. “It says here you were molested by your mom’s boyfriend,” she said then looked up at me for a response. She got none, so she continued, matter-of-factly, “Are you promiscuous?”

“Promiscu—” I repeated the word slowly, as if trying to translate it.

“Promiscuous,” Miss Angie repeated. “Are you sexually active?”

“Um...Yeah?” I replied, stunned that she had even asked. The other foster moms just assumed I was and took me down to the clinic to put me on the pill. “But the pill makes me nauseous. I’ve got condoms, though,” I added.

Miss Angie cackled, “Girl, this ain’t Planned Parenthood! I just wanted to know what I’m dealing with, here. Now, you say you’re sexually active. You gotta boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Good. Look, I know you’re sixteen and I’m not opposed to you having a boyfriend, once you get settled in and I see you bringing home some good grades. But this is a celibate household, young lady. You know what that means?” Miss Angie raised her glasses up as if that would help her see me better. To examine my eyes.

“Um...it means no sex.”

“Exactly. The Bible says it’s a sin so, if I can’t get none, you can’t get none either. Ya understand?”

“Yes.”

“All right then. Good night.” Miss Angie slipped her glasses back on her face and started reading again. I was dismissed. Then Miss Angie added, “Oh, and bring me those condoms, please?”

* * * * *

In the bottom drawer, underneath my blue sweatpants and a couple of pairs of jeans, was a brown paper bag filled with about ten condoms, in all different styles, colors and flavors. I grabbed the bag and started to take it to

Miss Angie when I caught myself. *What are you thinking?* That was the last of my stash. I never knew when I might get the urge. I took a handful of condoms out of my bag and tucked them in a sock. *That woman must've been out of her mind if she—*

“What ya doing?” The voice startled me. I looked back to find Chelsea in the doorway with a big grin on her face. While Chelsea may have been the reason I was there, she was also annoying as hell. I knew that for a fact, even though I had just met her—always buzzing around me like a tiny little gnat that needed to be swatted.

“Don’t you knock?” I snapped, quickly shoving the bag of condoms back into the drawer.

“The door was already open.” Chelsea sashayed in and flopped on my bed.

I just stared at her. “Well, I would appreciate it if you knocked first. I need my privacy.”

“Excuse me!” Mildly offended, Chelsea sucked her teeth and added, “Well, Mommy says there ain’t no privacy in her house. So, you’d better get used to—”

“Chelsea!”

The voice scared both of us. Chelsea nearly fell off the bed. We looked back to find Miss Angie standing there with hand on hip. “I thought I told you to go to bed.”

Chelsea whined, “I was. I just wanted to give Toya her present.”

Present? I had been so outdone by the fact that this girl had just barged into my room and plopped her little hips on my bed, that I hadn’t even noticed she had a little pink gift bag in her hand.

“Welcome to the family.” Chelsea smiled at me wearing clear plastic braces with tiny pink flecks. Standing next to her mother, their appearance was as different as night and day. Miss Angie, like a model in her Japanese silk robe and French manicured toes. Chelsea looked like a member of the geek squad, skinny legs poking out of an over-sized T-shirt, white sweat socks on her feet. But if you looked deeper, you could see Miss Angie’s beauty just beneath the surface, ready to bloom someday on Chelsea’s face.

I dipped my fingers into the gift bag and pulled out an angel night light.

“Sometimes I get scared when I sleep in a new place and this helps me.” Chelsea explained, “I thought you might like one too.”

“Thanks.” I stared at the plastic angel in my hands. Maybe Chelsea wasn’t a little gnat after all. Maybe she was one of those annoying lady bugs instead.

But then Chelsea added, “Trust me, it’s not that deep. I got it from the dollar store.” She laughed and her hands immediately covered her mouth, still a little self-conscious about the braces. Miss Angie pinched her arm. “Ow, Mommy! I’m only joking.”

“Go to bed.”

“Okay. G’nite.” Chelsea threw her arms around her mother, stole a quick

hug from me before I could react, then disappeared—with the sound of her footsteps thudding down the hall like she had lead in her feet. For such a skinny girl, she sounded like a herd of elephants running.

Miss Angie listened to the sound of her daughter's muffled footsteps entering her bedroom then turned her attention back to me. "Don't mind Chelsea. She's just excited that you're here. She painted this room all by herself, ya know."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. And Lord knows getting that girl to do any work around this house is a miracle in and of itself." Miss Angie let out a little hoot of a laugh then sighed. Holding out her hand, she asked, "So, you have something for me?"

It took me a minute to figure out what she meant. "Oh!" I quickly returned to the bottom drawer and dug out the bag of condoms. I was about to hand the bag to my foster mother when I felt something strange. A twinge of guilt tugging at my conscience. For some reason, I did not want to start out on the wrong foot with this lady. I wanted to be on her good side, though I did not know why. I reached into the sock drawer and pulled out my other secret stash of condoms, put them in the bag and gave the whole thing to Miss Angie.

"I'm glad you did that, Toya. Cuz you know I would've found them eventually."

"Yeah, something tells me you would have."

Miss Angie shot me a look as if to say: "*You better believe it!*"

Seamlessly, the hardness of Miss Angie's raised eyebrow melted into a kind expression. She waited for me to climb into bed and tucked me in like I was three years old. I half expected her to read me a bedtime story.

Instead, Miss Angie asked, "So, is the room okay?" There was an anxiousness in her voice, like that of a brand-new foster parent wanting to please her first chargee.

"Yeah. It's nice. I never had my own TV before."

"Well, feel free to enjoy it—when you're off punishment."

I winced. I had forgotten all about that one. "You really gonna put me on punishment my first day here?"

"Is there really no way in hell you're going to church tomorrow?"

I let out a deep sigh and rolled over in my bed. "I guess I don't have a choice, now do I?"

Miss Angie busted out into a classic Wicked Foster Mom laugh. "Ah! You catch on quick, my dear," and flicked off the light.

CHAPTER 2

Church. Church in the summer. Church in the summer with no air conditioning. Actually, the church had air conditioning, but the building was just packed with so many folks singing and shouting that all the cold air was sucked up before it could reach me. My arms were getting tired from fanning myself so hard. Today, I had on a black T-shirt, denim mini skirt with black leggings and flip flops. “Come as you are,” Miss Angie had told me this morning. Her way of trying to reassure me that my outfit was fine and the people at her church wouldn’t care what I wore. They would just be glad I was there. But I still felt self-conscious. All of the people there looked so nice: sharp suits, colorful sundresses, big fancy hats—even Chelsea looked like a she was in an ad for The Limited.

Miss Angie was an usher, so she was dressed in all white, right down to the pair of immaculate white gloves on her hands. And she must have had on roller blades instead of shoes, because as soon as I started to nod off to sleep, Angie the Usher was there with the quickness, nudging me and gesturing for me to pay attention. Chelsea slid me a grape Now-and-Later candy, which all the kids pronounced, *Nova Later*.

She whispered, “Here, this will help. But don’t let mommy catch you. She’ll embarrass you in front of the whole church. Trust me, I know.”

“Thanks.” I faked a cough so I could open the wrapper without being heard. I could feel my foster mother’s eyes burning through me, but I kept my eyes straight ahead. When Miss Angie looked away, I quickly popped the candy into my mouth, then me and Chelsea snickered. Miss Angie fired a “Shh!” in our direction. We straightened right up.

Most of my foster parents had dragged me off to church. I didn’t have anything against church. I liked God. I just couldn’t understand why the service had to be so long. My first foster family would show up for 7 am sunrise service at 6:45, next it was Sunday school, 11:00 service, out to the

Chinese buffet for lunch and then come back in time for the afternoon service. Then for fun, they'd go away for weekend retreats where all they did was eat, sleep and go to church.

I once stayed with a Catholic family for a few weeks. Their services were over in 45 minutes. I liked that church! The service I was in right now had been going on for two hours and the pastor still hadn't even preached yet. *Come on!*

Prayer. Offering. Then the scripture reading and another prayer. Angie the Usher was going to get a real workout today, because I could feel myself getting ready to nod off again. The youth choir, which included Chelsea, sang an upbeat song but even that wasn't enough to hold my eyes open. I could feel my head snap back as sleep fought to take over. Then all of a sudden, bam! Something caught my eye that would keep me awake for the rest of the service.

On the drums. He was beautiful. Gorgeous. Hazel eyes and sexy braids that gave him sort of an edge—not juvenile detention center edge, but hot boy edge. And the way he was rocking those drums! He had the whole church up on their feet clapping, dancing, slapping on tambourines.

I was the only one not standing. I was too busy staring at him to move. “*I love this church!*” I giggled to myself. When the service was over, I would tell Miss Angie that I wanted to join the choir—even though I sang like a worn out, old alley cat. Come as you are, right?

Pastor Dwight Ewing had been a pro football player back in the day, so all of his sermons tended to have a football theme. Today's sermon was: “The Perfect Catch,” based on Matthew 11:29, where Jesus encouraged the masses to make the great exchange: Their burdens for His peace.

Pastor Ewing talked about God being an excellent wide receiver. “Whatever we throw His way, He catches it. Therefore, you oughta feel free to cast your cares upon Him, cuz He won't let ya down. He's able to bear any load we're carrying. So, why don't y'all throw yourselves in the arms of Jesus and let Him carry you over the finish line and right onto victory.”

He delivered the message with the force of a linebacker and the finesse of a seasoned quarterback. And apparently his words had an impact, because when the pastor called for people to give their lives to the Lord, a stream of people made their way to the altar—including the cutie-pie on the drums.

Up until then, I had only been half-listening to the sermon. I was too busy looking for “the face.” I had lost track of him when the choir finished singing, but now there he was, standing with three other teens. The congregation exploded with applause and *Praise the Lord's* as the group made its way down the aisle. The foursome stood side by side with tears in their eyes—even cutie-pie. *What's everybody crying about?* I wondered. I wanted to

ask Chelsea, but I was afraid of being shushed to death by Miss Angie.

The cute one and the others knelt down, while Pastor Ewing prayed the Prayer of Salvation over them. When it was over, the group stood and embraced each other. Members of the congregation, led by the mothers, came out of the pews and hugged the teens. I wondered if it would be wrong for me to go up and hug them too. Never mind. God would probably strike me down before I got up there, because there was absolutely nothing pure about what was in my heart at the moment. But when cutie-pie turned around, I could see he still had a tear in his eye. My heart felt sad for him, and I had no idea why. I watched him walk back up the aisle and noted where his seat was. Twelve rows back and to the right near the puny air conditioner. When the service was over, I would make a bee line for that row and say hi.

* * * * *

Making my way to cutie-pie was like making my way through a human maze. People were cutting in front of me, blocking the aisles, stopping to hold long, drawn out conversations. He was still there, just 20 feet away if I could just break free of the grip of Mother Pearl, the church mother, who had me all locked up in a bear hug: “Welcome to the family, Baby...God loves you, Sugar...Keep holding on to God’s unchanging hand, Precious.”

Finally, Mother Pearl released me. Cutie-pie was now just 10 feet away, talking to some of his friends. The closer I got, the cuter he got. I was 7 feet away...6 feet... now 5 feet when...

Miss Angie stepped right in front of me. Her face was all twisted up. “Why are your lips purple?” she asked.

“Huh?” My answer was half confused, half irritated. Instinctively, I rubbed my fingers across my lips. There was nothing there. *Why was Miss Angie tripping?* Miss Angie held her compact up to my face so I could look in the mirror. My lips really were purple. Deep purple, like someone had punched me in the mouth. How in the world had I—

“The *Nova Later!*” I slapped my hand over my mouth. At that moment, I could see cutie-pie looking right at me. Had he seen? Had he seen my lips all purple like I had some crazy grape disease? *Oh no!* He was headed straight for me. He was coming my way!

“I gotta get outta here,” I announced, panicked, but my voice was muffled by the hand over my mouth.

“What? Girl, take your hand off your mouth,” Miss Angie said. “I can’t understand a word you’re saying.”

Cutie-pie was just two feet away when Miss Angie reached up to take my hand off of my mouth. Freaked out, did not begin to describe the weird set of emotions that rolled over me in waves. I did the only thing I could think to do in that moment. Bolt.

I jerked my head away from Miss Angie’s reach, spun around and

Boy Toy

ran—crashing first into Mother Pearl, then into the deacon carrying the offering plate. Dollar bills and coins flew in the air.

“Sorry!” Still clutching my hand over my mouth, I hurdled two-year-old Johnny, who was playing with his cars in the aisle, and zoomed out the front door like an Olympic sprinter.

Come as you are. Leave any way you can.

CHAPTER 3

Tuesday afternoons at Sassy's was the senior citizen special. A press and curl was only twenty-five bucks for ladies over sixty-five on Tuesdays, so the place was packed. And they were not the sweet, soft-talking, grannies I had been expecting. These ladies were loud and rowdy, talking about everything from men to menopause. Miss Angie broke out her old Motown CD's and served strawberries and champagne to the ones who weren't too holy to drink.

Despite the party vibe in the salon, I was wiped out. I had been up until two o'clock in the morning taking my braids out. My fingers started cramping around midnight. And just when I was about to find a pair of scissors and cut the stupid braids out of my hair, Chelsea came to the rescue. At that point, I was glad to listen to her motor mouth run, just as long as I could give my hands a break.

Sitting there, unraveling braid after braid, Chelsea told me all of her business. I learned that Chelsea loved pizza and hated broccoli. She was an honor student—no surprise there, because she looked like a bookworm. More importantly, Chelsea was so smart that she actually skipped the 5th grade. That meant, even though she was only thirteen, she would be starting high school this year. “Hey, maybe we can have lunch together,” she said, brimming with the eagerness of a freshman.

Or maybe not, I thought.

We took a break at one in the morning, and we both stretched our legs and made some microwave popcorn. As soon as we sat back down, the motor mouth flipped her switch on again. This time things got more personal. Chelsea talked about her dad, who had moved to Texas after the divorce. She went to see him three times a year. He was a financial analyst in Dallas, Texas, and this summer he taught her how to buy stock on the internet. She made six hundred bucks, part of which she used to buy a new telescope, and the rest went into her savings. My father once taught me to shoot craps. I won eight

dollars. But that was years ago, before he dropped off the face of the earth. My mom said it was the drugs.

Chelsea said her parents had been divorced for six years. "But I'm not one of those kids who secretly wishes her parents will get back together," she told me. "They fought way too much. I like it just the way it is. Peace and quiet. Besides, I want Mommy to marry Uncle Kevin."

I looked at Chelsea strangely until she laughed and said, "He's not my real uncle, silly. He's Mommy's friend. They were boyfriend and girlfriend in college, before she met my dad. She lost track of him after that. Then one day we were in the supermarket and there he was. Turns out Uncle Kevin and Mommy had been living in the same town for years and didn't even know it. Isn't that something? Sometimes they go out to the movies." Then she said in a hushed tone, "Don't tell Mommy I told you this: one time, I saw them kissing in the car."

"Miss Angie?" For some reason, I couldn't picture my new foster mother in love. I couldn't see Miss Angie acting all silly over a boy, like I did. Or letting a man boss her around, like my mom did.

"She don't know that I saw her. I was supposed to be asleep. But when I heard the car pull up and all this slow music coming from the radio, I just had to see what they were doing."

"So, Miss Angie has a boyfriend, huh?"

"Uh uh! Please don't tell her I told you that, cuz she'll swear up and down that she doesn't. She and Uncle Kev are just friends."

"Yeah, friends who make out in the car."

We laughed so loud, that Miss Angie had to tell us to tone it down. "Sorry," we sang in unison then shared a quiet giggle.

* * * * *

Thinking about that conversation put a smile on my face even now as I watched Miss Angie hustling between clients, putting deep conditioner in the silver-haired lady's hair then teasing the curls on the head of the heavy-set lady in the red velour sweat suit. I wondered what kind of man Miss Angie would go for. She was pretty, had her own money, her own business. She had it all together. This man, Kevin, must have had a lot of money, a big house. He probably drove a Cadillac or a BMW. How would Miss Angie react if she found out her boyfriend was sneaking into her little girl's room? Would she take his side if Chelsea told her he was touching her private parts?

Those questions were still floating in my brain, unanswered, when Miss Angie noticed me.

"There you are!" She waltzed over and put her arm around my shoulder. "Everybody, meet LaToya. My foster child."

It still made me wince to be introduced with that word: Foster child. She might as well have said: "My Fake Child." But I gave a quick wave and the old

ladies beamed at me with big grins on their faces.

Miss Angie continued, "Toya will be in the eleventh grade this year. Let see, uh...she grew up in Philly with her mom. But they put her in foster care because her mom's boyfriend was molesting her."

Instantly, I shot Miss Angie a horrified look.

"What? Because I said you were molested?" She turned to her clients and put her hand on her hip. "Anyone in here who's ever been sexually abused or has someone close to them who was sexually abused, raise your hand."

Every hand in the place went up—including Miss Angie's. She turned to me. "See? I said that because I wanted you to see you're not alone. It's a sisterhood up in here, girl. This place is our therapy."

"Amen to that!" a voice yelled from underneath a hair dryer.

That put me at ease, and I could feel myself smiling, a little.

"Well, now that we've got that straight, let's deal with this hair." Miss Angie pulled the scarf off of my head and revealed a mass of thick, unpermed hair. "What do you want me to do with it? Ponytail? Wrap it? Shave it all off?

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Does your mom let you relax your hair," she asked, carefully examining my split ends.

"Uh huh."

"You sure? I don't want nobody getting mad at me."

The whole conversation was pointless to me. I hadn't seen my mother in over a year. I could've dyed my hair green, and I was sure my mom wouldn't care. Once she got over being angry with me for what happened with Mr. Rick on the night in question, Tamika, my mother, visited pretty regularly. Every other week at the social services agency. Then we started going out to different places: McDonalds, the mall, the park. I couldn't visit my mother at her home because of the restraining order against Mr. Rick, but the visits were going very well. Lots of laughing, gossiping about the neighbors, taking pictures. My mom even gave me a prepaid cell phone so I could keep in touch.

Then one day, Tamika called the agency and told them she had to cancel her visit. She wasn't feeling well. The next visit, Tamika came, but she was a half hour late, so there really wasn't any time to do anything. Also, she seemed distant. I could feel her slipping away. I wasn't even surprised when Tamika cancelled the next visit and then the next one. After a while, she didn't even bother to call, she just stopped showing up. I still had the pre-paid phone, but my mom's cell phone was off.

"She won't care what you do to my hair," I said, deflated.

I could tell that Miss Angie detected the faint hint of sadness in my voice. She probably sensed that talking about my mom was making me miss her. I could see her trying to think of something: *What could be said to cheer her up?*

What magic words existed that would fill the mom-sized whole in this young girl's heart? Nothing came to mind. All Miss Angie could do was what she did best. "Okay, then. Let me work my magic on this hair."

Miss Angie's magic consisted of a relaxer, followed by a deep conditioning with some concoction that smelled like spearmint and made my scalp feel all tingly. Miss Angie worked the scissors like a surgeon, slicing away split ends and shaping my hair into a work of art. Two hours later, I was staring at myself in the mirror, marveling at how my hair bounced and shined. My hair was cut into a bob, but was still long enough to pull into a ponytail when necessary.

"You like it?"

"It looks good," I said, unable to tear my eyes away from the mirror. "Thanks, Miss Angie." I jumped up and gave her a hug. I hadn't expected to do that. It just came out of me. The way Miss Angie welcomed me. Going out of her way to be nice to me. Who wouldn't feel grateful? But in that same moment, I pulled back. I had experience with other foster parents who treated me like gold at first, then before I knew it, they were calling me all kinds of ugly names and kicking me out of their lovely homes. How long would Miss Angie's nice act last? Her nice was the worst kind of nice, because it seemed so real and when it goes away, it was going to hurt all the more.

"You okay?" she asked, seeing that sadness had returned to my eyes.

"Yeah. I'm just tired." I looked away because I could feel Miss Angie reading my eyes. "I think I'm gonna take a nap." I hurried out of the room before anything else showed up in my eyes.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I could hear them talking. *I knew it!* They're all two-faced. I hung around, so I could hear what they really thought of me. One of the customers, Miss Gladys, was saying "Poor thing. She must've been through so much."

"Such a pretty girl. And she's got to carry such a burden," another added.

The others sighed in agreement. I heard Miss Angie call for her next client, Miss Coretta, to climb in her chair. I pictured Miss Coretta waddling over and plopping in the chair, drops of water trickling from her freshly shampooed hair. "She's a pretty girl, all right. Better be careful, Angie. It won't be long before the neighborhood boys come sniffin' round here."

"Coretta!" Miss Gladys crowed.

"I'm just saying. I've seen her kind before. Fast. Fast. Fast! Girls like that are always chasing after the ding-a-ling." Miss Coretta announced, apparently not all concerned about who might be blushing. "That's right, I said it. The ding-a-ling! Like they got something to prove."

"She'll be fine, Miss Corie." That was Miss Angie. I heard a rustling sound that must've been the plastic apron being tied around Miss Coretta's neck to keep her clothes dry. I hoped Miss Angie would strangle the hag with it.

Miss Coretta kept running her mouth. "It's not her I'm worrying about.

You got your own daughter to think about. You got Chelsea on the right path. Honor student, singing on the choir, still playing with dolls. It only takes one bad apple to spoil the barrel, ya know?"

"No, I don't know."

"All I'm saying is, it's still your job to pick your daughter's role models. You pick the wrong one and next thing you know, sweet little Chelsea is pushing her own little girl in a baby carriage. I've seen it happen too many...."

Miss Coretta had plenty more to say, but I guess Miss Angie had heard enough. She clicked on the blow dryer, which drowned out the sound of that old lady's voice. I wished she would blow Miss Coretta right out the door.

CHAPTER 4

The crash of a shattering dish woke me up. It was followed by a “Damn it!” then a “Chelsea!” and finally the thud, thud, thud, of Chelsea’s heavy feet stomping down the stairs. I couldn’t hear what Miss Angie and Chelsea were saying. Whatever it was, they were all worked up. I knew it! Finally, these freakishly nice people were starting to show their true colors.

For the two weeks since I’d started living there, it had been a relatively drama-free household. I never trusted it, though. Sure, I played along. As foster homes went, this one was okay. Clean. Quiet. Nice flat screen TV and cable. And I really didn’t want to move again, so I did everything I could to be the model foster kid. I did my chores. I sat with them at night and watched TV. No back talk. No attitude. But I was definitely holding back. I made polite conversation, but never revealed anything too personal about myself. I resisted, hard, that part of me that wanted to accept these people and feel close to them. It was easier that way. So, when the stuff finally did hit the fan and they kicked me out, it wouldn’t hurt so bad. I had enough hurt. I just wanted to make the best of things until I was old enough to get my own place. That was my plan and so far, it had been working. I even talked Miss Angie into training me to work as a shampoo girl in the salon a couple of days a week, so I could make some extra money on top of my allowance. Everything had been going along nicely, until now. Bring on the drama.

This morning’s commotion was the signal to me that the honeymoon was officially over. I pulled the covers over my head and pretended to be asleep, hoping Miss Angie would leave me alone. No such luck.

“Toya!”

The sound of that voice made my stomach twist into a knot. I flipped back the covers, took a deep breath and dragged myself downstairs, dreading what I’d find when I got there. What did I do that I wasn’t supposed to do?

Or not do that I was supposed to do? Who knows? Foster moms just like to go off sometimes—PMS, I guessed.

* * * * *

What happened to all the drama? I walked into the kitchen expecting to find a whole lot of yelling and screaming, pots and pans flying. No, what I found was Chelsea sitting at the table munching on a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios, watching the Disney Channel on the tiny, flat screen TV mounted on the wall. Miss Angie was stooped down on the floor picking up fractured pieces of a mug that lay in a puddle of green tea.

“Hey. Good morning,” Miss Angie said as she reeled off a long stream of paper towels and started mopping up the spill. “Listen, I’ve got a little emergency to deal with, and Chelsea’s got to go to dance class, so will you be okay here by yourself?”

“Yeah?” I answered, still processing what Miss Angie just said. I hadn’t realized it until then, but I had not been in this house alone since I got there.

“I figured you would.” Miss Angie scooped a ball of tea-soaked paper towels into the trash can. “I just didn’t want you to wake up this morning, find everybody gone and think we ran away from home or something.”

I smiled. “No. I’ll be okay.” I felt a strange sense of relief. It turned out all the commotion I heard was because Miss Angie got a phone call from one of her clients who was having a “hair emergency.” Now, Miss Angie had to rush over and fix the woman’s hair, which meant she couldn’t drive Chelsea to dance class. Miss Angie was so busy packing her supplies, while fixing herself a bagel, at the same time talking on the phone trying to find someone to take Chelsea to dance class, that she dropped her mug of tea. That was the crash I heard. So, then Miss Angie had to get Chelsea up early to drop her off at her friend Alexis’ house, so her mom could take them both to dance class, while she went on to deal with the hair emergency.

The hair emergency turned out to be due to the fact that her client, Cheryl, who was supposed to get married this afternoon, went to her bachelorette party last night, where the groom’s ex-girlfriend just happened to show up. A big cat fight broke out. Apparently, fake hair and fake nails were flying all over the place.

“I told Cheryl not to go out last night,” Miss Angie said, stuffing her travel bag with combs and hair pins. “Now I gotta try and glue tracks in the whole left side of her head. I’m a magician, not a miracle worker. Oh shoot!” She snapped her fingers, just remembering something. She grabbed her purse and started rummaging through it. Whatever Miss Angie was looking for, she couldn’t find it. And the longer it took, the more frazzled she got, the harder she slammed things on the counter that she took out of the bag. When she slammed her sunglasses so hard, they bounced off the counter and onto the floor, Chelsea looked worried.

“What are you looking for, Mommy?”

“My cell phone.” Miss Angie stopped long enough to tuck a wild strand of hair behind her ear. “I was supposed to braid Terry’s hair today. I gotta call and cancel—”

“I can do it.” I heard myself say. Where did that come from? My mouth? “I can braid hair good.”

The way Miss Angie was squinting at me, I thought she was about to bounce me off the counter like she did to those sunglasses. Then her face lit up. “Could you? Oh thanks, Toya. That would be a big help.” She hugged me. I didn’t hug back. But Miss Angie had already turned her attention to Chelsea, clapping her hands. “Come on, Chels let’s go! Let’s go!”

As Chelsea gulped down the last few swallows of cereal and milk, Miss Angie gave me some basic instructions on what to do with Terry. Then, in a whirlwind, Chelsea and her dance bag, and Miss Angie and her travel bag, were out the door.

The house was quiet now. I finally had the place to myself. It was sort of nice. I felt strangely free. Free to sing out loud and dance through the halls. Free to walk from the bathroom to the bedroom in my bra and panties, if I wanted to. Free to sneak into Chelsea’s room and play with that gigantic pink doll house. Free to run into Miss Angie’s room and try on some of those designer clothes. But there really wasn’t time for any of that. Terry would be over in half an hour.

The doorbell rang an hour later. Miss Angie said that Terry was a family friend. He may have been that, but he was also late. At first, I thought that Terry was a woman, but he was actually a boy. He came over every few weeks to get his hair braided. Miss Angie had known him for years, so he didn’t have to pay. And apparently he didn’t have to be on time, either. I took my time brushing my hair then scooped up the plastic caddy that held a comb, brush and hair oil, as I headed downstairs.

The doorbell rang again.

“I’m coming!” I yelled from the top of the stairs. Not only was this dude late, he was also impatient. I raced down the stairs, through the living room, opened the door and almost fainted.

Terry, the family friend, the late one, the impatient one, was the same cutie pie I saw playing the drums back at church. My eyes nearly fell out of my head, as I gasped, “You! I-I mean, uh...you, you’re Terry?”

“Yeah,” his voice was uncertain, at first, as if trying to figure out who this girl was that was staring at him like a lioness staring at a fresh young gazelle. Suddenly, his eyes lit up. “Hey! Aren’t you the girl who ran over Mother Pearl in the church that day?”

Flashes of poor Pearl clutching her chest, before toppling over, flooded my mind. I thought fast. “Oh, that? I was um...sick. I had to get out of there before I threw up all over the carpet.”

Terry nodded, then stuck his hands in the pockets of his cargo shorts, feeling uncomfortable again, because I was back to staring. “You’re LaToya, right? Miss Angie told me about you.” *How much did she tell you?* I thought to myself as Terry continued. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Terrence.” He extended his hand. A gentleman. I shook his big, strong hand and examined him. A large bush of hair was tucked up under his Phillies baseball cap. The cap and hair shaded Terry’s face, but I could still see that the face was beautiful. He had to be over six feet tall and smelled fresh and clean like Irish Spring soap.

“So, uh, is Miss Angie here?” Terry asked, growing more and more uneasy under the heat of my longing gaze.

I snapped out of my trance. “Oh, no. She had an emergency with one of her clients, so I told her I’d do you—I-I mean, I’d braid your hair for you.” Why was my mouth working against me? The harder I tried to appear cool, the more I came off like goofy little girl who had never talked to a boy before. And though I felt like a babbling fool, Terry barely seemed to notice.

He shrugged his shoulders, “Okay.”

Okay? I was amazed at how laid back he was. If a total stranger had just popped up out of the blue and said she was going to braid my hair, I would want to see a resume and some references or something. Not Terry. He just took off his baseball cap and made himself at home.

“Okay, then.” I tried to echo his breezy tone. “Well, it’s nice outside so I figured we could sit out here on the porch. Unless you wanted to do it in front of the TV.” That’s not what I meant to say. “I mean, we can—I can braid your hair while you watch TV.”

“No. Outside’s cool.”

Cool. I took a seat on the top step, while Terry plopped down two steps below me, resting his back between my knees. I was wearing white denim shorts that were just short enough that I could feel Terry’s skin brush against my thighs as he slid into position. I suddenly felt very warm, much warmer than this eighty-degree day had called for. Terry’s back was broad and strong. I could tell that he lifted weights. I reached for the comb and noticed my hands were trembling. *Stop that!*

Terry had already washed his hair before he got there, and it smelled like Pantene. It was soft, like mounds of cotton passing between my fingers as I crafted neat rows of braids. I found myself rambling on and on about nothing, trying to find things I might have in common with him. It was the most talking I’d done since I moved to Miss Angie’s house. I discovered that Terry was an only child. He was on the honor roll, and he wanted to be a lawyer someday. He played the drums, and he also played football—which was the reason he was there today. He always got his hair braided for football camp then shaved it all off when school started. Out of everything he’d said so far, I could find nothing that we had in common—except for the fact that

we would be going to the same school and were in the same grade.

There were long gaps in our conversation where we said nothing to each other, the silence interrupted only by the occasional car driving by with its music so loud the windows on the house shook. Terry didn't seem at all bothered by the quiet, but it was driving me crazy. I only had four braids left and he would be outta here. I needed to think of something to grab his attention and fast. *Think, Toya. Think!*

I didn't have to think. It was Terry who asked the question that really got the ball rolling. "So, do you miss your family?"

"Of course," I said, with a *that's-a-stupid-question* tone. I didn't mean for it to come out that way. It just slipped out like that. But it was a stupid question.

"It's a valid question," Terry replied. "Not everyone in foster care wants to go home to their family."

This boy may have been cute, but he was about as dumb as they came. I could feel my blood starting to simmer. I hated when people talked about things they had no possible way of understanding—especially things that involved my family. "Why? You think just because you take a kid out of the hood and put her in a big house with some nice clothes, she's supposed to forget all about her own family?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then what are you saying?" My voice was hot with bitterness. I was being defensive and I knew it. It was just a reflex. He had nudged me, and I shoved back—hard.

Terry continued, "I'm just saying, sometimes the situation is so bad at home, some kids never want to go back."

"How would you know? You have kids?"

"Hell no!"

"Coulda fooled me. I mean, you're sitting here like you're the expert on raising kids. Or did you learn that in one of your honor's classes? Unless you're the type to go around running your mouth when you don't know what you're talking about—"

He gripped my hand, suddenly. "Girl, chill! You're about to dig a hole in my head with that comb."

I could feel the tension in my hands, and I was taking it out on poor Terry's scalp. One look at his smile, though, and it all melted away. "Sorry."

"Mental note: Toya is very sensitive when it comes to talking about her family."

"I'm not sensitive."

"Yeah, you're not sensitive. I just mentioned the word family and you stabbed me in the head with a comb."

"Why not? That's what we hood rats do, right? You piss us off and we stab you in the head."

"Hey, I never called you a hood rat, so don't go putting words in my

mouth. Why are we fighting anyway? I mean, all I did was ask a simple question. If you didn't want to answer, you could just say that. You didn't have to assault me."

"First of all, I didn't assault you. And second, I don't like people being all up in my business."

"I was just trying to have a conversation."

"No. Conversation is: How's the weather? What do you want to be when you grow up? You were just being ignorant." The more I thought about it, the angrier I got all over again. I added, "As a matter of fact, I don't want to braid your hair anymore. Bye!"

I shoved Terry in the back, and he popped to his feet. "Seriously? You gonna leave me standing here with my head looking like this?" He pointed to the patch of afro sticking out from among the neat cornrows.

I ignored him and kept packing up my supplies.

"Wait till I tell Miss Angie. She don't like it when people mess with her customers."

Customers? No, he didn't just say that. I slapped my hand on my hip, and my neck began to roll. "Customers pay. This was a handout."

Terry proved he could roll his neck too. "Handout? Whatever! My dad does enough favors for Miss Angie to keep my hair tight for the rest of my life."

"Your dad?" I stopped and cocked my head. I covered my mouth and gasped. "Is Uncle Kevin your dad?" I laughed so hard I had to sit back down.

"What's so funny?"

I didn't answer—I couldn't answer, from laughing so hard. I didn't know why it was so funny. Probably because I had spent so much time fantasizing about the man who had possibly stolen Miss Angie's heart; and the rest of the time fantasizing about the cutie-pie I saw on the drums at church. Now I had just learned the two men in my fantasies were father and son.

"Uh oh," Terry said. "I see Chelsea's been talking him up again."

"According to her, your dad and her mom are practically engaged."

Terry sat down beside me, shaking his head. "I keep telling that girl I don't want no little sister."

"Why not? Then you can play with her doll house whenever you want."

He waved me off. "Man, I got my own doll house at home."

I laughed some more, so Terry kept going. "Actually, it's more like a doll condo. It's got leather couches, flat screen TV and a Jacuzzi—you know, for the honeys..."

The more Terry talked, the more he cracked me up. I think he liked that about me. I had a big, joyous laugh, like he was the funniest boy in the world. Terry seemed to make up his mind that he liked the Laughing Toya much more than the angry one and would try to stay on my good side from now

on—a task that would later prove a lot harder than it would seem on this breezy summer afternoon.

“Listen, about what I said earlier,” Terry’s tone turned serious. “I wasn’t trying to be mean. I really was just curious. I had a friend who was in foster care. Tara. She was in foster care for like eight years because her mom was on drugs. Then one day, they told her that her mom cleaned up her act and she had to go back and live with her. She begged the judge, the social worker, even her foster mom not to make her go back. But they wouldn’t listen.”

“She got used to it, right?” I asked, a hopeful note in my voice. “I mean, eventually she and her mom made it work.”

“A month after she went back, her mom was back on drugs again.”

That made me sad. Like it was my best friend he was talking about and not some girl I had never met. I sighed. “That’s messed up. Did she go back to her old foster mom?”

“Nah. She already had new kids by then. Tara ended up in a group home.”

Just hearing the words “group home” made me nauseous. “Does she like it there?”—almost afraid to hear his answer.

Terry shrugged. “She stopped calling me when they put her in there, so I wouldn’t know.”

Dozens of scenarios raced through my mind as to why Tara would’ve stopped calling. Maybe they weren’t allowed to make phone calls. Maybe she was depressed. Maybe she was mad at the world. Maybe she was mad at Terry for not finding her and coming to her rescue. The scenarios ceased when I saw the pain in Terry’s eyes. A lot like the pain I saw in them that day at church.

“Can I ask you a question?” I said after a moment.

“Do I have a choice? ”

I nudged him. “I’m serious.”

“Okay, okay, what do you want to know?”

“That day at church when y’all were at the altar. Why was everybody crying?”

Terry released a sigh that seemed to have been trapped deep within his soul then he said, “I guess we were all thinking about Kareem. He died a few of months ago.”

“He got shot?”

“What? No!” Terry sounded repulsed, as if such a thing were completely out of the question in his world. In my world, teenaged boys named Kareem getting shot to death was more common than even I liked to admit. Terry said, “He had cancer.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Terry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay. You know, you sort of remind me of him.”

I didn’t know if that was an insult or a compliment.

"I mean, he only lived here for a couple of years. His dad sent him out here to live with his grandmom to keep him off the streets. But he was Philly to the bone. Like you. He was real cool, but he could be hardcore when he wanted to be."

"You think I'm hardcore?"

"You stabbed me in the head with a comb!"

"I said I was sorry. Anyway, back to my question. Is that why y'all got saved? You think when you go to heaven, you'll see Kareem again?"

"I guess so. But I went down there because Pastor Ewing was talking about casting our cares on God. I felt like I had been carrying this hurt around so long, if God wanted to carry it, He could have it."

Terry looked away like he was watching the cars drive by, but I sensed he was afraid that if he looked at me, he might cry. The quiet settled in on us again. Without saying another word, I unpacked my comb and Terry scooted back into position. Moments later, I finished the last few braids. Terry admired my work in a hand-held mirror. He was pleased. I was pleased.

* * * * *

I lay in bed that night, unable to sleep. My mind replayed every moment of my time with Terry. I was interested in him, but at the same time I felt sorry for him. One friend got shipped off to a group home, another friend got cancer. Both were now gone from his life. He suffered a lot of loss in his life and so had I. I finally found something we had in common. Pain. Why couldn't we both love bowling or writing poetry? Anything but pain. Maybe we could help each other through it. Maybe we could lean on each other when we were hurting.

I suddenly had the urge to talk to him. To hear one of his dumb jokes. I remembered that I still had his home phone number. Miss Angie wrote it down this morning before she went to deal with the hair emergency. I picked my shorts up from the floor and dug the number out of my pocket. As soon as I picked up the phone, my stomach started doing back flips. I dialed the number anyway. After three rings a female voice answered.

"Hello."

"Hi. Is Terry there?"

"Who is this?!!" Uh oh. I recognized that voice. I didn't know the woman, but I was very familiar with the voice—an angry mother with a *stay the hell away from my precious baby boy* quality in her voice.

"Um...this is Toya."

"Toya. Do you know what time it is, Toya?" the voice snapped, clearly irritated.

I, in fact, had no idea what time it was until I looked over at the clock. "Um, 11:26?"

"A decent girl knows better than to be calling a boy's house at eleven

o'clock at night. As a matter of fact, decent girls don't go around chasing after boys. They let the boys chase them. You know what that tells me about you, Toya?"

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to answer her or not. But when the voice said in a louder, angrier tone, "Well, do you?"

I quickly replied, "N-n-no, ma'am."

"It tells me that you are not a decent girl," the voice said sharply, slicing through me like a steely blade. "Don't call my house no more."

Dial tone.

CHAPTER 5

The sea breeze blew my ponytail like a flag, but it wasn't strong enough to blow the sour taste out of my mouth from my conversation with Terry's mom. "*You are not a decent girl.*" I could hear those words in my sleep. It would have hurt less if the woman reached through the phone and slapped me in the face. I couldn't understand why it was bothering me so much. I didn't know that lady and that lady didn't know me—and she certainly wasn't the first mother to put me in my place, though she was probably the scariest. Terry's mom must not have said anything to him about her little phone chat with me, though, because he came right over after church and started talking to me. Apparently, he thought I was a decent girl.

I struggled to erase those thoughts from my brain and enjoy the moment. At this moment, I was at the beach with my foster family. It was Labor Day. School would be starting the day after tomorrow. Everything was done. Physicals, done. School shopping, done. School registration, done. Miss Angie even finished all of her back-to-school hair appointments. The checklist was complete. Nothing left to do but soak up the last days of summer vacation. Miss Angie woke us up early this morning and told us to get our bathing suits on. She packed a cooler with cold fried chicken, deviled eggs and sliced pineapples and we were on the road to Wildwood by ten o'clock.

It was the perfect day for the beach. Eighty-five degrees and sunny. The smell of suntan lotion and funnel cakes saturated the air. I had on a navy blue and white, one-piece bathing suit. Miss Angie said she would buy me a bikini when hell freezes over, because by then it will be too cold to wear a bikini anyway. Now, I stretched out on the blanket taking in all the sights. I was amazed at all the large-bellied women, with jelly thighs, who weren't afraid to throw on a bikini and strut around the beach, jiggling to their own beat. One blanket over, there was a kid building a sandcastle that looked more like a sand

hut. A beautifully bronzed lifeguard sitting high in his perch watched over the whole scene. I pictured Terry up there, in swim trunks, with no shirt on, skin glistening in the sun. *You are not a decent girl.* I quickly turned away from the lifeguard, feeling almost ashamed for looking. Beside me, Miss Angie hid under a wide brim straw hat, reading a Toni Morrison novel and listening to her iPod.

Chelsea was in the water, allowing the waves to knock her skinny frame all over the ocean. Sometimes I couldn't believe the girl was thirteen. She acted more like she was seven. By the time I was thirteen, I had gotten drunk off a bottle of Hennessy, shoplifted a pair of earrings from the mall and had sex. The most Chelsea had ever done was stay up past midnight on a school night. Big deal. I had been staying up past midnight since I was one year old. But that was because my mom was usually up that late having house parties or going to the clubs. I always had a hard time sleeping when my mom wasn't home. I worried about her.

There was a part of me that envied Chelsea, though. Not her nerdy side, or her childish ways, but her innocence. She had this air about her that was always so free, like she didn't have a care in the world. I seemed to have all the cares in the world. I hadn't been innocent for a long time now. It was snatched from me before I even got a chance to really appreciate it. Now that innocence was gone and I knew I could never get it back, I felt cheated. I would love to be prancing around the beach, all happy-go-lucky. Never knowing what it was like to have a grown man forcing himself on me; never hearing the words "lying slut" attached to my name; never knowing one day of being forced to live apart from my mother.

"Girl, what you got cooking in that brain of yours?" I vaguely heard Miss Angie say.

"Huh? You talking to me?"

"Yeah, I'm talking to you," Miss Angie said from behind DKNY sunglasses. "You look like you're about to blow up the world. What's on your mind, girl?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing, huh?" Miss Angie closed her book and studied the side of my face. "You don't like talking about yourself, do you?" she stated, more as a fact than a question. "You keep a lot of stuff to yourself. Don't want nobody all up in your business, right?"

I nodded.

"I see, I'm gonna have to break you out of that habit. Cuz if it's in my house, it's my business."

"Okay Miss Angie." I would say anything to get her off my back, but the woman wasn't going for it.

"Don't *okay Miss Angie*, me. Now, listen I was looking over your school records..." *Here we go again*, I thought while Miss Angie rambled on, "The

school counselor said you were a good student, A's and B's up through the third grade. Is that when your mom's boyfriend started messing with you?"

"Yeah." I decided it was best to just get it over with. I knew once Miss Angie started snooping around in my records, the woman wouldn't rest until she found something.

"Didn't anybody ever notice something was wrong? A kid who gets good grades and good behavior, all of a sudden, starts getting in fights and getting D's and F's and nobody stops to wonder why? How long was it going on?"

"I don't know. A couple of years." I knew exactly how long. I will never forget the first time it happened. Eight years ago, when I was eight years old. My mom went to Atlantic City with some girlfriends. They got a room because they were going to be partying all night, and nobody wanted to drive home. Mr. Rick was left babysitting me. I hadn't seen it coming. It was a normal night. We watched TV and ate pepperoni pizza. I drank grape soda. He drank beer—six beers. I thought he was just being nice: letting me stay up late, watching R-rated movies on cable until I fell asleep on the couch. I woke up in the middle of the night and saw that it wasn't a regular R-rated movie on the TV anymore. The man and woman on the screen were butt naked and doing things to each other I had never seen before. But it wasn't the moans and groans from the TV that woke me. It was Mr. Rick's hand in my panties.

"I hate that you had to go through all that, Honey," Miss Angie said. "I'll tell you this, Toya: That snake Rick better not come sniffing around our door. Cuz I got a baseball bat with his name all over it."

That made me smile. The image of Miss Angie and the rest of her salon senior citizens chasing Mr. Rick down the street with a baseball bat.

"Anyway, I'm getting off the subject." Miss Angie said, as she fished a bottle of water from the cooler to calm herself. "Listen, I know you've had some trouble in the past. You've made some bad decisions. Probably made quite a reputation for yourself at your last school."

Did I ever! I thought to myself. There's no way those reports could cover all the dirt I had done in my last high school, not to mention the internet incident. I didn't answer her, but found myself listening intently to Miss Angie's words.

"...the good thing about moving to a new place is, you can start all over again. Whatever your reputation was in that other place; whatever teachers you had a problem with before, you start at this school with a clean slate. Nobody knows you here, so you can be whatever you want to be." Miss Angie could tell I was at least thinking about what she was saying. "This is a great opportunity you've been given, Toya. It's up to you what you do with it. Ya know what I mean?"

"I hear you," I sighed. "Is it all right if I ask you a question now?"

"Sure."

"Is Terry's dad your boyfriend?"

Miss Angie nearly choked on her water. Before she could answer, she was interrupted by a sudden shower. Chelsea, the innocent one, was shaking off water like a furry wet dog.

“Chelsea!” I yelled.

“Sorry.” Chelsea grabbed her towel and dabbed saltwater from her eyes. “Toya, you have to get in the water. It feels good.”

“Nah, I don’t want to get my hair wet.”

“Are you serious? That’s why we have a hairdresser in the family. Right Mommy?”

“Go on. Have fun.” Miss Angie said, opening her book again, thankful to have ducked my question—temporarily.

“See? Let’s go.” Chelsea grabbed my arm and dragged me to my feet. For someone so scrawny, she sure was strong. Chelsea sprinted for the water lugging me behind her. As we ran, I could feel my legs taking over, churning and picking up speed as they drew closer to the water.

“It’s s-s-soooo cold!” I shivered and screamed.

Chelsea screamed right along with me, but her scream was more out of pure joy than the shock of being immersed in ice cold water. Through chattering teeth, she told me, “You’ll get used to it.”

And I did. The waves toppling over me were warm and foamy. My pretty ponytail was now drooping down around my shoulders in a wet blob. Splashing. Falling. Flopping. Sprawling. I hadn’t laughed so hard since God only knew when. In the water, there were no worries, no loss, no pain, no reputations, no reports and no judgment. A swell in the water lifted me off of my feet and I was suddenly weightless, not a care in the world. It was a strange sensation, bobbing around with my feet barely touching the ground, but I loved it! I certainly felt free, but something more. This was it. This must be what it felt like: Innocence.

CHAPTER 6

“Open your texts to page 12 and begin with Exercise #1,” announced the silver-haired teacher, in the green plaid vest and matching bow tie. Mr. Stokes, English II. His voice was flat like he was already tired of being there, even though it was just the first day of school.

So far, my first day of school had gone along smoothly. Excelsior was a model school. I expected no less. Its brightly colored walls greeted students with posters containing inspiring phrases like: *Dare to Dream, Believe and Achieve*, and *Reach for the Stars*. It was a school overloaded with state-of-the-art computers, a TV station, radio station, and massive athletic facility—complete with football stadium. The student population looked like the rainbow coalition: Black, White, Asian, Latino, Middle Eastern, all blending together in perfect harmony. But they were like teenagers everywhere else in the world. They hung out in their own cliques: the Pretty and Populars, the Jocks, the Geeks, the Special Eds, and the Social Rejects. I seemed to fit in well with the “Normals.” The regular kids who didn’t really stand out, but could blend with any of the other cliques if they chose to. That’s all I wanted to do, just blend in.

I hadn’t seen Terry at all today. I knew we weren’t going to have any classes together. He was in all the Honors classes. But I hoped I would at least pass him in the hallway or something. No such luck. The closest I got to the Honors classes was the fact that my locker was in that wing. Maybe some of that smartness would rub off on me if I spent enough time at my locker. Maybe some brainiac would sneeze and infect me with her smart germs. Until then, I would have to rely on the brains God gave me to get back to the A/B student I had been before Mr. Rick got his hands on me.

As I worked through my Reading Comprehension exercise, a small whisper grabbed my attention.

“You can look on my paper if you need to.” It was Emily Pederson, the

New School Buddy assigned to me.

"I got it," I whispered back.

Emily gave me the thumbs up. I shot her the thumbs up back and then rolled my eyes. When I arrived at school this morning, they dumped Emily on me, and I had been stuck with her all day. She wore her hair in a crooked ponytail, glasses, and clunky shoes, but I could tell there was a cute girl under all that geeky-ness, just waiting to blossom. She was a bubbly little blonde-haired, White girl, barely five feet tall, but full of knowledge. In other words, she was a know-it-all! Emily knew all the students, all the teachers, all the classes, all the rules; and she was eager to share it all with me—all of it. At first, she seemed quiet and shy, but once she warmed up to me, Emily's motor mouth ran more than Chelsea's.

Speaking of Chelsea...I learned something new today. Chelsea has a boyfriend. A tall, scrawny kid in glasses, who I would have thought was Chelsea's twin brother—except for the fact that I caught them kissing by Chelsea's locker after second period. I couldn't believe my eyes. Nerd Girl making out with a boy. She didn't learn that from her Barbie dolls. Once I got over the shock, I was sure to "accidentally" bump into Chelsea, just to make sure she knew she was busted.

Chelsea tore her lips away from lover boy and chased me down the hall.

"Please don't tell Mommy," she begged me, breathlessly, when she finally caught up to me.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"For the future."

I didn't know what in the world this girl was talking about. "The what?"

"Because you and I both know there's going to be a time when you're going to need me to keep a secret for you."

She was right and I knew it. Even though I was planning to take advantage of this clean slate and stay out of trouble, I never knew when I was going to need Chelsea to have my back.

"All right," I said, reluctantly. "But don't let me see you kissing that boy in school again. It's disgusting."

"Thanks," Chelsea said and gave me a hug. I had to peel the girl off of me. Apparently, Chelsea came from a hugging family. She and Miss Angie hugged each other for any old reason: When they're happy, sad; when they forgave each other; when one of them bowled a strike—in Chelsea's case when she knocked over more than one pin. They were always trying to drag me into this hug-fest, but I wanted no parts of it. Usually if one of them came toward me with their arms wide open, I ran the other way.

"Hey. We've got lunch next," Emily hissed again, distracting me from my paper. "I can eat with you if you want."

"That's okay. I'll be all right."

"Oh, I don't mind. I know how hard it is to be the new girl"

I wanted to tell Emily to back off. Just because they assigned her as my New School Buddy, didn't mean we needed to be joined at the hip. Instead, I said, "Okay."

"Goodie," Emily chirped.

Mr. Stokes cleared his throat, signaling for us to shut our mouths. *Aw man!* My buddy was about to ruin my unblemished reputation by getting me in trouble for talking—on my first day! I shot Emily a warning look and she got the hint. We worked in silence for the rest of the period.

I thought a lot about what Miss Angie said that day on the beach. I did have a clean slate here. No one seemed to recognize me from the infamous internet incident that got me kicked out of my last foster home. Thank the Lord! As a matter of fact, for all they knew, I was the most popular girl in my old school, the head cheerleader. I could be an honor student—except for the fact that this Reading Comprehension exercise was kicking my butt. Other than that, I had a flawless reputation here at Excelsior and I'd do everything in my power to protect it. So far, it was working. So far, people seemed to like me. They laughed at my jokes. They admired my hair. My art teacher even complimented my drawing of a unicorn. So far, I was off to a great start.

Yet, for every sunny day there was always someone just dying to rain on my parade. Today's rain cloud went by the name of Jenelle Tucker. According to Emily, Jenelle was the most popular girl in school. I couldn't figure out why. Sure, she was cute—in a fake kind of way—but from what I could see, the girl had done nothing to earn the title: "Most Popular." She wasn't a cheerleader. She wasn't a star athlete. She wasn't on the dean's list. She was not funny. And she wasn't even very nice.

I knew that last fact from my first encounter with Jenelle. I was leaving homeroom at the beginning of first period and this fine, dark chocolate honey, Devon Jordan, started talking to me. He was a football player. I knew he was a football player because he announced it to me as part of his introduction.

"Hi. I'm Devon Jordan. I'm a Scorpio and I'm on the football team." He extended his hand like a politician. I shook it.

"Really? My friend Terry is on the football team, too," I said. "You know him?"

"Yeah, I know him," Devon said, which was followed by a snicker.

"What? What's so funny?"

He wouldn't say why. He was probably just jealous. Terry was probably a starter while Devon rode the bench. I ignored him and walked to my locker. Devon saw me struggling to get my locker open and came to my rescue. The latch on the locker was stuck and refused to open, but with one flex of his Hulkish muscles, he popped the locker right open. I thanked him and he continued on with his small talk.

Devon barely got the words "So, where are you from?" out of his mouth, when I felt the searing hot burn of laser beam eyes boring through me.

Jenelle. A pretty girl who knew she was pretty, which made her sort of ugly in my eyes.

“Devon!” The sound was harsh coming from behind her cotton candy lip glossed lips. Jenelle stomped up to him in her Manolo Blanicks. With four-inch heels on, she was about 5’7”. Devon towered over her, but she got in his face like she was six feet tall. “I thought you were going to walk me to class,” she snapped, cracking her gum.

Devon stumbled over his words like he was talking to his mother. “Huh, I-I was. I was just helping Toya with her locker. Did you meet Toya? She’s new.”

Without even bothering to acknowledge me with a glance, Jenelle said, coldly, “How could I have met her? You just said she was new.”

“Oh. Jenelle, Toya. Toya, Jenelle,” Devon said with a guilty smile.

“Hi.” Jenelle spoke the word as if it pained her to say it.

I couldn’t help but laugh to myself. “Nice to meet you. Devon was just—”

“I’m sure whatever little story you want to tell me about my man, is all cute and charming, but we’re late for class.” With that, Jenelle yanked Devon’s hand and led him down the hall like a dog on a leash.

“Her dad is Big D,” said Emily, who had been hovering in the background and saw the whole situation.

“Big D?” Big D was a washed-up rapper who had one big hit in the Nineties and made a fortune off it. This was the reason Jenelle was popular? Because her father was a D-list celebrity, she was a celebrity in her high school. She didn’t even live with Big D. He was never married to her mother, and he lived all the way out there on the west coast, with his wife and three kids. According to Emily, ever since Big D got his own reality show and Jenelle was on one episode for like two minutes, everyone in the school practically worshiped the girl. I had actually been a fan of Big D. I loved old school rap. But after meeting his daughter, I would be sure to delete him from my playlist when I got home.

The bell rang and I made my way to the cafeteria. As soon as I walked in, I was hit with an icy stare from Jenelle. Apparently, talking to Jenelle’s man was some kind of mortal sin; because all morning, whenever she saw me in the hallway, Jenelle would shoot nasty looks in my direction and then whisper something to her girls—a group of suck-ups who seemed grateful that Jenelle allowed them to be in her presence. It was 12:35 in the afternoon and my slate was still clean, so I chose to ignore Jenelle instead of slapping her in the face like the old me would’ve done—though, the old Toya was really starting to lose her patience with the new Toya.

The cafeteria looked more like a food court in the mall. There was a grill section for burgers and fries, a pizza station, a salad bar and a specialty station that featured a different dish every day. Today it was meatloaf, mashed

potatoes, and string beans. The whole thing was a little overwhelming for me. I didn't even get in line at first, deciding to wait and see what everyone else got.

"The pizza's good," Chelsea said, trying to be helpful. She joined me for lunch, along with her boyfriend, Alonzo. Of course, my Siamese twin, Emily, was there. A few minutes later Terry joined us—along with his girlfriend.

Mercedes Jackson, the girlfriend. I'd known Terry for a month, and never once did he mention that he had a girlfriend. Mercedes was part of the dance squad for the marching band. She wore her hair real short, almost like a boy, but it looked good on her. She had those high cheek bones that could pull off such a look. Terry thought she was gorgeous. I could tell. He carried Mercedes' lunch tray to the table and sat so close to her, he was practically in her lap. And he barely ate because he hung on to every word she said, laughing at every dumb joke—and her jokes were dumb. If there was one knock I could find against Mercedes, it was that she was not the sharpest knife in the drawer.

Bubblehead is the word that popped into my head. First of all, when Mercedes went through the salad bar and saw they had shrimp salad, she announced to the table that they had "skrimps" on the salad bar. And just now when Terry boasted about how good his burger was and offered her a bite, Mercedes crinkled her nose and said:

"No thanks. I don't eat pork."

"There's no pork in the burgers." Alonzo felt the need to inform her.

"Yes, there is! Why do you think they call them *hamburgers*?"

The whole table just stared at her with blank looks on their faces, as if to say: "Are you serious?" To which, Mercedes busted out into a high-pitched horse laugh. "You guys! I'm just kidding. It's a joke. Get it? *Hamburgers*, pork?"

More of the horse laugh. Terry joined in, crackin' up like he was listening to a female version of Kevin Hart. I rolled my eyes. If this was the kind of girl Terry was into, I didn't have a shot. I might not even want a shot. I would put myself through a lot to get a boy like Terry to be my boyfriend. But pretend to be an airhead? How could I face myself in the mirror?

Not wanting to hear anymore of The Mercedes Comedy Show, I decided it was time to go and get some lunch. Maybe I'd try the *skrimps*. I waited one minute too long. Just as I pulled the lunch money out of my pocket, Jenelle and her suck-ups strolled up to the table.

"There you are!" Jenelle sang, in an overly sweet tone. "Toya, I know you're new and all, so I just wanted to let you know the free lunches are over there." Jenelle pointed to the section of the cafeteria with the cheese sandwiches, the dried-up looking lunch lady and absolutely no one in line. The table went silent. I may have been new to the school, but everybody knew what the free lunches were. They were for the poor kids. The kids with

no money to buy the regular lunches and no friends willing to share their lunch with them. And even if I hadn't known what it meant, I could tell by the snotty look on Jenelle's face that she just dished out a low blow.

What was her deal? I thought to myself. This little wench hated me that much that she had to go out of her way to walk across the cafeteria to try and make me look stupid? I could feel my cheeks getting warm. All eyes were on me now. Jenelle had just stepped to me. What was I going to do about it? Punch her in the face? Cuss her out? That's what the old Toya would do. I made it to one o'clock and my slate was still clean. I was not about to ruin it over this hussy. But I had to do something. I couldn't let Jenelle think I was a punk; that I was going to put up with her mess all school year.

So, I smiled and, in a voice, more phony, more gooey sweet than the one Jenelle used on me, I gushed: "Thanks. I was wondering where that was. Gosh, the people here are so nice. Thank you, Jenelle."

Speechless. Jenelle stood there, not knowing what to say. She had been ready for me to put on a show: watch the hood rat take off her earrings and get all ghetto on her. Jenelle didn't know what to do with me. She turned on her heels, flinging her hair over her shoulder, and stormed off. The suck-ups followed close behind her.

A moment passed and the table burst into snickers. Even I had to laugh, surprised at how well I handled things. The only one not laughing was Mercedes. She looked at me with a concerned look on her face. "I hate to tell you this, Toya. But I don't think Jenelle was being nice to you."

That caused the table to laugh even louder. Alonzo choked on his chocolate milk, while poor, clueless Mercedes struggled to figure out what she just said that was so funny. Finally, she gave up and joined in the laughter, adding her horse laugh to the mix. Terry put his arm around her and that made me stand up and head for the lunch line.

For such a fancy, upper class school, the food sure was nasty. I got the meatloaf, which tasted like dog food and the mashed potatoes tasted like paste. I would've been better off getting one of those free cheese sandwiches like Jenelle suggested. Tomorrow, I would try the pizza.

Then to make matters worse, who did I find sitting in my very next class? Jenelle. Sitting right there in the front row of my Communications class. I had to walk by her to get to an empty seat and tripped over Jenelle's foot. I know she didn't stick her foot out there on purpose! Whatever. Two hours to go and my slate was still clean. It was becoming a mission for me now. How long could I stay out of trouble? A day? A week? The whole school year?

Just before class began, Devon came running in and slid into the seat beside Jenelle. She had been saving it for him by giving the evil eye to anyone who even looked like they might sit next to her. But when Jenelle wasn't looking, Devon peeked back at me and winked. Ain't that something? Miss Popular, daughter of Big D, Queen Diva of the Excelsior High, had a player

for a boyfriend. I gave a sly smile back to him. Something told me this slate of mine wouldn't be clean for too much longer.

CHAPTER 7

My clean slate lasted about two weeks, actually eight school days. It was now Thursday, 1:35 in the afternoon, and I found myself sitting outside the office of Mr. Chase, the vice principal, waiting for my foster mother to come and pick me up. I could still hear Miss Angie's voice squawking through the phone when Mr. Chase called her ten minutes ago.

"She did what!" Miss Angie's voice was so loud, it sounded like she was standing right in the room with me.

And soon she would be. I sat there staring at the clock, watching the second hand slowly tick by, counting down the moments to my execution. I still didn't know how I got here. Everything had been going so well. Not great, but well. Until today, I would have described my time at Excelsior as the good, the bad, and the evil.

The good. Mercedes Jackson was not Terry's girlfriend.

"But I want her to be," Terry told me, one day, when we were walking to school. I sat on that question for three days but finally I just had to know: Is this chick your girlfriend or what?

Terry was caught off guard at first. One moment we were joking around about something that happened on MTV, next thing he knew, I was in his face talking about: "Is Mercedes your girlfriend?" He liked Mercedes since freshmen year when they were in marching band together, but she was already in a relationship. This past July, Terry heard through the grapevine that Mercedes was a free woman. He called her up and found out that it was true. Her longtime boyfriend, Nate, decided that since he was going to be a big-time college man this fall, he didn't want to spend his last summer chained to her. Mercedes was devastated: "He called me his ball and chain," Mercedes told Terry, sobbing hard. "Which I couldn't understand. I don't even like sports!" Terry gave her a shoulder to cry on, and was slowly trying to work his way up to her heart.

I didn't mind all that. Technically, Terry was still on the market. He was still ripe for me to swoop in and pluck him from the boyfriend tree. Once I opened my bag of tricks, he would be all mine. But I knew I had to work fast. I could tell Terry wasn't the type to cheat on his girl; so, if he did end up with Mercedes, I would have to either cut my losses or wait their relationship out. Neither one was an option for me—but at least I still had options.

The bad. The schoolwork was definitely the bad. I was determined to fulfill my goal of returning to the A/B student I had once been. But then I made the mistake of letting Miss Angie know my goal. Why did I do that? Ever since then, Miss Angie made it her goal to help me reach my goal. She set up meetings with teachers, arranged for testing, sat up with me at night reviewing homework. She even got Terry to agree to tutor her in geometry—I put that one in the “good” column. But when Miss Angie tried to get Chelsea involved by asking her to proofread my papers, that was where I drew the line! I didn't care how many grades Chelsea skipped, there was nothing a thirteen-year-old could tell me about anything.

It wasn't that I didn't understand the work. I was just out of practice. I spent the past eight years cutting school; and when I was there, I was either in detention or running my mouth in class. I did just enough work to get by—either that or my teachers passed me just to get rid of me. I hadn't read a book or written a report in so long, I was physically tired after the first report I tried to write at Excelsior. But I had determination on my side. No longer would the only “As” on my report card be the ones in my name.

One class I was certain I would get an A in was Communications. The class was taught by Miss Gupta—a middle-aged Indian woman with a long braid trailing down the center of her back. Miss Gupta spoke with a thick British accent, which students often mimicked when they asked questions. The whole class consisted of doing presentations about whatever topic Miss Gupta assigned: current events, politics, entertainment. For the second class, she asked each student to discuss their favorite movie and why it is so special to them. I picked *The Wiz*, the Black version of the Wizard of Oz, starring Diana Ross and Michael Jackson. I told the class it was my favorite because of the music, but really it was because it was my mom's favorite. Whenever I saw that it was on, I would let Tamika know and watch her face light up like it was Christmas morning. We would pop some popcorn and settle in on the couch to watch it. My mom knew the words to all the songs. She had a beautiful voice.

After class, Devon hung back to tell me what a great job I'd done on my presentation and that *The Wiz* was one of his favorites too, though his number one movie was *Scarface*. He was in the middle of his Tony Montana imitation when Jenelle interrupted him. She was having a temper tantrum because Devon was supposed to put some songs on her iPod, and he still hadn't done it. I knew Jenelle's whole performance had nothing to do with an iPod and

everything to do with the fact that her man was standing within 20 feet of me, holding a conversation and actually laughing—which led to “the evil.”

The evil. In my eyes, Jenelle was pure evil. In Jenelle’s eyes, I was a threat. People liked me. Some may have actually thought I was cool. Anything that pulled a few rays of spotlight off of Jenelle would not be tolerated. I had to go. Since Jenelle probably couldn’t get me kicked out of school, the next best thing would be to destroy my reputation. In addition to the dirty looks and whispers behind my back, Jenelle had taken to calling me horrible names. It was only because of my vow to keep a clean slate that Jenelle felt bold enough to pull such a stunt. The first time, Jenelle called me Orphan Annie, nothing happened. No slap, no push, no running up to tell the teacher. So, Jenelle just assumed I was soft. She piled it on from there: Orphan Annie, Hood Rat, Crack Baby—my mom never even used crack. But I put up with it. I let it roll right off of my back, humming to myself: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but my slate is squeaky clean.” The added bonus of ignoring Jenelle was that it drove the girl crazy. She couldn’t get a rise out of me, hard as she tried. So, she tried harder.

Yesterday, in Communications class, I was wearing my new silver heart bracelet. Some of the girls were admiring it, until Jenelle actually had the nerve to tell me that since it was her parents’ taxes that were supporting me, I should be thanking *her* for that bracelet. That really ticked me off. I must have shampooed one hundred heads to be able to buy that bracelet. I could see a little smirk on Jenelle’s face, thinking she’d finally gotten to me. Then I let out a light chuckle and said: “Now that’s funny. I could’ve sworn I read somewhere that your dad is facing jail time because he hasn’t paid child support in like ten years. If you want, I could sell this bracelet to help pay his legal fees.”

The whole room erupted in jeers and Jenelle’s beige face turned beet red. She snatched up her bag and clomped out of there in her platform shoes. I found myself laughing at her, too. If that was the worse Jenelle could dish out, my school year would be a breeze. Until today.

The assignment for Communications was: “The Media’s Influence on the Youth of Today.” I sat in my seat, clutching my note cards, tightly. I was up next, prepared to dazzle to class with my discussion of “How Violence on TV Affects Teens.” I must have watched two hundred hours of *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and even WWE wrestling as part of my research, but it was worth it. I was ready to go, as soon as Miss Jenelle finished her presentation: “Sex and the Media.”

Always the one to take things to the next level, Jenelle was the only one to show up to class in a navy-blue pantsuit, crisp white blouse and three-inch heels, her hair pulled back into a long sleek ponytail. Jenelle’s PowerPoint slides were very professional and matched the tone of her voice. She was very nasal and enunciated each syllable with the precision of a TV news anchor.

Despite the fact that her presentation was well polished, the class was bored to tears. Leave it to Jenelle to find a way to make sex boring. It was all statistics and charts. Then she moved onto the section she called "Impact." The word "Impact" exploded onto the screen in yellow letters that flickered

"...The result of all this, is a generation that has no morals," Jenelle announced. "Sadly, my generation consists of a large number of weak-minded, lazy individuals, who do nothing but sit around all day and watch this rubbish on television. No literature. No arts. No science. Just sex, sex, sex..."

"What's wrong with that?" mumbled one of the girls in the back of the class. Snickers were heard around the room.

Jenelle scanned the area for the offender, but couldn't find her, so she ranted: "What's wrong with that, you say? Well, I'm glad you asked, my sister, because it affects you most of all."

As she talked, Jenelle aimed the clicker and fast-forwarded through the PowerPoints until she found what she wanted. "Young men who have no respect for women. Young women who have no respect for themselves. For example..."

Jenelle stopped at a slide that looked completely black, except for a white arrow in the center of the screen. "Here is an example of a poor young girl who has absolutely no respect for herself."

Jenelle aimed the pointer at the arrow on the screen. It was a "play" button. A video appeared and my new world came to an end.

The video was amateurish. A shaky hand guided the camera around a living room with huge plaid couches in search of its subject.

"Put that camera down!" A girl's voice rang out in the background. I knew that voice. I slumped down in my seat, suddenly feeling nauseous.

"Aw come on! I said I'll erase it." A male voice answered on screen. "You lost the bet, you gotta do it."

At this point the camera was pointing down, getting a clear shot of the male's Timberland boots.

"I said I'd do it. You didn't say nothing about taping it."

"It ain't fun if you don't tape it."

"How would you know? You done it before?"

"I told you, no. Now, will you chill? Here, have some more of this wine."

A grumbling arose from the class, trying to figure out what was going on. Miss Gupta's eyes were riveted on the screen, curious as well. The only one not looking at the screen was Jenelle. Her eyes were locked on me, a satisfied grin on her face. It was as if I could read her mind: *Gotcha nom, Crack Baby*.

From the video, there came muffled talking then the girl started giggling. Slow bump n' grind-type music. Sounded like R Kelly. The male voice could be heard cheering, "Whooo! Go on, girl. Shake it!"

The class laughed out loud, getting rowdy. I wanted to run. Run out of

the building and hop on a boat to China—even better, some remote island where they didn't have the internet. I couldn't move. My legs were frozen. The only thing moving was my heart, drilling inside of my chest like a snare drum.

Maybe she didn't use the whole thing. Maybe Jenelle put enough of the video on there to scare me and put me in my place once and for all. I closed my eyes and prayed: *God, please don't let her show it. Don't let her show—*

The roar of the classroom let me know the answer to my prayer. I opened my eyes and saw myself. Larger than life on the screen. Dancing around like a fool, stripping off my clothes, piece by piece. Stumbling out of my boots and getting tangled in my denim jacket. Thankfully, the video was dark, and you couldn't really see my face. Then someone in the class hollered: "Yo! That's Toya!"

All heads whipped around and locked in on me, sitting there trying to look cool, my hands folded on the desk, all prim and proper, like I should have a halo over my head.

Eyes returned to the screen when the Toya in the video started unbuttoning her blouse, flashing her leopard print bra. The boys in the class howled like werewolves—especially Devon. Drooling at the screen, he leaned forward so far that his desk nearly fell over.

"That's enough!" Miss Gupta shrieked, slapping her desk. "Jenelle, turn that off right now!"

"I'm trying, Miss Gupta. It must be frozen or something." Jenelle stood at the computer fumbling with the keys, with a determined look on her face, as if she were really trying to turn it off. She and I both knew she wasn't. When Video Toya started shimmying out of her panties, Miss Gupta had enough. She reached over and yanked the computer's chord out of the wall, which did nothing because the battery kicked in. Huffing and puffing, muttering to herself, Miss Gupta scrambled to get her hand on the plug to the projector. She jerked out of the socket.

When the screen went blank, the boys all jeered and threw wads of paper.

"Cut that out!" Miss Gupta yelled, panting hard. She rested her hand on her chest and tried to catch her breath. She turned to Jenelle and said, "Young lady, report to the office immediately."

"Yes ma'am. Can I get my things first?"

"I-I don't care. Just, just, go!...Go!" While Jenelle gathered her books, Miss Gupta turned her attention to me. She softened her voice, not quite sure how to approach me. "LaToya. I...I need you to go see..."

I couldn't hear her. I sat there stone-faced, repeating within myself: *Don't cry. Don't you dare cry!*

Miss Gupta moved a little closer, trying to snap me out of my trance.

"LaToya?"

My eyes slowly shifted to Miss Gupta.

“I want you to go see the guidance counselor, LaToya.”

At first, it seemed as if my body wasn't going to move—like the real Toya was gone, replaced by this lifelike statue. But then I was able to swing my legs out from under the desk, stand and head for the door, leaving my books and my dignity behind. All of that effort I put into keeping my slate clean and getting a fresh start at my new high school had been blown out of the water with a little click of a button on a computer.

As I walked, the class was silent but ready to burst—just dying for me to leave so they could laugh, and talk about me, and make their stupid jokes freely. Oh, they were definitely going to talk. I couldn't blame them. I would have been doing the same thing if the shoe was on the other foot. *Well, if they're going to talk*, I thought. *I might as well give them something to really talk about.* The kind of something they would email their cousins down South about. The kind of thing they would reminisce about at the twenty-year high school reunion.

As I got closer to the door, Jenelle was still there packing her book bag. I almost walked out of the room without saying anything. But when Jenelle flung that annoying ponytail over her shoulder, it brushed my arm. Like a tiny match brushing against a stick of dynamite, it set me off. I yanked Jenelle to the floor by her ponytail and exploded on her. Blow after blow, to her arms, chest, face. It must have been all that wrestling I had been watching, because I pinned Jenelle down in a death grip, the girl's legs flailing from side to side, desperate to break free.

The whole class sprang to their feet, cheering me on. Some whipped out their cell phones and started making their own videos. Jenelle was helpless, caught between trying to grab my hair and blocking her own face so I wouldn't leave any permanent scars. I was relentless. A fiery ball of energy, unleashing my fury on the one who had dared to poke the sleeping lioness inside of me. The blows I struck weren't just for the humiliation I suffered at the hands of Jenelle, not just for her insults and the dirty looks, but for my mother, who hadn't visited in a year. For foster parents who treated me like a cockroach. For Mr. Rick and his filthy hands. For abuse, abandonment, separation, and loss. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I pounded Jenelle. I almost felt sorry for the girl. No one deserved this kind of whooping. Jenelle had only known me for eight days, yet she was getting the wrath of a lifetime of suffering. She'd been asking for it, though. She had been poking and poking at me from day one, trying to provoke this confrontation. Now, here it was. And I was giving Jenelle her money's worth.

Miss Gupta was a basket case, scurrying back and forth, not sure what to do. She certainly wasn't crazy enough to reach down there and try and break up the fight.

“Somebody do something!” she cried. Then she remembered the panic button under her desk. In 30 seconds, Eddie the security guard and Mr. Riley,

the gym teacher, burst into the room. The two men must have weighed 500 pounds together, but they struggled to peel my 120-pound self off of Jenelle. I had superhuman strength that made me near unstoppable.

Everything after that was a blur. I remembered being hoisted to my feet, my arms clamped to my sides by some muscle-bound man. As they carried me out of the room, I caught a quick glimpse of Jenelle. Her pretty white blouse ripped, little drops of blood on the collar. Her hair was a mess, clumps of weave scattered on the floor all around her. My clean slate was on the floor too, now stained and shattered to pieces.

CHAPTER 8

The silver Infiniti rounded the corner, wheels squealing. The speed limit was 35 mph. Miss Angie must have been doing 65 mph. She was too busy fussing to herself to pay attention to speed limits.

“...fist fighting in the school like some thug. How am I supposed to explain this to my clients? ‘Sorry I had to leave you under the dryer for so long, Mrs. Carter, but my foster child done lost her mind. Yeah! Thinks she’s the Ultimate Fighting Champion...”

She flew around another corner, and I held on for dear life. I hadn’t known Miss Angie for long, but I knew better than to interrupt her when she was all worked up like this. Instead, I stared out the window while Miss Angie ranted. “What the hell was she thinking? What am I saying? She wasn’t thinking.... Think! Kids just don’t think anymore. Everything’s a fight. Nobody knows how to walk away anymore.”

“Actually, Toya did try to walk away,” a small voice piped up from the back seat. Miss Angie and I looked back at the same time to see who it was. Emily. Somehow, Emily found her way into Miss Angie’s car. That was strange enough, but then she didn’t even have sense enough to keep her mouth shut. I didn’t bother to warn her. I just let Emily keep running her mouth. Maybe it would take Miss Angie’s attention off of me.

Emily continued, despite Miss Angie’s icy glare. “Um...what I meant is, Jenelle has been harassing her since the first day of school, and Toya just walked away. This time, it was just too much. And can you blame her? Showing a video of her stripping? That’s outrageous!”

Miss Angie stepped on the brakes. She cocked her head and studied Emily for a moment then asked, “Who are you?”

“Emily. Emily Pederson, ma’am. I’m Toya’s New School Buddy. I was standing in the hall when you said, ‘get your ass in the car’ and I thought you were talking to me. But...I can see now that of-of course you weren’t...”

Emily's voice got all high and squeaky the longer Miss Angie stared at her. "...Um, you can just drop me off at the corner. I'll walk home."

Miss Angie peeled off, shaking her head.

Emily clutched her seatbelt, "Or you can just slow down a little and I'll jump out?"

* * * * *

The school's punishment was three days of suspension for fighting. That was like three days at Disney World for me compared to having to sit down and have "a talk" with Miss Angie. She sent me to my room until she cooled off. Four hours later, I was sitting in the salon explaining myself while Miss Angie swept up clumps of stray hair on the floor.

I told her all about Tyreese and the video. It started out with a simple Super Bowl bet. I was sure there was no way the Patriots would win again. Wrong. Tyreese was quick to collect on the bet. As soon as his folks went out of town for the annual pastor's convention, he was on the phone luring me over with pizza, cable TV, and wine. Halfway through the wine, when I seemed nice and loose, Tyreese reminded me that I lost the bet. I was fully prepared to hold up my end of the bargain. But when Tyreese whipped out his dad's video camera, I tried to put on the brakes. I wasn't that drunk. Tyreese filled me with so much wine and sweet talk until I finally gave in. I thought I saw him erase the video. He showed me as he did it. But when I arrived at school on Monday and was greeted with smirks from the boys and eye rolls from the girls, I knew exactly what happened.

My child advocate threatened to sue the entire world if that video was not pulled off the internet immediately. She even threatened to have Tyreese arrested for trafficking in child pornography. The whole thing was a great big mess, with me in the middle of it—scandalized and foster homeless. I bounced around to a few foster homes afterwards. And even though the reasons for being put out were different at every home, this video was ultimately the driving force. Foster moms didn't feel comfortable with me around their husbands because of the video, fights in school because of the video, neighborhood boys stalking me because of the video. To calm the situation down, the judge ordered that I be placed in a new foster home outside of Philadelphia, since everyone in every high school in the city knew who I was by then. That's probably how Jenelle found out about it too. She probably had suck-ups outside of Excelsior who were more than willing to dig up any dirt they could find on me—not that they had to dig that deep.

By now, Miss Angie had swept all of the hair into a neat pile in the middle of the floor, but she kept on sweeping. She had not said a word in over five minutes. She just listened and swept, letting me do all the talking.

"I really did try to ignore her, Miss Angie," I said. "The girl was just begging for a beat down."

Miss Angie stopped sweeping the floor and swept me up and down with her eyes. Finally, she said, “I guess I just don’t understand girls like you, Toya.”

“Girls like me? What girl’s gonna just sit there and let somebody—”

“That’s not the point!”

Miss Angie raised her voice, so I raised mine too. “Yes, it is the point! The only reason she showed that video was to—”

“There shouldn’t have been a video in the first place!” The power behind Miss Angie’s voice silenced the room. “*That* is the damn point! Why would you put yourself out there like that? Huh? Where is your self-respect?”

“I thought he erased it,” I mumbled.

Miss Angie shook her head. “You just don’t get it, do you? Jenelle shouldn’t have had a video to use against you, because there shouldn’t have been a video. Because you shouldn’t have been at some boy’s house, drunk and taking off your clothes, because you should have enough love for yourself not to put yourself in that kind of situation.”

I had no answer for that one.

“And don’t go blaming it on the fact that you were abused, either. What that man did to you was horrible and he should rot in jail for it, but the power he has over you is over now—or it will be over the day you decide to take it back. Don’t you get that?” She could tell that I didn’t get it, so she broke it down for me. “Every time you act out like that. Jumping in bed with every Tom, Dick and Tyreese. Every time you take off your clothes on a dare, it’s like that bastard, Rick, is abusing you all over again. That’s not the real Toya. That’s not the young woman God made you to be.”

“I tried. I tried it your way, Miss Angie. I minded my own business. I focused on my books. I tried to ignore Jenelle. It doesn’t work for me. I’m not one of those nice girls, Miss Angie. I am a hood rat. I am a trifling bitch. And, and it’s true what they say: you can take this bitch out the hood, but you can’t take the hood out of the bitch!”

I braced myself for a slap in the face after that one. I wanted Miss Angie to slap me. I wanted her to slap me so I could hit her back then smash the windows in her fancy salon and end up in the residential facility. My brief experience at Excelsior taught me some things. It showed me a life I desperately wanted, but could never have. I could have been born to a woman like Miss Angie and lived an upper middle-class life with dance lessons, trips to the beach, expensive schools and my innocence still intact. But I was born to Tamika Young. And today I felt every bit of my mother breathing inside of me: low class, cheap, dirty and no desire to be anything more than that. *Hit me!* My eyes dared Miss Angie to strike me and put me out of my misery.

Miss Angie took a step back and closed her eyes—apparently saying a quick prayer either for wisdom or the strength not to strangle me. She blew out a deep breath and all the tension in her face seemed to drain to the floor

on top of that mound hair she just swept up. Her voice was calm and steady, now. “Is that how you see yourself? As a hood rat? A bitch?”

I raised my arms in surrender. “That’s what I am?”

A faint smile played about Miss Angie’s lips, which I thought was strange since I didn’t think I said anything funny. She walked over to her manicure station and gestured for me to sit down. I did. Thoughtfully, she said, “This reminds me of someone I know.”

“It does?”

“Yeah. Me.” Miss Angie picked up a cotton ball, instinctively dabbed some polish remover onto it and started scrubbing the deep green, glitter nail polish from my fingers. “When I was fourteen, my freshman year in high school, we had to meet with the guidance counselor—you know, to talk about our hopes and dreams for the future.”

I nodded, not at all interested in hearing one of Miss Angie’s cute little stories.

“I told the guidance counselor that I wanted to be a doctor. Not just any doctor, but one of those doctors that travels to poor countries and helps those who can’t afford good medicine. Well, the guidance counselor took one look at my records and said I didn’t have the aptitude to become a doctor. That I should set my sights on something a little more realistic. And I guess she must have been right, because I didn’t even know what the word aptitude meant.” Miss Angie chuckled, but I could tell this was still a painful subject for her because of the force with which she now scrubbed at my fingernails. “My brother knew what it meant. My younger brother, Freddy, knew exactly what it meant. ‘Girl, you’re too dumb to be a doctor!’ That’s what he told me. He was three years younger than me, and he knew what aptitude meant. And I believed him, even though I knew better than to pay any attention to anything Freddy said. I mean, he’s the one who still has a scar on his coconut head from the time he jumped off the roof trying to use a trash bag for a parachute.”

“No, he didn’t!”

“Yes, he did. Anyway, Freddy may have translated the message, but the message was loud and clear. It was right there in my school records. I was a dummy. They put me in special classes because I couldn’t cut it in the regular classes. It took me a long time to get over it, to stop believing that lie that I was too dumb to be a doctor. I even got into college,” Miss Angie added proudly, “...but I never felt like I belonged there. Every class was a struggle. I managed to get C’s but that only frustrated me more. All that effort for a C? I wanted to flunk out, so I’d have an excuse not to keep trying anymore.”

Miss Angie picked up the nail file and started to slowly shape my tattered nails into oval-shaped masterpieces. “So, when I met Randle, Chelsea’s dad, and he asked me to marry him, I jumped at the chance. I wasn’t good at school, but he was really smart. He used to say he had enough brains for the

both of us...,” she mumbled under her breath, “That arrogant son-of-a—” but caught herself. “Anyway, I was good at being a wife and mother. And I was also good at doing hair—my mom taught me in her own salon, which was actually the kitchen of our old house.”

Miss Angie stopped filing and looked off past me. She sighed. “But there was something missing. I could see that Chelsea was so smart, gifted even, at a young age, but I felt like she got that way in spite of me. I was so scared that one day she’d be embarrassed to have a mother that was so dumb.”

I didn’t know what to say, but I felt like I should try and cheer her up. “You’re not dumb, Miss Angie.”

“Oh, I know that now, Honey. But I just want you to see how easy it is to swallow a lie and make it your own. For so long, I believed I was dumb. One person said it, even wrote it in my record, and from that point it became my reality. Before that meeting with my guidance counselor, I actually believed I was really smart. I really thought I could be a doctor. One word from her and my whole world changed.”

Miss Angie set the file down and picked up a jar of hand cream, the one that smelled like rose petals that I liked, and started massaging my hands. “There was a time when I wouldn’t dare go to Chelsea’s doctor’s appointments or even meetings at the preschool without Randle with me; because I was afraid they’d say something I wouldn’t understand. I was such a mess and so depressed. One day, they had this woman’s workshop at the church. I’ll never forget that title: “Breaking Free of the Chains that Bind You,” that’s what it was called. And I certainly had some chains I needed to be free of. The woman who was speaking was great. She had all kinds of props that she used to make her point. And when the workshop was over, I asked her if she would pray for me. Do you know she said no?”

“No?” The words slipped past my lips in surprise.

“That’s what I said! I mean, I thought ministers had to pray for you if you asked, but she said no. She handed me this pack of seeds instead and said, ‘only the seeds that you water will grow.’ You know what she meant by that?”

“She meant she was too busy to pray for you.”

“No,” Miss Angie said with a chuckle. “She meant, think of your mind as fertile soil. People are always trying to plant their seeds in your soil. In my case, the guidance counselor planted the seed that I was dumb. She wasn’t trying to hurt me. I’m sure she thought she was helping, but the seed was still planted in my soil. *My* soil. But it was my choice what to do with that seed. I could have ignored it, starved it, and what would have happened to that seed?”

I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to answer her. Finally, I said, “Uh, it would have died?”

“Exactly. But instead of ignoring it, I watered it. I let it dominate my thoughts until it blossomed in my mind. And after a while, it got so big that

everyone could see it. I thought I was dumb, so I started thinking dumb things, doing dumb things, until everybody else thought I was a dummy too.” Miss Angie paused to pick up the base coat and started applying it in long, even strokes to my nails. “The good thing about plants is, if something grows that you don’t want, you can always dig it up and plant something new. When that woman handed me those seeds, I knew it was time to start planting new seeds in my mind. Every morning, I reminded myself of how smart I really was, even though deep down I didn’t believe it, at first. I started going to the library and reading everything I could get my hands on. I was talking to people, asking questions, always trying to learn something new. I took a couple of classes online, and I even went on to finish my degree. See what I mean, Toya? I planted new seeds and stopped watering the old ones. And pretty soon I had a whole new garden in my head.”

Miss Angie reached back and picked up a robust African violet plant that sat on the shelf behind her. She cradled it in her arms like it was her baby. I had seen that plant a million times and never knew that it had a backstory; but suddenly I realized the plant had more meaning to Miss Angie than matching the color scheme of her salon. “You grew that from those seeds?”

“I sure did. And I keep it here, to remind myself to be careful what I allow to grow in my garden.”

“That’s nice, Miss Angie, but this is different. I mean, you really are smart. Me? I really am—”

“Stop watering that seed, Toya! Don’t you see? It is the same thing. Hood rat, bitch, somebody planted those rotten seeds in your head. But what do you want to be? What do you want in your garden?”

I shrugged.

“You do know! What kind of person do you want to be?”

My face grew warm. I was feeling the pressure. I knew the answer Miss Angie was looking for, but I couldn’t make my mouth say it. Out of sheer frustration I blurted out, “Happy.”

“Okay. And what will make you happy?”

“For you to leave me alone.”

“Well, I’m not gonna; so, come up with something else...Come on. Those first few days of school, what did you want the other kids to see in you?”

Miss Angie had that determined look in her eyes. I knew she wasn’t going to let this go. I sighed, “That I was nice—I can be nice. I’m funny. And I can be a good student when I wanna be.”

“Doesn’t sound like a hood rat to me. Were you being fake?”

“No.”

“So, there must be a part of you that’s actually nice and funny and a good student, right? Right?” Miss Angie said.

“Yes, but—”

“But nothing! Those seeds are in there. You just haven’t watered them for

a long time.”

“But...what is watering seeds? I’m from the hood. I mean, we had a community garden down the block, but they shut it down when they found a dead body in there.”

Miss Angie covered her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. “Watering seeds means nurturing those qualities you want to grow and starving those qualities you want to get rid of.”

“I tried that and ended up with all my negative qualities being shown on video in front of the whole class.”

Miss Angie paused. “Oh, yeah. I forgot to mention that part. There will be those people who are more than happy to plant weeds in your pretty little garden. In my case, it was my ex-husband. See, he married a dummy; and he liked being married to a dummy. He liked being the smartest man in the room. He didn’t want a wife with an opinion. I had to use the money I made doing hair to pay for school, because he hated the idea of me going back to school. No matter how many A’s I brought home, he was always there to point out everything I didn’t know. The man was an expert in all the mistakes I’d ever made in my life.”

“Is that why you divorced him?”

“Some weeds you can live with and some weeds you have to yank right out of the ground. Otherwise, they’ll choke the life out of you.”

My eyes lit up. “So, I get to choke Jenelle?”

“No. You get to ignore her rotten ass. Trust me, she’s not worth your time. Meanwhile, you put all your energy into watering those good seeds and before you know it, your garden will be so rich and full, the Jenelles of the world won’t matter anymore.”

“That sounds good, Miss Angie. And I’m sure it worked for you, but I don’t think it’ll work for me.”

“Not with that attitude, it won’t. The first step is believing. Even when you don’t feel it, you have to believe it anyway. That’s what faith is: believing even when you can’t see anything happening. You start believing then you’ll start seeing and pretty soon the rest of the world will see it too.”

She directed my eyes in the direction of the rack of nail polish, an invitation to pick whatever color I wanted. I thought carefully, as if my very future depended on this decision. I picked a beautiful shade of purple, much like Miss Angie’s African violet. Later, she cut a piece of that plant for me. We set it in a mug with water so it would eventually grow into a plant that I could put in my own pretty little garden.

A question popped into my mind as I watched Miss Angie turn out the lights in the salon. “You ever think about going back to school to become a doctor?”

Miss Angie stopped and let out a loud cackle. “Baby, I am a doctor!” She gestured toward her salon like a showroom model. “And right here’s my

operating room.”

CHAPTER 9

You take my rep. I'll take your man. That was my new motto. I made my choice. The “clean slate” experiment was officially over. The whole thing was just too hard. It was much easier being the old Toya. I was good at being low down, devious and scandalous. And I was an expert at paybacks. Which is why as soon as my suspension was over, I was busy launching my attack on Jenelle. The cost of destroying my clean slate? One boyfriend.

Luckily, Jenelle’s suspension was twice as long as mine, so I had three more days to lay the groundwork on Devon. Not that I needed the extra time. A few minutes of flirting, telling Devon how his T-shirt really showed off the muscles in his back, and I had his phone number. We spoke on the phone that night and every night after. Apparently, Devon’s mom didn’t have a problem with girls calling her son after eleven o’clock at night. Then one night, when we had been on the phone for three hours, Jenelle was on the other line. Devon did not click over. I knew I had him hooked.

And tonight, he was all mine in my bedroom. Miss Angie and Chelsea were off at Chelsea’s dance recital. I was invited to go, but I told Miss Angie I had some homework to catch up on due to my suspension. It wasn’t a complete lie. I did have work to catch up on, but I wouldn’t dare ask Devon for help. The boy must have taken too many hits to the head while playing football, because he was clueless. The only things he knew anything about were football, girls and TV. So, we sat on the floor in my room watching TV. The Simpsons. Devon loved cartoons—but apparently, he loved kissing on me more. He barely even glanced at the TV, too busy kissing and nibbling my neck, his wide receiver-sized hands pawing at me like I was a football. And I was into it. At least, I tried to be into it. But something was missing. Devon was kissable. His lips were full, soft like pillows. Just like the last boy—and the one before that, and the one before that. The same old same old. There was nothing special here. And strangely, I was feeling a strong desire for

something special.

I kissed Devon harder, trying to lose myself in the moment. This wasn't about special. It wasn't about love. It was about revenge. Who cared if my heart wasn't in it?

Obviously, I did. As hard as I tried to push out Miss Angie's words, they kept creeping back into my head. All that mumbo jumbo about planting seeds and watering flowers really got to me. I didn't think it had. I tried to blow it off. But every time I looked at my windowsill and saw my little African violet in a cup, struggling to live, it moved me. I found myself rooting for the poor thing—almost as if I was rooting for myself. I did want that pretty garden. I did want the good seeds to take root and flourish in my life, but I wasn't sure I could really have it. Was I destined to be every man's amusement park ride? The girl every boy wanted to screw, and no one wanted to take out to dinner and a movie? Would I never be a “decent girl?”

“I want you so bad, girl. Man! I can't wait to...” Huge drops of sweat were dripping off of Devon's forehead. He slipped off his T-shirt and was now working on the buttons of my shirt. I barely noticed all of his exertions. The wheels of my mind were churning faster than Devon's fingers could unbutton. I never really had a boyfriend before, just sex buddies. Devon would be another buddy. A clean slate? Who was I fooling? My slate was so dirty, even when I tried to clean it, it got splashed with something else. I did enjoy that time, though—those few days when my slate was clean. At the time, I felt good about myself—nervous at first, but I was starting to get my confidence back.

Another thing I noticed was the quality of people I was starting to draw to me. Positive people. Kids who were about something: Terry and Emily, of course. But then there was Shay and Sharita from the church, who read to kids at the homeless shelter once a week. Because they wanted to, not because some judge ordered them to. Dominic, from my gym class, was involved in every club, group, organization, and society the school had to offer. He was always inviting me to meetings, but I never got that vibe that he was doing so because he was trying to get in my pants. He said I had excellent leadership skills. Me? Excellent? Leader? Skills? Of course, it wasn't all positive. Jenelle was definitely the rotten apple in the bunch—a dirty, stinking, rotten apple, with fuzzy mold growing all over her. I couldn't wait to see the look on her face when I popped up at the school with Devon's arms around me. Sweet satisfaction. Sweet revenge!

But would it really be sweet? Sure, sleeping with Devon would hurt Jenelle, but so what? *This was strange.* These thoughts running through my mind. For the first time, I was really starting to think about the “C” word. Consequences. Jenelle may be hurt, but she wouldn't be surprised. If I was being honest with myself, it would be the kind of thing everyone expected a girl like me to do—use my body to get revenge. What would Terry think of

me if he found out—when he found out? I would never, ever, ever, ever have a shot at being his girlfriend. If I had a shot at all, that would destroy it all together. And then what about Chelsea? The girl was annoying, but she was growing on me. What would I tell her? *Girl, you gotta use what you got to get what you want.* No way. I didn't want to corrupt that sweet, innocent child. Miss Angie would be disappointed, of course. It saddened me to think about the look on Miss Angie's face when she picked me up at the school that day. I didn't want to disappoint her again, especially after all the personal stuff she just shared with me.

I noticed Devon had taken a break from groping me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him dig in the pocket of his jeans and pull out a condom. He snickered, "Always come prepared. That's what they told me in the boy scouts."

The look of excitement in his eyes. Like a kid waiting in line to get on the roller coaster. I invited him over to watch TV, but in Devon's mind I invited him over for a freak-fest. That's what he expected from me. And I was about to give him no less. What would he say if I said no? If I told him the roller coaster ride would be closed until further notice. He'd be pissed, but who cared? I still might have a shot with Terry. Miss Angie wouldn't be disappointed. And there would be one less stain on my slate.

Then what about Jenelle? No big payback? No sweet revenge. I remembered my grandmother once saying, "*Sometimes the best revenge is living well.*" Pay Jenelle back by not stooping to her level but by rising above it? It sounded like something I might have heard in Sunday school, but maybe there was some truth to it. Jenelle pulled that stunt to drag me down, to make me look bad in front of my classmates. What if I came back to school better than ever? Smiled more, laughed louder, showed off some of those "excellent leadership skills" by joining a couple of Dominic's clubs? Show Jenelle, and everybody else, that no matter what they threw my way, I was coming back bigger, bolder, better than ever! Ah, sweet revenge!

"What the..." Devon must have been having trouble with my bra, because he stared at the lacey, blue contraption with a puzzled look on his face. The same look he got when the Mr. Chamberlain asked him to work out a geometry problem on the board. Finally, he said: "Can you help me out here?...Toya?"

I finally looked at him, really looked at him, as if meeting him for the first time. That smooth, dark chocolate skin. His muscle-bound chest, rising and falling with anticipation. I felt his enormous hand on my bra, and I saw the look in his eyes. That *Yay! I'm-about-to-get-me-some* look. I saw his jaw drop when I finally said the words, "I can't do this."

"I know, man, this bra is crazy!"

"No." I knocked his hand away and started re-buttoning my shirt. "I'm not talking about the bra, I'm talking about this. Having sex with you."

He looked stunned. "What? Why? Is it my breath?"

"No, it's not your—"

"I've got gum."

"I didn't say it was—"

"It's okay. Jenelle makes me keep gum with me all the time." Devon started rummaging through his pockets for the gum, until I grabbed his arm.

"Devon, stop. Your breath is fine. It's me."

"You? Your breath smells good."

"Will you stop talking about bad breath!" I snapped. "I'm trying to tell you something."

"What?" Devon slipped into smooth operator mode and slid his arm around me. "What is it, baby?"

"It's me. I can't do it with you Devon. It's wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Yeah. I mean, you and I both know the only reason I'd be doing it is to get back at Jenelle."

Devon tipped his head back and let out a loud cackle. "Is that what this is about? It's okay, baby. You can use me. I don't mind." He leaned in to kiss my ear.

I pulled away. "No, it's not fair to you. Or to me. I don't need any more drama in my life."

"There don't have to be no drama, girl. Jenelle don't have to know what we do."

I buried my head in my hands. I could tell this was going nowhere. Saying no to Devon was like giving him a shot of Viagra. Now he was massaging my shoulders. And he smelled so good. Calvin Klein's Eternity for Men. I could feel myself weakening. If I was ever going to take a stand, I had to do it now. It was time for drastic measures. I held Devon's hands in mine and looked deeply into his eyes.

"I love you, Devon," I said, and could immediately feel Devon's hands turn ice cold. It was working already. In addition to the tips, another thing I picked up while working in Miss Angie's salon was relationship advice. The best way to cool off a man who wants to have sex is to talk about love or religion. If that didn't work, cry. I hadn't been listening enough in church to talk about religion, so I thought I'd give love a try.

"I didn't plan for this to happen, Devon," I said. "But I really do love you. I want us to spend every moment together."

"Toya I-I...I mean, J-Jenelle and—" Devon stumbled over his words, barely remembering how to speak.

"I know. I know. You're with her. It's my loss." I tried to say with a straight face. "But can't you see? How can I make love to you then watch you walking down the hallway with her, holding hands and stuff, on Monday morning? It would break my heart."

Devon let out a deep sigh, speechless. Then he jumped up so quickly, I thought he was going to bolt for the door. He paced the floor, scratching his head—as if it would bring the right words to surface in his mind. “Listen, I—”

“You don’t have to say it. I know you don’t feel the same way.” I rested my head in my knees so he couldn’t see me laughing.”

“Aw, don’t cry.”

“No, I’m okay. I’ll be okay.” My voice was muffled by my knees. I lifted my head and whimpered, “You’d better go now.”

Devon’s head hung low as he turned and slowly walked to the door. He put his hand on the doorknob and my heart leapt. It worked. It actually worked.

Then he stopped. Devon rested his head against the door then sighed. “I can’t.”

“You can’t what?”

“I can’t leave you like this.”

Uh oh. I quickly straightened up. “No, no. You go on. I’m fine. See, I’m better already.” I flashed him a big cheesy grin.

“You don’t have to pretend with me, Toya. I can see right through you.”

“No, really...I’m not pretending.”

Devon walked back to my side, with a look of determination. “Truth is...I love you too, Toya.”

“You what?”

“I love you, girl.”

Now it was my turn to forget how to speak. I sputtered. “Huh?...B-but, what...what about J-Jenelle?”

“She’s gonna kill me. She’s gonna kill us both. But I don’t care. You’re so much nicer than she is. And when we talk on the phone, we talk about real stuff—football and X-box. Jenelle only wants to talk about shopping.” Devon rushed over and took my hand in his. “And you never yell at me or call me names like Jenelle. Last week when I forgot it was our eleven-month anniversary, she called me a big, dumb Jock-a-saurus”

“That’s a pet name! She only does that to show you that she loves you.” I couldn’t believe I was actually defending my arch enemy.

“Nah. That’s not love. What we have...it’s true love.”

This was not going well. I almost wanted to have sex with him just to get him to shut up. I didn’t want to mess with the boy’s head. Maybe the truth would come in handy here. “Listen, Devon...I’m not really—”

A thud interrupted me.

“What was that?” Me and Devon whispered in unison.

Next came the unmistakable jangle of Miss Angie’s keys.

“My foster mom. She’s home,” I hissed.

“I thought you said she wouldn’t be home—”

"I know what I said. I guess she changed her mind."

The thump, thump, thump, of Chelsea's lead feet on the stairs followed.

"You gotta get out of here."

"I can hide in the closet."

"Uh-uh...with my luck, she'll come up here and head right for the closet looking for her tennis racket or something." I gripped Devon's arm and dragged him to the window. "Trust me you do not want to mess with Miss Angie. You think Jenelle is scary?"

"Okay, okay..." Devon's body was dangling half out the window, half in. "Hey. Aren't you going to kiss me goodnight?"

Suddenly Chelsea burst through the door, saying, "Don't laugh, I got stage fright. Threw up before I—"

Panicked, I shoved Devon out the window with one hard push.

A yell. Tree branches crackled. Then a clunk. I peeked out the window just in time to see Devon climbing back to his feet.

"Oooh!" Chelsea howled like a siren. "You had a—"

"Shhhh!" I slapped my hand over Chelsea's mouth, just as Miss Angie barged in the room.

"What in the world is going on up here?"

"Nothing," we replied, innocently.

Miss Angie stood there with her hands on her hips, and I realized how it must look: Me standing there holding Chelsea in a headlock, my hand clamped over her mouth. I slowly released the girl. "Um...Chelsea was about to throw up and I was helping her hold it in."

Chelsea nodded her head vigorously. "Uh huh. But, I think I'm okay now." She breathed out an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Whew! Thanks Toya. That was a close one."

Miss Angie folded her arms and said, "I thought I heard someone yell."

"It was a cat," we answered, a little too quickly. It freaked me out how me and Chelsea were so different, but in the heat of the moment came up with the same lie.

Chelsea added, "Uh...there was a cat outside, howling. I think it was in heat."

Miss Angie stared at the two of us as if reading our minds. We looked guilty. Though, of what, she couldn't even imagine. Chelsea had only been in the house for 30 seconds. Not nearly enough time to get into trouble. Finally, Miss Angie gave up on the mind reading. "Well, whatever... Chelsea, I put a glass of ginger ale on your nightstand. Drink it and then go take your shower."

"Yes Mommy," Chelsea said then disappeared.

Miss Angie turned her eyes to me. "You get your homework done?"

"Most of it. How was the recital?"

"Fine. What we could see of it. Chelsea got sick just before she was about

to walk on stage.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Well, last year she threw up in the car on the way to the recital. So, at least we’re making progress.” Miss Angie walked over to the window and peeked outside. Nothing but trees and houses. “I’m going to check on Chelsea. Goodnight, Toya.”

“Goodnight.”

As soon as Miss Angie left, I flopped on the bed and exhaled. That was a close one. It was a good thing Devon played football. Any other boy falling out of that window would have still been laying there with a broken leg, just waiting for Miss Angie to come down and break his neck too. My cell phone chirped, and I nearly leaped off her bed, startled. Clutching my chest with one hand, I picked up the phone with the other. A text message.

Devon: “I luv u, gurl!”

CHAPTER 10

Apparently, true love lasted about as long as it took for the bruises to heal from Devon's fall. Monday morning, I saw him all hugged up with Jenelle at her locker. Rumor had it that Devon did work up the courage to tell Jenelle it was over. She yelled. She cried. Then she bought him a new pair of Nike Air Max sneakers. One hundred and eighty-five dollars! That was the price of true love. However, he would have to wait a couple of weeks to show off his prized sneakers, as the fall from the window caused Devon to sprain his ankle. Though injured, Devon moved quickly enough whenever I was around. Avoiding conversation, avoiding eye contact, avoiding making a phone call to explain his sudden change of heart. Not that it mattered to me. I was glad to have him out of my hair. I had more important things on my mind.

The doorbell rang and I sprinted for the door. Terry, my more important thing and future husband, was at the door. Of course, he didn't know he was my future husband. For now, he was just my geometry tutor.

As excited as I was to see Terry, I always played it cool. "Hey, what's up?" I said, leaning against the door frame.

"Theorems! That's what's up." Terry waved a book in the air, as he sauntered through the door.

Textbooks, notebooks, Capri Suns, and a bowl of grapes cluttered the table. We had been working on geometry for an hour and a half, and my brain was having a meltdown. I shoved my book away. Terry pulled it back. I shoved it away again. He pulled it back again.

"Come on, Diva. Only three more problems to go."

"I'm not a diva. My eyeballs are about to fall out of my head. You want that on your conscience, Terry? You want to be responsible for my blindness?"

"You're right. You're not a diva, you're a drama queen. Let's take a break."

Ready, set, go. Me and Terry bolted for the kitchen in a hundred-yard

dash. I reached the refrigerator first, but before I could open the door, Terry spun me away and yanked the door open.

“Ha! Beat ya, again.”

We played this game at every tutoring session: first one to the fridge got first dibs on what was inside. Last time, Terry was first and got the last shrimp egg roll. This time, he stepped away from the fridge loaded down with lunch meat, cheese, and the rest of the ingredients for a sandwich. I grabbed a chocolate Tastykake and a tall glass of milk. This was my favorite part of geometry tutoring. Break time. When Terry loosened up and stopped being the uptight professor. He was really funny when he wasn't in tutor mode—even if he was eating us out of house and home.

For a while, I worried that our friendship wouldn't survive the infamous internet video incident. Terry was such a goodie-goodie, I was afraid the whole thing would have scared him off. But the next morning after the incident, Terry sent me a text: *R U Ok?*

I texted back: *Yes. Dont want 2 tok about it now.*

He texted back: *K*

And we didn't talk about it. When I got back to school, Terry was hanging out with me as if nothing happened. We walked to school together, ate lunch together, studied together, without so much as a hint that he was bothered by the whole scandal. It was driving me crazy that he never brought it up. Finally, I dragged him out of football practice and asked him:

“So, what's up with you? You mad at me or what?”

He looked at me as if I was speaking a foreign language. “What are you talking about?”

“You know! The video!”

“You dragged me off the field for that?”

“It's not like you were doing anything,” which was true. Terry was a bench player. While the rest of the team was on the field running drills, he was reading a book. His uniform was sparkling clean, and there wasn't a drop of sweat on him.

Terry ignored my last remark. “What do you want, Toya?”

“I want to know how you feel. You never talk about it.”

“You said you didn't want to talk about it.”

“At the time! I didn't mean forever!” I didn't mean to, but my volume was growing louder. Terry's teammates were starting to stare.

He lowered his voice. “What do you want me to say?”

“Say how you feel?”

He looked away for a moment and ran his hand over the back of his head. Finally, he shrugged and said, “Am I happy about it? No. But who am I to judge?”

I rolled my eyes. “Thank you, Pastor. Now, how does Terry feel?”

“I don't feel anything. I mean, I get it. I know you've been through some

stuff—with your past and all. And I guess it makes you act out sometimes. Like when—”

“Stop. Don’t...”

“You said you wanted to hear how I—”

“I know what I said. But not that...” I would’ve preferred it if he had been angry with me. Instead, I was hearing pity. *Poor little abused girl can’t control herself. Don’t mind her, she’s a foster kid. No wonder she acts like that.* “I don’t want you to feel sorry for me, Terry.”

“I wasn’t feeling—”

“Yes, you were! You’re making excuses for me. I don’t want that.”

“Then why did you ask?”

I could tell by the strain in his voice, Terry was beyond frustrated. I was frustrated too. This is when all that therapy was supposed to pay off, to help me express myself. Now, all I wanted to do was just get out of there before I burst into tears. “Forget it. Forget I said anything.”

I turned to run away, but Terry grabbed my hand. “Wait. Now, you started this. Let’s deal with it.”

I let out a deep breath as I searched for the words. “I just don’t want things to get weird between us. I don’t want it to change how you see me.”

“Have I been treating you differently?”

“No. You’ve been normal. That’s what’s freaking me out!”

Terry just stared at me. It was making me feel uncomfortable. He smiled and shook his head.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing.”

Then he started laughing.

I shoved him. “What is so funny?”

“It’s not you. I was just thinking about Kareem. You remember, my friend who passed away?”

“Yeah. What about him?” I shot back, annoyed.

“He used to cut class all the time. One time, he hooked up with this girl, a senior, under the bleachers in the gym. They were drinking and fooling around, and eventually he passed out. A few hours later, he woke up because the basketball game was about to start. And he was on the team.”

“Uh huh.” I had no idea where he was going with all this.

“Well, check this out! The girl was gone and so were his clothes.”

“Are you serious?”

“All she left him with was his Jordans.”

I gasped. “So, what did he do?”

“What else could he do? He couldn’t miss the game so...He stood up, covered his Johnson with his Jordans, and walked out into the crowded gym—butt naked. Headed straight to the locker room with his head held high.” There was a tone of pride in Terry’s voice. I’d seen pictures of Kareem

in Terry's locker, so it was easy for me to visualize that tall, pencil-thin kid walking around naked. I covered my mouth and snickered.

"So, you see my point?" Terry asked.

"You have strange taste in friends?"

"No, Toya. The point is, I was best friends with Kareem before that happened, and I was still his friend after. I wasn't friends with him because he was a saint. I was friends with him because he was real."

I nodded, finally getting it. "The kind of person who could walk through a crowded gym butt naked and not even break a sweat."

"Yes! I mean, I know you're not the same girl who made that video. But it says a lot that you came back to school with your head up. You could've tried to pay Jenelle back for what she did, but you didn't."

"Well, that's not exactly true. I did give her a beat down."

"In the heat of the moment. Anybody would've done the same thing in that situation. But when you had time to cool off, you let it go, and I think that's really cool...I'm proud of you, Toya."

No one had ever said those words to me before. I didn't know what to say, or do, so I hugged him. Terry put his arm around my shoulder and gave me a squeeze, nearly crushing me with his shoulder pads. Howls and cat calls floated from the football field. We quickly separated, feeling self-conscious.

I looped my arm around Terry's arm, and we headed back toward the football field. We walked in silence for a moment, then I said, "I wish I could've met Kareem."

"Yeah, I think you would have liked each other."

"Maybe. But it does make me wonder."

"Wonder about what?"

"You. I mean, that's two friends you've had now that like to take their clothes off. It won't be long before you start taking your clothes off in public too."

I looked up to see the bashful grin on his face. I loved to say things that made this choir boy squirm.

"Trust me, the world ain't ready to get a look at this masterpiece." Terry stopped in his tracks and started to pose, flexing his muscles like a steroid-stuffed body builder. I never saw that silly side of him before, and laughed so hard, my stomach ached.

Watching Terry now, polish off his sandwich in three bites, I was overcome by gratitude. If Terry never became my boyfriend, I would be grateful if we could remain friends forever.

"I got good news," he said, while wiping a glob of mayonnaise off the corner of his mouth. "Coach said I'm going to play this Saturday."

"Really?"

"Yeah, since Devon got hurt, he's going to need another wide receiver."

"Congratulations!" I didn't see the need to tell Terry that I knew how

Devon really injured himself. He told the whole school that he slipped in the shower. I didn't see the need to say otherwise. "You know you'll already have a fan club rooting for you."

Terry smiled. I smiled back. I felt the sudden urge to grab him by the head and kiss him, but his cell phone spoiled the mood. Terry picked up the phone. He had a text message. I could tell by the way his face lit up, the text must have been from Mercedes. I felt my stomach sink, but I couldn't complain. After all, Mercedes was his girlfriend now.

It was official. Some time while I was out on suspension, Terry and Mercedes finally became a couple. There was nothing I could do about it now. I would have to wait out the relationship. I could have tried my old tricks: showing up for my tutoring sessions in short skirts and tight belly shirts, brushing my leg against his while reading. I could have pulled out my old bag of tricks, but this was the new Toya. I had to be true to the new Toya at all times. Besides, if Terry actually did give in to my temptations, something told me I would lose a little respect for him and wouldn't want him anyway. So, what was the point?

He quickly texted a message back. I wanted no part of this. I went back to doing something much more fun than watching Terry send love texts to some other girl—geometry. By the time Terry joined me in the dining room, his cell phone buzzed again. He read the message and laughed out loud. He was about to send another message, when I snatched the phone out of his hand.

"Do you mind? I'm trying to concentrate."

"Sorry."

"I know you are." I mumbled under my breath.

"What?"

"I said: no, your phone is sorry." I took a closer look at the black and silver device, with all the latest cool features. "I mean, this phone is crazy expensive and yet, somehow, you've managed to make it boring. You don't even have any pictures on it."

Terry took the phone out of my hand. "My dad bought me this phone, but he lost the manual. I have no clue how to work it. I'm lucky I can make phone calls with the stupid thing."

I snatched the phone back. "Let me see." I pushed a few buttons and had a music video playing.

Terry was in awe. "How'd you do that?"

"It's a cell phone, Terry. Not rocket science." I had to lean in close to show Terry how to open up the menu screen. I inhaled his fresh clean scent. Man! I could get high off that scent. *Concentrate Toya*. I cleared my throat and started walking Terry through the various features on the phone. Before he knew it, he was taking my picture. I showed him how to save it so that my picture would pop up whenever I called his phone. He was so amazed, like he'd just found a new toy. "Okay. Next time, you have to show me how to

play games with this thing.”

“How do you like that? The student teaches the teacher,” I boasted proudly.

“I bet there’s a lot you can teach me, Toya.”

If those words had come out of any other boy’s mouth, I would have sworn he was flirting with me. But I knew Terry wasn’t flirting. Knowing Terry, he meant exactly what he said: *Gee, I bet there’s a lot you can teach me about cell phones, Toya.*

No worries. Terry may not have been flirting, but I did find one thing to cheer about. I took great pleasure in knowing that the only picture in Terry’s cell phone was not of his girlfriend, but of me!

* * * * *

Screams of horror filled the air.

Terry may have been cute, he may have been smart, but he was a lousy football player. Every time the ball came in his direction, disaster was sure to follow: Fumble, fumble, dropped pass in the end zone. When he did manage to hold on to the ball, he suffered the most bone-crushing hits that put everyone in the stands in fear for his life.

“Maybe Terry doesn’t understand the rules,” Emily said with a pained look on her face. “I mean, does he get that he’s supposed to run after he catches the ball, not before.”

“He’s doing it on purpose,” I said, clearly irritated. “It’s strategy. He’s trying to make them think he doesn’t know what he’s doing so they’ll let their guard down.”

“Well, it’s working. It *really* looks like Terry has no clue what he’s doing. Maybe he should take up acting instead of football.”

I cut Emily a sharp look and scooted a little further down the bleacher away from her. “I can’t talk to you, Emily. You obviously know nothing about the game of football.”

“Ohhhh!!!” The crowd groaned. Terry took a hit that knocked his helmet halfway across the field. I covered my eyes, afraid to see if his head was still attached to his shoulders. A moment later, he was back on his feet again, trotting off the field with a spring in his step. *Go Terry!*

I wondered if a part of Kareem’s spirit lived on in Terry. He endured blow, after humiliating blow, and kept coming back on the field for more. Sort of like walking out into a crowded gym butt naked. When I could stand to see my friend suffer no more, I turned my attention to people-watching. Perched up high in the bleachers near the fifty-yard line, I had the perfect view of all the action.

On the other side of the field, sat the visiting team: St. John’s Preparatory School. Their colors were silver and maroon with a bright orange tiger for a mascot. To me, the St. John’s girls all seemed stuck-up. I ran into a group of

them earlier in the girl's bathroom and one of the girls was writing on the mirror in lipstick: *This bathroom stinks and so does Excelsior*. That was rude! I thought. And so unnecessary. Wasn't it bad enough that their team was winning like 150-3? They had to insult Excelsior's bathrooms too?

Well, St. John's football team may have been better, but Excelsior's band rocked. Strutting around in their regal-looking purple and gold colors, like the king's royal marching band. Our half-time show was full of funky music with lots of percussion and brass that blew St. John's weak little band right off the field. Now that they were deep into the second half of the game—a game that was a total blow-out—most of the band had packed up their things and were floating around throughout the stadium. Not that I was spying on the girl, but I did spot Mercedes standing by the fence, having an intense conversation with some big, muscle-headed dude in a University of Delaware sweatshirt. Hmmm. What was that all about?

The crowd erupted into a cheer, which yanked my attention back to the game. An Excelsior cornerback intercepted a pass and was running it back toward the end zone. As the wiry athlete dipped and dodged his way up the field, the crowd roared with excitement. Touch down! Everyone was on their feet, high-fiving and waving purple and gold banners and pom poms. I noticed that the only one not cheering was Devon. He was sitting on the front row, in street clothes, looking like a lost puppy dog. He could have been standing on the field with the rest of his teammates, like the other injured players. He must not have had permission—his girlfriend's permission. I could tell that he wanted to be out there so badly, celebrating with the rest of the team. Instead, he was stuck sitting with Jenelle, who was too busy talking on the phone to even notice the team had just scored. But at least he was sporting his new sneakers. A little kid walked by carrying a tray of nachos, tripped over his own feet and spilled gooey orange cheese on Devon's sparkling clean sneaks. I laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" Emily asked.

"Life. Life is funny." I tried not to snicker as I watched Devon hobble after the boy, who was just too fast for him. Meanwhile, Chelsea thundered her way down the bleachers, making them quiver. She flopped into the space on the other side of me with a lovesick grin on her face. She was gone for 20 minutes and came back empty-handed.

"Where's your popcorn?" I asked.

"Oh, um...they were all out." Chelsea looked away so I couldn't see how guilty she looked.

I knew Chelsea wasn't out there all that time standing in line for some popcorn. Especially, when I saw Alonzo return to his seat empty-handed too. I just wanted to give Chelsea a hard time because Miss Angie was sitting nearby.

"What do you mean there was no popcorn?" I announced, loudly. "They

were practically giving that stuff away, they had so much—”

“Shut up, Toya!” Chelsea shrieked, her eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets. I shook my head. Young girl still didn’t know how to play it cool. It wasn’t like Miss Angie had heard me anyway. She was too busy talking to Mr. Kevin.

He came because Terry was finally getting a chance to play. Mr. Kevin even brought his tablet to video the game, not that there was anything worth recording. Terry had given me his phone and asked me to record all of his touchdowns. Turned out to be the easiest job I ever had. Every once in a while, I would find my eyes drifting in the vicinity of Miss Angie and Mr. Kevin. I was fascinated by them. What were they talking about? Music? Politics? Calling an ambulance for Terry? Whatever he was saying, Miss Angie sure found it hilarious. Sometimes Miss Angie would touch his knee when she laughed, and Chelsea would elbow me hard, trying to get my attention.

“Stop staring at them!” I would say, though I was staring at them too.

Mr. Kevin seemed cool. First of all, he gave me forty bucks to buy soft pretzels, hot dogs and sodas for me and my friends. And when I tried to give him his change, he said: “Keep it. That’s your tip.” It was like a five-dollar tip. Nice! Second, he was a good dresser. He wasn’t trying to dress too young, in saggy jeans with a baseball cap tipped to the side. That was Mr. Rick’s style. Mr. Kevin had his own style. Classic. Dark jeans that fit him just right, a navy-blue Polo shirt and aviator sunglasses. Third, he never lost his cool. No matter how many times he watched his son get bulldozed to the ground, Mr. Kevin just clapped his hands and said: “Get em, son. You’ll get em next time.”

Until the last time Terry got hit. That time, Terry did not get up. Players from both teams were waving to the sidelines for the trainer to come out. A hush fell over the crowd. Through the mass of sweaty boys crowded around him, I caught glimpses of Terry lying completely still, with his eyes closed. Immediately, Mr. Kevin darted to the field. Miss Angie followed. I started to come too, “No. Watch Chelsea,” she yelled back at me.

Watch Chelsea? Chelsea was thirteen going on thirty with a boyfriend on the side, she could take care of herself. It was Terry who needed me now. But I didn’t protest. I remained in the stands with Chelsea and watched as an ambulance entered the field.

Please God, let him be okay. Please, God. Tears flooded my eyes, and I forced them back down. I could feel Emily squeezing my hand. I squeezed back.

CHAPTER 11

“...So, the doctors say Terry’s gonna be all right. It was just a concussion. He’ll be back to school on Monday.”

“That soon? The way you described it, I thought he’d be paralyzed or something,” said Miss Meagan. Twice a month, she fulfilled her social worker duties by visiting me to make sure I was doing all right. And lately, I had been doing all right. We usually talked about school, getting along with Miss Angie or, if we ran out of topics, Miss Meagan’s non-existent love life. Sometimes I asked about my mom, but it was getting harder and harder to hear Miss Meagan say: *No. Still no word from her. But I’ll keep reaching out to her.* Today, the hot topic of conversation was Terry’s near-death experience on the football field—the story of which still had Miss Meagan shaking her head. “I mean it’s never good to have a concussion; but, that is good news.”

“That ain’t the good news,” I said. “The good news is Terry quit the team.”

“Oh no! That’s a shame.”

“No, it’s a shame to watch your friend get his head torn off for two hours straight. His dad said he’d give him the rest of the money to buy this motorcycle if he quit, so he did. If you ask me, I think he was ready to quit anyway. I mean, really, how much fun can a sport be, if you end up in the hospital?” I could joke about it now, but seeing Terry get loaded into that ambulance, knocked out cold, chilled me. It was scary to think about losing him. It figured. I finally found a boy I could actually be friends with, as well as like, and then he dies in a freak football accident. It wasn’t until I got to visit him in the hospital and saw him sitting up, eating orange Jell-O that I felt sure that he was going to be okay. I was so relieved, I didn’t even care that Mercedes was there too, feeding Terry that Jell-O. I ran over and gave him a big hug. Mercedes didn’t seem to mind.

“Jell-O?” said Mercedes, slicing an orange, cake-shaped mound that jiggled

when she touched it.

“Uh...sure,” I replied, then whispered to Terry, “Is this hospital food?”

Mercedes overheard me and giggled, “No, silly. I made it.” She handed me a small paper plate filled with Jell-O, then plopped a dollop of Cool Whip on top. “I’m no cook, but my Jell-O is off the hook!” She clapped her hands and squealed. “Did you guys hear that? I made a rhyme.”

The rhyme may have been corny, but the Jell-O was off the hook. I didn’t know what Mercedes’ secret was, but the girl made a bowl of Jell-O that would make a grown man cry. It was just one more reason to hate her. But instead of hating, I sat there with Mercedes and Terry, laughing and filling him in on parts of the game he couldn’t remember.

“So, you still have a crush on Terry?” Miss Meagan asked. The question snapped me to attention.

“Nope,” I lied. “He made his choice. He could’ve had chocolate cake, he chose orange Jell-O instead.” That made Miss Meagan laugh. I was always making her laugh. Maybe that’s why I liked her so much. Miss Meagan was the fourth social worker to have been assigned to me since coming into foster care—and by far the one I liked spending time with the most. It could have been the fact that when Miss Meagan wore her hair in a ponytail, like she did today, she looked about sixteen. So, anybody walking by wouldn’t wonder: “Why is that Black girl sitting there with that White lady? Oh, she must be her social worker or probation officer.”

With Miss Meagan, we just looked like two teenage girls hanging out at Starbucks, sipping on lattes, shooting the breeze. Sometimes we met at my house, or in the park, if the weather was nice. We usually went to get something to eat when Miss Meagan had something heavy to talk about. Like today. I didn’t know what it was that was bugging my social worker, but I could tell it was big. Miss Meagan hadn’t been her usual happy-go-lucky self. She was quiet. The only time she laughed was when I made that crack about the Jell-O. Something was definitely going on. But I was afraid to ask, so I played along, allowing Miss Meagan to continue to make small talk until she was ready for the big talk.

“So, how’s school?”

“School’s fine. I gotta B on my geometry test.”

“Excellent. That Terry is a good teacher.”

Almost too good, I thought. If my grades kept getting better, I wouldn’t need him as a tutor anymore. Well, I would have to cross that bridge when I came to it.

More small talk. “Any more problems with Jenelle?”

“Nope.” After the fight, the principal chose to remove Jenelle and me from Communications class. We ended up in separate study halls. I decided I would take the class again next semester. I really liked that class—though I liked not having to put up with Jenelle’s crap anymore, even better.

“And what about at Angie’s house? You and Chelsea getting along, okay?”

“Uh huh.” This was getting ridiculous. Soon she’d be asking me about the weather.

“Gosh. This weather has been great, hasn’t it?” she said, cheerfully. “I love the fall. The air is so—”

“Miss Meagan!” I squawked. Enough was enough. Miss Meagan had beaten around the bush until the bush was bare. “What is it? Just spit it out, okay?”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Yes! I mean, whatever it is can’t be anywhere near as bad as this tired conversation.”

“Okay...” Miss Meagan took one more sip of her drink, licked the foam off her lip and announced: “Well, your mom called the other day.”

I nearly fell out of my chair. It wasn’t until this very moment that I realized I had given up on my mother. It had been so long since I’d seen or heard from the woman. I didn’t think I’d ever see her again. I always figured I’d wait until I was all grown up—rich, successful, super-fine husband—and then I would go looking for my mother. I would put on my mink coat and drive up to the house in my BMW, knock on the door and say: “See what you missed out on?...Oh, don’t cry, now. It’s too late.”

But that whole fantasy flew out of my mind with three simple words: *Your mom called.*

I tried to sound unaffected, “What did she want?”

“She wants to see you.”

I couldn’t picture it. My mom picking up the phone, calling the agency and crying: “I want to see my baby! Please, let me see my little girl.” It must’ve been a joke. Maybe Jenelle was up to her old tricks again—though not even she would be so cruel. Or would she?

“Toya?” Miss Meagan said, looking concerned. “How do you feel about that, Toya?”

“How do I feel about what?”

“Seeing your mother.”

I shrugged it off. “Whatever.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to need more of an answer than that.” Miss Meagan’s green eyes stared at me, intently. I hated that. It always made me feel like Miss Meagan had X-ray vision. “Tell me what’s going through your mind.”

“What difference does it make?”

“It makes a huge difference.”

“Why? It’s not like I have a choice. She wants to see me, so she gets to see me, right?”

“Not if you don’t want to.” Miss Meagan inched closer to me in her chair and lowered her voice. “Listen, no one’s going to force you. As far as I’m

concerned, you're doing well in school, you're staying out of trouble, your placement is stable. No sense rocking the boat...unless you want to rock it."

I stared down at the laces on my sneakers, thinking about things. Thinking about running. Finally, I asked, "Did she say where she's been all this time?"

"Something about being sick, then the car breaking down, and so on and so on. But she did say she's sorry, and she's really been missing you. She was worried that you might hate her for staying away so long."

I rolled my eyes. "And you believed her?"

"She sounded sincere enough, but who knows?" Miss Meagan slumped back in her enormous chair and folded her hands across her lap.

"Will Mr. Rick be—"

"Absolutely not! The restraining order is still good. Rick won't be allowed anywhere near you." A few silent moments passed, and Miss Meagan added, "Listen, you don't have to decide right now. Think about it, then call me when—"

"No, I don't need to think about it." My voice was heavy with resignation. "I'll see her."

"Are you sure? You can always—"

"I'm sure."

"Okay. I'll set it up."

I raised my latté to my lips, but couldn't drink. I suddenly lost my taste for sweet, foamy, coffee drinks. I wanted this, right? A day hadn't gone by when my mother wasn't on my mind. Tamika had a lot of explaining to do. If she thought she was going to show up, shed a few tears, and expect me to forgive her, she had another thing coming. She was going to have to work for this forgiveness. I finished the latté in one big gulp. "Besides, there's always a chance that she won't show up."

* * * * *

What had I gotten myself into? Ever since I agreed to visit with my mother, I was a wreck. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I was distracted in class. One day, Terry showed up for tutoring in a sleeveless T-shirt that really showed off his biceps, and I barely even noticed. Luckily, the visit was scheduled for tomorrow. In less than 24 hours, this nightmare would be over. Either my mom would show up or she wouldn't. She would have a good reason for her absence, or she wouldn't. I would fall to pieces, or I wouldn't. All I had to do was hold it together for just a few more hours.

It was Sunday. I went to church and caught myself praying to God that my mother would show up. When we got home, I played with Chelsea's doll house, but had to stop because all of the Barbies reminded me of my mom. I even called the brown-skin one with the straight black hair, fuchsia mini skirt, and silver stilettos, Tamika. I knew I was losing it then. A nap. That was the answer. Sleep the rest of the day away. Yet, lying there on the bed, I found

my brain filled with images of my mother. Laughing with my mother. Christmas with my mother. My mother, in court, telling the judge that “her daughter has been known to stretch the truth sometimes—when she wants attention.” My mother climbing into Mr. Rick’s car the last time I ever saw her. My mother on the floor, begging Mr. Rick not to leave her. Mr. Rick creeping into my bedroom. Mr. Rick standing over me. Mr. Rick sliding his hand down my—

I sat up, gasping for breath. The pressure was suffocating me. I feared I would not survive the next few minutes, forget about the next few hours. My sneakers lay on the other side of the room in a heap. I spotted them and knew just what I needed to do—as if the sneakers were calling to me.

Sweat ran down my back and drenched my T-shirt, but that didn’t stop me. I had a stitch in my side, which made me feel like I was having an appendicitis, but that didn’t stop me. I ran until my heart felt as though it would explode, and it still didn’t stop me. I ran until I had no idea where I was anymore. That stopped me.

This wasn’t the first time I had run. Whenever the pressure was really getting to me, I would run. I picked up this habit right around the time Mr. Rick started making it a habit of messing with me. It felt good to run. Sometimes I felt as though I could outrun my problems; run so far that I ended up in a different day, a different life.

I dragged the back of my hand across my forehead to wipe the sweat away. Nothing looked familiar. An old factory, some abandoned cars and a few yards ahead, the Schuylkill River just rolled along. No people. I looked around for a McDonalds, a shopping mall, some sort of landmark to let me know where I was. I couldn’t even call Miss Angie, because I ran out without my cell phone. I laughed to myself. I didn’t even know the woman’s phone number. I had been living with Miss Angie for four months now, and I hadn’t thought to memorize the phone number.

I was lost, sweaty, tired—and even a little hungry. All the ingredients were in place for a classic meltdown, but none came. The run had done its job. It drained me of my anxiety, even if only temporarily. I let out a deep breath and started retracing my steps. I seemed to recall sprinting past a gas station a few blocks back. They had to have a phone. I could call Information and get the number to Sassy’s.

My legs felt like lead. I must have run further and longer than ever before. Now, I was paying for it. But the gas station was just ahead. As I hobbled to it, I rehearsed in my mind what I could possibly say to Miss Angie to explain how I ended up in the middle of nowhere. I wasn’t ready to talk about my mother yet. I wasn’t ready to explain why I was afraid to see my mother. I wasn’t even sure if I knew why I was so afraid.

I looked around to see what street I was on, so I could tell Miss Angie where to pick me up. Just standing there those few seconds, caused my muscles to stiffen even more, but I managed to drag myself to the gas station's mini-mart. I stuck my head inside and was immediately welcomed by the frigid, air-conditioned surroundings. I spotted a squat, bald, Black man behind the counter. I could tell by the sneer on the man's face that he was one of those adults who hated teenagers because they were teenagers. Regardless, I put on a smile and tried to work the situation.

"Um, excuse me, sir," I said, politely. "Is there a phone in here?"

"No."

I could see a yellow phone on a shelf behind the counter. Maybe he thought I meant a pay phone. "Oh. What about that phone?"

"Phone's for employees only. Now, are you buying something or what?"

"No, but I need to use the phone. I'm lost. I need to call someone to—"

"You think I'm stupid, don't ya?" He sneered.

"Huh?"

"You think I just fell off the turnip truck, yesterday." The man came from behind the counter. He had a fly swatter in his hand, and I wasn't sure if he was going to beat me with it, or swat me out the door. Instead, he tried to smack down a big fat fly on the window, while he fussed, "I know that old trick. I let you use my phone then one of your hoodlum boyfriends comes in and robs me blind. Well, I'm not the one!"

"No, sir. I'm really lost. I just need to call home and—"

"What's the number?" He studied me from the corner of his eye. Now that he was out from behind the counter, I could see the man was shorter than he originally appeared. I must have been three inches taller than he was and as I looked down at the name patch on his gray work shirt, which had the name *Reggie* stitched on it.

"I'm sorry?" I asked, after taking in the sight of this man.

"You heard me. Give me the number and I'll call."

"Uh...I don't know the number."

Still waving the fly swatter, the man laughed, pleased with himself that he had exposed me for a fraud. "I thought so. Now get outta here before I call the police..." As he spoke, he shooed me out the door.

"Yes!" I tried to tell him. "The police! Please call the police, Mr. Reggie." I wasn't a fan of the police, but at least they'd make sure I got home. "I want you to. Please call the police."

He stopped swatting and slapped a hand on hip. "Girl, what have you been smoking?"

"Nothing. I just need—"

"Toya?" A familiar voice called out from over my shoulder.

Instantly, I knew who it was. "Thank you, Jesus!" I breathed out a sigh of relief and whirled around. "Terry."

I wanted so badly to run up and hug him, but the strange look on Terry's face made me keenly aware of how odd I must have looked to him. Drenched in sweat, hair mussed all over my head, begging this cranky old man for a phone. I smoothed my hair back and said breezily, "Hey."

"What are you doing here?" asked Terry.

"Oh...well, I went for run and then I-I got lost."

"Lost?"

"Yes, lost. I'm still new to this town, Terry. Anyway, I got lost and I don't have my cell so..."

"So, you need a ride."

"Yes. And something to eat. I'm starving. And I don't have any money."

"Taco Bell, okay?" Typical Terry. Nothing ever fazed him. I could've been standing there with my hair on fire, and Terry would just say, "Hey, would you like a glass of water?" At this moment, though, I was grateful that Terry was so cool. He didn't tease me. He didn't laugh at me. If anything, his calm presence calmed me too.

We walked back to the gas pumps, and I looked for the blue Maxima, the car Terry's dad allowed him to drive. I didn't see it. I didn't see any Maxima, just a green and black Ninja motorcycle.

"Where's your car?" I asked.

"I don't need a car. I've got my baby," Terry said, patting the seat of the cycle like a proud papa. His baby was his shiny, new Kawasaki Ninja 250R, special edition lime green, metallic Diablo black, motorcycle.

I stared at it in awe. It was beautiful—no, sexy. Sexy and scary all at the same time. "This is yours?"

"Yup. I've been saving up for two years. My dad gave me the rest of the money when I quit football."

"Hold up. Your dad won't let you play football cuz it's dangerous, but he'll let you ride around in this death machine?"

"It's not a death machine if you know what you're doing. I've been riding forever." Which was true. I knew that Terry's dad was part of some Black Biker's Association. Black professionals—doctors, lawyers, judges—who, on the weekends, laid down their suits and threw on jeans and leather, pretending to be Fonzi from that old TV show Happy Days. Terry said they even had conventions and did charity events; and now he was one of them. "Look, do you want a ride or not?" He handed me his spare helmet.

I stared at it, trying to decide if I really trusted Terry enough to put my life in his hands. Before I could make up my mind, Reggie burst out of the mini-mart, waving his fly swatter in the air. "I knew it! And this must be the hoodlum boyfriend that was gonna rob me."

Terry nearly fainted. "What? I'm not a hood—"

"Don't pay him no mind, Terry. He's crazy." I hopped on the back of the cycle and slipped on the helmet. "Let's get outta here!"

Terry was a big spender. He bought me a Volcano Burrito, cheesy Nacho Supreme nachos, and a large Sprite. Then he listened for the next hour as I unloaded all of my troubles.

"I don't think you should get yourself all worked up, Toya. I'm sure your mom feels bad about going MIA for so long."

"But what if she doesn't have a good excuse? What if she comes in there and tries to lie? I can always tell when she's lying. What if she comes up with something weak, like she lost the number to the agency?"

"Honestly, does it matter?"

"Of course it matters."

"No, it doesn't. Whatever her reason, it won't be good enough. There is no good excuse for a mother to stay from her child for so long. And if you go in there expecting her to come up with something good, you're just going to end up disappointed."

I didn't say anything. I munched on my burrito and listened, allowing Terry's words to sink in.

"You want my advice?" There was no answer from me, so Terry took that as a yes. "You keep talking about how you're starting over with a clean slate—"

"I'm not ready to give my mom a clean slate, Terry!" I exploded.

Terry's tone was calm. "I didn't say you should. I'm just saying, look at this as a chance for *you* to have clean slate with your mom."

"I just said I'm not giving my mom—"

"That's not what I'm saying." He snapped. "Will you just listen to what I'm saying?"

"I am listening. You're not making any sense."

"I always make sense. You're just not understanding me."

"Well, then say it so I do understand, Professor."

Terry laced his fingers behind his head and propped his size fourteen feet on the seat right next to me. His words were slow and measured, like teaching multiplication to a first grader. "You're starting over, right? New attitude. New way of doing things?"

"Uh huh."

"And it's working, right?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes. Depends on what day of the week it is"

"Why don't you try something new with your mother? I mean, what do you normally do when your mom messes up?"

"I don't know. Ignore her."

He added, "Stop talking to her until you feel like she's suffered enough. Doesn't really work though, does it?"

"She cusses me out. And if that doesn't work, she cries until I feel guilty."

"Seriously? She cries?"

I could tell that Terry hadn't encountered many women like Tamika—though his mother hadn't sounded like a day at the beach either when I talked to her on the phone that night. "Not all the time. She cried one time—Okay, a few times."

"Fine. So, why don't you try something new with your mom? Instead of ignoring her and not talking to her, why not try being nice?"

"Nice? Terry, if this is more of that Sunday School BS, I swear I'm gonna throw up!"

"This isn't Sunday school, it's reality. Your mom is expecting you to show up pissed. What would happen if, instead of giving her attitude, you gave her a hug?"

As soon as those words left his mouth, I started scooping my napkins and my emptied burrito wrappers onto my tray. I dumped the whole tray in the trash and walked out.

Terry caught up to me, sitting on the back of his motorcycle. "You didn't have to walk out. You could've just told me to shut up."

"I didn't want to be rude. I mean, you did buy me food." I smiled at him. He smiled back. An instant passed, and I tore my eyes away from his. I handed the helmet to him. "Do I have to wear this? It's messing up my hair."

Terry handed the helmet back. "You should see how messed up your hair gets when your brains get splattered all over the highway."

"Not with you driving. I'll be safe." Though the cycle was sleek and looked like it could go well past 100 miles an hour, Terry drove it like an old lady. I could have run home faster than Terry drove. Not that I minded. The slower he drove, the longer I got the chance to cling to him on the back of that motorcycle.

"Still can't believe you ran all the way to the river," Terry said.

"I couldn't help it. I always run when I'm stressed."

"Yeah? I clean when I'm stressed."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" I mumbled.

Terry was too lost in thought to hear me. "But still...To the river? That's like four miles. You should run track."

"Track? I don't think so. I've got enough on my plate just trying to keep my slate clean."

"If you ran track, you could get a scholarship."

"A scholarship. You mean for college?"

"No, a scholarship for Taco Bell. Of course, college. Aren't you going to college?"

The tone of Terry's question showed me that he grew up in a home where it was just assumed that college was in everyone's future. I hadn't even thought about college. I was too busy worrying about where I was going to live from month to month to even think about what I was going to do two years from now when I graduated—if I graduated. My mother never

graduated high school. She had me instead. When I was old enough to go to school, Tamika got her GED then went to school to be a dental hygienist. She had worked for about six months when she met Mr. Rick, and the rest was history.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about going to college? We graduate next year, Toya!”

“Don’t you think I know that? It’s just, I’ve had a lot on my mind the past few years.”

He nodded. “You gotta point there. Well, you’d better start thinking. Graduation will be here before you know it.”

“Well, you’d better start driving or we won’t make it home in time to see it,” I teased.

Terry started to climb on his cycle and stopped, his leg dangling in the air. “Wait. Are you trying to say I drive too slow?”

“Safe. You drive safe.” I slipped on my helmet before Terry could see me laugh. He looked at me skeptically, then gunned the engine. Like a bullet firing from a gun, the cycle shot out of the parking space.

I screamed and latched on to Terry for dear life. “Okay. Okay!!! You don’t drive too slow. Now, slow down!”

Satisfied that he had proven his point, Terry slowed down to his normal, grandmom speed. My heart rate also slowed down to a grandmom speed. The rest of the ride was calm and steady, though I still clung to Terry tightly. I was no longer holding on for dear life, but for comfort. I closed my eyes. I felt safe with Terry. Like he would always be there for me when I needed him, just as he was today. I wanted to hold onto him forever. He was a teddy bear, a security blanket, my rock. When the motorcycle pulled in front of my house, I hadn’t even noticed. He let me hold on a moment longer before saying, “We’re here.”

I slowly released him. “Thanks, again.”

“No problem. I’ll just be glad when you get your license, so I don’t have to keep driving you around.”

“I’ll learn to drive when you teach me.”

“It’s not enough that I’m teaching you geometry? I have to teach you how to drive too?”

“Hey, I’m the one teaching you how to use your cell phone,” I fired back, as I climbed off the bike. “And if you ever want to learn how to shoot movies on that thing like M. Night Shyamalan, you’d better be nice to me.”

Terry walked me up the driveway. “Hey. I just spent eight bucks on you in Taco Bell. I’d call that very nice.”

“You’re right.” I gave him a big hug. He squeezed back. I stepped back and looked at him. For a second, I thought I saw something in his eyes. A flicker, as though he had just seen something in me. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Oh. No reason,” he said. The moment passed, and the flicker was gone. He looked off past me toward his bike. He was about to leave.

I wasn’t ready for him to go yet. “Hey, you never said...what were you doing out by the river, today?”

“Huh? Oh, uh. I was coming from Mercedes’ house.”

That sucked the wind right out of my sails. “Oh,” I said. “You had a date this early?”

“Um...no” Terry was fidgeting, stuffing his hands in his pockets and then taking them out again. “I stopped by to take her for a ride on my new bike.”

I could picture Mercedes on the back of the bike, her arms locked around Terry’s waist, no helmet on, her cropped hair flowing in the breeze. If Mercedes fell off the bike, her brains wouldn’t spatter all over the highway. Nope, daisies and pixie dust would spill out of her head. I could feel hate rising up in me again. I forced it back down.

“Does she like the bike?” I said, pleasantly.

“I wouldn’t know. She wasn’t feeling well, so I couldn’t stay.”

“Oh.” I did the math in my head: Mercedes was sick + Mercedes didn’t ride on Terry’s motorcycle + I *did* ride on the motorcycle = I was the first girl to ride on the back of Terry’s motorcycle, not Mercedes. Suddenly a mighty whoosh came over me. The wind flooded my sails all over again. I giggled to myself.

“Why are you laughing?” Terry asked.

“Oh. No reason.”

CHAPTER 12

Children First, the child welfare agency responsible for my care, was located in a three-story Victorian-style home now converted into an office building. Upon entering, one was immediately greeted by a giant mural: A family sitting by the lake enjoying a picnic. Warm and sunny with vivid yellows, blues, pinks, and oranges, the mural was designed to put any anxious family member at ease. Its images of rainbows, sailboats and children of all shades, flying kites of all colors, sent the message that the agency was fun, free, and open to all. The painted butterflies fluttered about cheerfully—not at all like the butterflies in my stomach. My butterflies were miserable. Pushing, shoving, and clashing about in my belly like my own personal mosh pit.

Miss Angie dropped me off five minutes ago. She offered to come in and wait with me, but I said no. I needed some time alone to get my thoughts together. I stood on the top step, watching the silver Infiniti reach the end of the driveway, turn right and disappear from sight. The appointment was for 2:00, which, for my mother, meant 2:25. And I would need every bit of that extra time to calm my nerves. Yet, as soon as I finished signing in at the front desk, Miss Meagan rushed up to me with file folders toppling out of her hands. “She’s here.”

Tamika Young sat in the family room of Children First, flipping through an outdated issue of *Good Housekeeping Magazine*. Her hair was slicked back into a long, silky ponytail that reached down the center of her back. With her big, silver hoop earrings and shiny pink lip gloss, Tamika looked like she could be my big sister. But there was a tiredness in her eyes that aged her. Tired eyes that had seen too much and cried too long. She must have felt me staring at her because she looked up, suddenly.

"There's my baby girl!" Tamika shouted, jumping up with her arms wide open. There was a jingling sound that accompanied all this motion because she wore so much jewelry.

I just stood there clutching my arm with my feet glued to the floor. My mouth wouldn't open.

Tamika poked out her bottom lip and pouted, "I don't get a hug or nothing?"

I managed to lift my fingers and give a little wave. "Hi," I said, weakly.

"Hi? Is that all I get?"

Silence.

I didn't know what to say. On the way to the agency, I rehearsed in my mind a thousand ways to cuss out my mother. Standing there, face to face, I was torn between running out the door and running into her arms and crying, "*Mommy, I missed you so much! Please take me with you!*" Neither response seemed appropriate for the moment, so I just stood there frozen.

Miss Meagan tried to help out. "Uh...Tamika, we did discuss this on the phone. It may not be easy for Toya to open herself up to you since you—"

It was as if Miss Meagan wasn't even standing there. Tamika walked right by her and stood inches from me, reaching up and stroking my face. "Aw, Tee-Tee, I know we got a lot to talk about, but I can't start without getting some honey."

She had done it. She hit me with the double-whammy: First, she called me "Tee-Tee," which was her pet name for me; and then she asked for some "honey," which was the word she used when she wanted some affection. I could feel myself losing my grip on my anger. The little girl who wanted her mommy was begging to come out. "*Try something new,*" I heard Terry say. Be the bigger woman. The one who forgives, not punishes. The one who keeps an open heart, not a closed mind. I looked up into my mother's tired eyes and let go.

I took one step towards my mother and Tamika took care of the rest. She threw her arms around me, her little girl, and smothered me with kisses. I clung to her, wanting to cry, but no tears came. Instead, my body shuddered, as if boiling with emotion: love, hurt, joy, rage, hope, fear. I didn't need to cry. Miss Meagan did enough crying for the whole room.

"Well, I'll just let you two get reacquainted," Miss Meagan said, though apparently, no one was listening. "Don't mind me." She slinked back into a rocking chair in the far corner of the room. Because Tamika had gone so long without visiting, this visit needed to be supervised. This meant a social worker had to be in the room, observing and later reporting back to the judge. Just because it was supervised didn't mean that Miss Meagan had to be a part of the visit. She sat in the back, blending into the background, filling out her paperwork but keeping her ears open for any signs of trouble.

After a minute or two, we finally released each other. Tamika studied my

face. She ran her hand down my hair. "Your hair looks good."

"Yeah. My foster mom has her own salon. She's always hooking me up."

Tamika didn't like the sound of that at all, though she smiled politely and said, "Oh. How you like it over there? They ain't mean to you, are they?"

"No. Miss Angie's cool."

Tamika shook her head. "Uh uh. She may be a lot of things, but she ain't cool. None of them foster parents are. Why you think you've been moved around so many times? They're only in it for the money."

"Not all of them. Miss Angie's got her own business."

"*Miss Angie's got her business,*" Tamika said, mimicking me, then snorted, "Man! She's really got a fan in you. But don't get it twisted, she may not be in it for the money, but she's in it for something. People don't want to take care of their *own* kids, let alone take care of somebody else's." By the way I rolled my eyes, Tamika could tell she said too much. She ran her fingers through my hair again. "Well, the woman does lay a mean perm. So, she must not be all bad."

I jerked my head back, freeing my head from Tamika's hand. I looked over at Miss Meagan, who was working really hard at looking busy.

"Hey! I brought you a present." Tamika clapped her hands and danced over to a blue gift bag on the couch. She plopped down and gestured for me to come on over. I did so, sitting far away on the other end of the couch. Tamika rolled her eyes and slid down beside me. From the gift bag, she pulled a brown, leather-bound photo album with the word "Family" engraved on the cover.

"I took these pictures at the family reunion this summer," she announced with pride.

I pulled back the cover and was met with a wave of memories. A flood of familiar faces. Cousin Paul, sixteen years old, weighing 300 pounds, waving a drumstick in each hand, a big greasy grin on his face. On the next page, Aunt Junie and Uncle Joe, hugging each other with love in their eyes—two hours and twelve beers later, they would be cussing and pulling knives on each other. They did that every year. Cousins Rob, Pete, Hakeem and Johnny, sitting at the card table playing a game of 2500 and smoking stinky cigars. The beautiful Aunt Lisa, in halter top and booty shorts, sitting on some guy's lap—must've been the new boyfriend of the month. There was Uncle Lonnie, dressed up as usual in a crisp, white linen suit. A group shot of all the girls doing the Electric Slide. My mind was swimming with the music of laughter set to a hip hop beat. Next page, manning the grill was Uncle Dexter. He wasn't really my uncle. He was just a friend of the family who had been around so long, we just adopted him.

On the last page was Grandma. Jean Young. She was sitting under a tree, cooling herself in the shade. My heart sank. It had been so long since I heard her voice or the hard cackle that was her laugh, inhaled her scent, Chanel #5.

Granny Jean had on her outdoor wig. The short, curly one that didn't get too hot in the sun. She wore lime green capris and a matching green and white striped tank top that showed off the flabby arms that used to bear-hug me and made me feel all warm and snug.

"We missed you out there that day," Tamika said.

As if I chose not to be there. I slammed the book shut and handed it back to her.

"I made another one for you of Aunt Lisa's wedding," she said.

"Aunt Lisa got married?" I gasped. So that wasn't the boyfriend of the month! It was her husband. Lisa once told me that she was never getting married. "Ruins all the fun." I would have loved to have been there. Lisa was my mom's younger sister. She and I had been very close. If I hadn't been in foster care, I might have been in the wedding. I would have bought a pretty dress and watched my favorite auntie come down the aisle, looking like a princess.

"Yeah, this past June. It was a nice wedding. I took a bunch of pictures." Tamika reached down in the bag for the other album. "I've been thinking about getting into photography..."

When Tamika bent down, her sweater slid off her shoulder, revealing a chubby little angel tattoo.

"You got another tattoo?" I said. It wasn't really a question as much as it was an accusation.

Reflexively, Tamika's hand touched the tattoo. "Oh...uh huh. You like it? Maybe we can get you one. You're old enough now." Tamika was so breezy, completely unaware that her words were making me mad. She had time to get tattoos. Time to go to weddings and reunions. Time to "get into photography." But she didn't have time to visit her only child?

"Here we go." Tamika fished out the wedding album and handed it to me. I didn't take it.

"What happened to you?" I finally asked.

"What do you mean, what—"

"You know what I mean, Ma. Where have you been?"

Tamika's mouth hung open, as if completely caught off guard by the question. She had to have known I was going to ask. Didn't she bother to make up some excuse or something? Instead, she sighed, "Tee-Tee, we've only got an hour. Why you wanna waste our time talking about—"

"Because I need to know. How come you've got time to get tattoos, but you can't come and see—"

Tamika rested her head in her hands. "Because...It just...got too...hard." She turned to look at me. "I hope you never end up in a situation like this, Tee. Having to make an appointment to see your little girl. Spending time with you, knowing that every word I say, every time I touch you, it's being written down by some stranger." She cut her eyes back at Miss Meagan then

lowered her voice. "I couldn't take it anymore. And I was so angry. Angry at you. Angry at the system. Angry with myself for letting all this happen to us.

I slumped back on the couch, crossing my arms over my stomach, as if it would block Tamika's words. This was not the explanation I wanted to hear. I didn't know what excuse would have been acceptable to explain my mother's absence, but this wasn't it. "So, why did you come back?" I asked.

Tamika reached out and grabbed one of my hands. "Because I missed you, baby." The earnestness in Tamika's eyes met the sadness in mine. "I miss talking about boys and getting our pedicures and watching movies together. Didn't you miss me too, Tee-Tee?"

I yanked my hand away. "I'm not the one who stayed away."

"I just said it was a mistake—"

"No, you didn't!"

"Well, I'm saying it now! I messed up, okay? I was angry and confused, and I let it get the best of me. I regretted it right away, Toya. I swear. But by then, I was afraid you'd hate me, and I couldn't deal with that, so I stayed away. I stayed away until it literally made me sick with sadness." Tears trickled down her face. Between sobs, Tamika forced out the words, "Finally, I said: 'It's now or never, Mika. Either you go and make things right between you and Toya or lose her forever.'" She shrugged her shoulders. "So, here I am."

The room fell silent, except for the ticking of the clock on the wall. Only 38 minutes left in this visit. I got what I wanted, an explanation. Like it or not—and I was definitely not liking her explanation. Now what? I could simply turn around and tell Miss Meagan I was ready to go, and the visit would be over. In fact, I could feel Miss Meagan's eyes on me right now, waiting for my next move.

Tamika grabbed a couple of tissues from the box on the coffee table. She sniffled and whimpered quietly to herself. I hated to see her cry. The woman had been hurt enough in her lifetime. Besides, she did deserve some credit for coming all the way out there and bearing her soul like this. The old me would have taken advantage of this situation. Milked it for all it was worth—maybe even got a new cell phone or a shopping spree out of it. The new me slid my arm around my mother's shoulder and squeezed her tight. "So...who caught the bouquet?"

Tamika's puffy eyes look at me, quizzically.

"At the wedding? Who caught the bouquet? Please don't say it was Aunt Liz again."

A smile burst on Tamika's face, lighting her up like the sun. "Girl, you know she did! Knocked three bridesmaids to the ground just to get it."

"No, she didn't!"

"Yes, she did!" Tamika howled. "I got the pictures to prove it too." She picked up the photo album and flipped right to the page where I could see a 4'11,"Aunt Liz, shove a 5' 10" woman in a peach bridesmaid dress who had

the bouquet just inches from her grasp. The next photo, the bridesmaid toppled over awkwardly. Next photo, the bridesmaid lay splattered on the dance floor with Aunt Liz standing over her, holding the bouquet triumphantly in the air. I squealed, taking in all the photos, then roared with laughter.

For the next thirty-eight minutes, me and my mom rocked back and forth, pointing, teasing, snickering at wedding pictures, then sharing neighborhood gossip, then childhood memories. And not once was the name Mr. Rick spoken by either one of us.

Tamika gave me one last hug, then one last kiss. We agreed to have another visit next month and see how things went from there. Taking it real slow. I watched Tamika and Miss Meagan disappear around the corner toward the parking lot. Across the street, Miss Angie tooted her horn. I waved at her, then floated to the car.

“How’d it go?” Miss Angie asked, as I fastened my seat belt—though the satisfied grin on my face must have said it all.

“It was okay,” trying not to sound too excited. But I clutched those photo albums like some ancient, royal treasure. In my mind, I replayed every word my mother said to me today. I smiled to myself, remembering her jokes. It really was a great visit.

We reached the corner. A red light. A black Escalade had the green light and passed by. Tamika was in the passenger seat, still dabbing tears from her eyes. The driver was Mr. Rick. My heart sank into the acid in the pit of my stomach. I slumped down in my seat, praying I could disappear before he spotted me.

CHAPTER 13

“Toya!!!” That voice again. It surged from the laundry room, up the stairs, down the hallway, and right through my spine like an electric current. It was just as well, really. For the past two days, since visiting with my mom, I did not do much more than lay around in a funk. Every time I thought about the hour I spent with her, my spirit soared. Only to be yanked back to the earth by the image of Mr. Rick behind the steering wheel of that Escalade.

From a distance, he looked okay—not at all like the child molester that he was. Always dressed in jeans, buttoned down shirts with designer labels and cowboy boots—a fashion statement he picked from his days of living in Oklahoma. A short-cropped haircut, goatee, and wouldn’t be caught dead without a manicure. He was a compact, stocky man, not much taller than me; and he seemed to walk with his shoulders slanted on an angle.

When I first met Mr. Rick, I thought he was the greatest thing since gummy bears. That was because my mother thought he was the greatest thing since gummy bears. Nice house, fancy car, always bought me the big tub of popcorn when we went to the movies. The other men Tamika dated—the ones who actually took her out on dates—were the kind that made Tamika bring her biggest pocketbook, so they could stock up on snacks at the dollar store before going to the movie. Mr. Rick owned his own business, an auto detailing shop that painted cars or tricked them out with racing stripes, spinning hub caps, and giant speakers that barely fit in the trunk. He always had money. And Tamika was always glad to spend it.

I refused to believe that this was the reason my mom was so loyal to him. It couldn’t have been as simple as financial security. My mother would never sell me out for a couple of Coach bags and a platinum Visa card. Tamika was just blind. Blinded by the love of the first man who ever treated her halfway decently. She believed him when he said that the whole “molestation” incident was an innocent mistake. That he got drunk that night and mistook

me for her. She believed him when he said it only happened that one time. She also believed I made up the other incidents for attention, because I was jealous that I had to share Tamika's attention with Rick now. After all, my behavior had been so out of control since Mr. Rick came on the scene. There were more attitudes, more fights, more phone calls home from teachers. This must've been a cry for attention. It couldn't be the cries of a young girl being traumatized on a regular basis.

"Get down here now!" Miss Angie barked, so I bolted down the stairs. I hadn't heard that tone from Miss Angie in weeks. I scurried to the back of the house and into the laundry room, where Miss Angie stood with a hand on one hip. There was something shiny in the other hand.

"Yes?" I said, with extreme caution.

Miss Angie waved the gold, shiny thing in my face and said, "I found something of yours in the laundry." Her tone was restrained, like she was trying hard not to explode on me.

The shiny object was actually a wrapper. I took it out of her hand and immediately knew what it was. "It's... a... condom wrapper?"

"Well, I'm glad you can read cuz you sure don't listen." Miss Angie snatched the wrapper back, crumpled it in her hand then fired it in the trash.

"Miss Angie, that's not—"

"Listen, I'm glad to see you're practicing safe sex, but we talked about this. I know I made my rule on this one very clear. Didn't I? *Didn't I?*

"Yeah!" There was a hint of an attitude in my voice, which Miss Angie stamped on right away.

"Don't get an attitude with me, young lady. You're the one who broke the rules, not me."

I twisted up my mouth and shifted my eyes away from hers. I didn't mean to have an attitude. It was just that I knew there was no point in arguing. Just ride out the lecture and suck up the punishment. Two minutes into the lecture, I wasn't even listening anymore. I tuned back in when Miss Angie announced, "You're grounded. Two weeks. You come straight home after school, no cell phone and no TV." No TV? What did she expect me to do? Sit at home and read the Bible all night?

I didn't argue. I sulked back up the stairs, closed my door and waited. This was not over. I just needed time to regroup.

Half an hour later, Chelsea floated into the house. The Student Council meeting ran a little late, because there was a heated debate over what the freshman class community service project would be. The council was torn between a canned food drive and a neighborhood clean-up project. As Chelsea hated to clean, she voted for the food drive, and she was willing to fight to the death for her choice. Luckily, her death was not necessary, though she did make a couple of girls on the opposing side cry. All of that yelling and debating had made her throat dry. As soon as Chelsea got home, she headed

right for the fridge and snagged a bottle of water.

She thudded downstairs to the salon and hugged her mom, then gave her the blow-by-blow of the drama at the council meeting. She could tell her mom really wasn't in the mood for a long, drawn-out story, so she cut it short. She assumed I must have done something to make her mad. *Oh well.* Chelsea clomped up the steps and into my room.

I wasn't there.

Chelsea burst through her own bedroom door, flicked on the light, and threw her book bag on the bed. She was about to take off her shirt and change into a T-shirt when she saw me—sitting in a chair in the corner of her room—steaming.

"Toya!" she shrieked. "What are you doing in here?"

I replied coolly, "I figured, if I'm going to take your punishment, I might as well take your room too."

"What?"

"Your mom found an empty condom wrapper in the laundry today."

"Eww!" Chelsea cringed. "Is that why she's all worked up? A condom in the laundry. Was it yours?"

"Hell no, it wasn't mine!" I jumped to my feet and closed in on Chelsea. "We both know it's not your moms. So that just leaves you."

A halo suddenly sprouted over Chelsea's head. "Me? I-I—"

"Drop the Little Miss Innocent Act. I've seen the way you and Alonzo are always rubbing all over each other. You were practically having sex in the cafeteria—"

Chelsea's hand suddenly flew over my mouth. "Okay, okay...shh! Mommy might hear you."

"I want Mommy to hear me!" I yelled. "I got grounded for two weeks over you and your boyfriend's little freak show."

"Two weeks? That sucks."

"I know! Especially when I'm not even having sex!"

Chelsea sank onto her bed, suddenly realizing that she had dragged me into her mess. "So, you want me to tell her the truth?"

"Have you ever been grounded for two weeks before?"

"No."

"I know you haven't. That amount of time would eat a rookie like you alive. I can do two weeks standing on my head."

"You'd do that for me?" Chelsea gasped. "Thanks Toy—wait! What do you want in return?"

"I want you and Alonzo to stop having sex."

"What? Why?"

"Because Miss Angie's right. You don't have no business having sex at your age."

"You've done it."

"I also did a video of me taking off my clothes on the internet. You want to do that too?"

"No!" Chelsea shuddered, remembering how she cried when she learned about that video. She hated the way the other kids, especially the boys, were talking about me. Calling me "ho" and "skank" and "slut." They didn't know me. They didn't care how nice of a person I was. Chelsea even broke up with Alonzo for a week because he was making fun of me. Then he bought her a stuffed dolphin. She forgave him.

"Use your head, Chelsea! You've got a bright future ahead of you," I said, realizing I sounded a little too much like Miss Angie, but that didn't stop me. "And your dream of becoming a Marine Biologist? What if you got pregnant? Are you prepared to raise a baby at thirteen?"

Chelsea sat there staring straight ahead. Her mouth was silent, but her eyes revealed a raging debate in her mind. A moment passed before she finally said the words, "I think I might be pregnant."

My jaw nearly hit the floor. "Chelsea! Are you sure?"

She stared at her feet, dangling off the edge of her bed. "No. But I'm late. And lately I've been really nauseous." She rested her hand over her stomach.

Instantly, the image of Chelsea with a beach ball-sized belly waddling down the hall to Wood Shop class, flashed before my eyes. "You have to take a pregnancy test."

Chelsea nodded, tears brimming in her eyes. "I will. But not just yet, okay?" She knew that the sooner she found out, the sooner her life would change. She would no longer be playing with her dolls. She would have her own, real-life doll to play with. The kind of doll she couldn't shove in the closet when she got bored with it. The longer Chelsea put off knowing the truth, the longer she would be able to stay a kid. And right now, she really, really wanted to be a kid.

* * * * *

I took my time walking home from school today. Day 8 of my two-week punishment. It was a lonely walk. Since I had to go straight home after school, I didn't have anyone to walk with. Terry didn't have football anymore, so he joined the Drama club. Emily had Advanced Chorus. Chelsea had Student Council. I had nothing. Waiting for me at home would be homework. That, and the pamphlets Miss Angie started leaving on my pillow: *Celibacy and Me, I'm Worth the Wait, Top 10 Things I'd Rather Be Doing than Being Pregnant, Public Enemy #1: Venereal Disease*. There was a different one every day.

The other thing I had to look forward to was a little treat from Chelsea. The girl felt so guilty for getting me put on punishment, she'd do just about anything to make me happy. Every day she brought something home for me: a pack of Oreo cookies—my fav, an Essence Magazine, a bottle of nail polish.

When she couldn't think of anything else, she would just give me cash. One day, I caught Chelsea trying to clean my room. I shooed her away, because if Miss Angie saw that she would've known something was up.

Three blocks from home, I turned down the narrow road that separated a group of backyards. The trash trucks mostly used this road, and it always stank like garbage. But it was the fastest shortcut home, so I always went this way—though lately I hadn't been in too much of a hurry to get home. This time, though, I had a creepy feeling as I walked this road. Something didn't feel right. As if the Grim Reaper himself was lurking in the shadows behind me. A low grumble followed me. Like a lion stalking its prey. The hairs on the back of my neck were actually tingling.

I looked over my shoulder and couldn't believe my eyes. I must have been hallucinating. A shiny black Escalade was trailing slowly behind me. I locked my eyes straight ahead and quickened my steps. I didn't want to believe it. I refused to believe it. I could hear my heart pounding in my chest. It was overtaken by the roar of the engine as it accelerated, slightly, and the whirl of car window gliding down. Then I heard the voice.

"What's up, girl?" That southern drawl so far up north, could only belong to one person.

I kept walking.

"Sorry I didn't get to holler at you down at the agency. But you know how it is." Mr. Rick chuckled. It sent chills down my spine. I kept on walking, refusing to look at him.

"It sure was good to see you, though," he continued, allowing the SUV to roll alongside me. "Mmm! Man, you lookin' good, girl! Getting curves in all the right places. Make me wanna pull over and—"

"Leave me alone." The words sounded strong in my head, but so weak and trembling coming out of my mouth.

"Just trying to be polite." One arm was hanging out the driver's side window while the other arm guided the steering wheel. His arm was so long, I thought he could just reach out and grab me. "I mean, here I am just driving along minding my own business, and I see this sexy little honey walking down the street. I just had to say hey."

I kept walking, though my legs were starting to turn to stone and my eyes were getting blurry. It seemed as if the whole town was deserted. I hadn't seen a car drive by or another kid walking home from school for a while. It was just me and the monster.

"So, you're not going to talk to me?"

Ignore him.

"Oh, you gonna be mean to me?"

Be calm. Just keep walking. Just keep walking. He can't hurt you.

"You used to be nice. You used to be real nice to—"

I bolted. No longer able to stand the sound of his voice one more second.

I didn't run down the street. I ran across the nearest yard, into the backyard, leapt over a fence and into another backyard. Then another backyard. And another. A dog barked at me fiercely. I could hear his paws scrambling in my direction, but I wasn't in that yard long enough for him to sink his teeth into me."

"Get outta there!" an old lady yelled from her back porch. I couldn't tell whose backyard I was in. I was caught up in a blur of high fences, bushes, and strange dogs. Just when I thought I was completely lost, I saw something familiar. An old, worn-out jungle gym that hadn't been used for years, and once belonged to Chelsea. I was home. Panting hard, my legs were scraped from climbing fences, but I kicked it into another gear and raced through the back door.

From between the blinds in my bedroom window, I stared at the street. No sign of the black SUV. There was no way Mr. Rick could have followed me. His ride may have been tricked out, but it did not have the ability to fly, and that's what it would have needed to do in order to keep up with me through the maze of backyards. When I was sure I was safe, I exhaled. My rattled heart was finally starting to calm down, though my stomach suddenly made a retching sensation. Somehow, I found the strength to run one more time, as I sprinted to the bathroom and threw up.

I didn't sleep that night. I told Miss Angie that I wasn't feeling well, so I was able to skip dinner and stayed holed up in my room for the rest of the night. I needed time to think. Mr. Rick violated his restraining order, but it wasn't as simple as picking up the phone and calling the police. No one had seen this violation. Once again, it would be my word against his—and I already knew how that battle would work out. On top of all that, the visit with my mother went so well. The next one was already scheduled. If I opened my mouth, I probably would never see Tamika again. So that was the price. The cost of seeing my mom, of having a relationship with my mom, would be putting up with Mr. Rick again.

My stomach growled. I rolled over and looked at her clock: 3:47 am. I tipped downstairs and into the kitchen. In the fridge, a big bottle of ginger ale stared back at me. Miss Angie bought it for me. That was the woman's remedy for every illness: "get yourself a glass of ginger ale."

I wasn't interested in any ginger ale. I was interested in comfort. I pushed the large green bottle aside and grabbed the carton of milk. After pouring myself a tall, cold glass, I scooped up a handful of Oreo cookies. After dipping the Oreo inside the glass until it absorbed its share of milk, I held the cookie to my mouth and sucked the milk out of it. Savoring the feeling of the cookie as it turned all soft and mushy in my mouth. Ah! The chocolaty goodness! Nothing like a cold glass of milk and an Oreo cookie to chase the blues away.

CHAPTER 14

Enough was enough. All this time, I thought it was best to keep my mouth shut about Mr. Rick stalking me, but things were starting to get out of hand. I saw him four more times since that first encounter. Thankfully, my punishment had ended three days ago, so I was now able hang around after school and wait for somebody to walk me home. If Terry wasn't somewhere sniffing around Mercedes, I would hitch a ride with him. One day, I even sat in on a Student Council meeting just so I could walk home with Chelsea. I didn't know what was scarier, the thought of being chased home by Mr. Rick or being stuck in a room for two hours with a dozen eggheads talking about class elections.

It wasn't actually seeing Mr. Rick that was torturing me, it was all the times I thought I saw him. I had to move my seat away from the window in history class, because every time I looked over there, I thought I saw him across the street. Was he lurking in the bushes when we were outside running laps during gym class? I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't concentrate in school. Day by day, I was slowly losing my mind. Enough!

As I walked down the hallway of Children First and into the family room, I rehearsed what I was going to say to my mother: "He's at it again, Ma. Mr. Rick has been following me around like a serial killer." Tamika, of course, would not believe me and would probably storm out of the building. It would hurt, but I convinced myself that I would be okay. I had gone so long without my mother, sadly, I was used to it. Without my mother or with my mother and Mr. Rick, either way I was going to be stressed out. Better to be stressed and not have to worry about fighting him off again.

I entered the Family Room and half expected to see Mr. Rick sitting there, with his arm draped over my mother's shoulder, his feet propped up on the coffee table, saying, "What's up, gurl?" He wasn't there. Just Tamika, sitting on the couch, hands folded, anxiously waiting for me to arrive. Miss Meagan

took her usual seat in the shadows of the room. I hugged my mom and sat down beside her, still rehearsing the words I needed to say.

Before I could say anything, Tamika blurted out, "I've got a surprise for you, Tee."

She made me close my eyes. When I opened my eyes again, Tamika had a big grin on her face and both hands behind her back, hiding something. "Guess what I've got," she sang.

There was too much on my mind to play games with her. "Huh? I don't know, Ma. Can't you just tell me?"

"Now, where's the fun in that? Come on. Guess."

I took a deep breath and thought really hard. It wasn't working. Every time I tried to imagine what was in her hand, my mind would trail off to other worries. I must have sat there for five minutes with this constipated look on my face, when Tamika finally said, "All right fine. If you're not even going to try..."

She whipped out a brand-new deck of cards on the table. I strained out a smile. I knew my mother was trying hard to make this work and I really appreciated it. "Thanks, Ma."

"Your social worker said it's a good idea for me to plan activities for us to do during our visits. And I know how much you love cards."

She was right. Really, I loved playing cards with my mom. It always brought me back to the days when it was just the two of us. Sometimes, when money was tight and the cable was out, Tamika would whip out the cards and we would play for hours: Go Fish, Old Maid, Concentration, and I Declare War. Then when I got older, it was Blackjack, Rummy and the cut-throat game of Poker. Tamika never took it easy on me. She played me just as tough as if she were playing a room full of sailors, which made me a better player.

As always, we'd have deep conversations. Something about playing cards that always made Tamika want to open up about her childhood. She learned how to play from her father, my grandfather, Rodney. The man we call "Pop-Pop" now is not my grandfather. He's Granny Jean's third husband, and the one everyone came to see as the man of the house. I never met Rodney, but apparently, he was always the life of the party. Big laugh, big gambler, big-time drinker—which proved to be too much for his liver and led to his death the year before I was born.

"You don't have to pretend you like my surprise, Toya." Tamika knew me well enough to know the fake smile when she saw it.

"No. I love it, Ma. Really. It's just...I'm not feeling too good today," I said, resting my hand on my stomach.

"Aw, poor baby. What's that foster mother been feeding you?" Tamika said this a little louder then cut her eyes back at Miss Meagan to make sure she wrote this offense down against my foster mother in her notes.

"I'm okay," I said, taking the cards from her mother's hand. "Well, enough

to whoop your behind a few times.” I slid the cards out of the box and fanned them, shuffling them like a seasoned casino dealer.

“Hit me!” Tamika demanded. I slapped a card down on top of the ten of spades and five of diamonds that was already showing. Seven of clubs.

“Ouch!” Tamika groaned. “Why you wanna do your mama like that? I’m the one who brought you into this world and this is how you treat me.”

I laughed. “Hey, you’re the one who always said take no prisoners?” That was four games in a row I had beaten Tamika at Blackjack, but she kept coming back for more.

Tamika made her wrist snap as she dealt the cards. She said, “My pops used to let me win all the time. When we first started playing, we used to bet M&M’s or bubble gum, pretzel sticks. But then when we started playing for pennies he used to mop up the floor with me. I was only six years old, and I’d say: ‘Daddy! How come you stop letting me win?’ And then he’d take that old stankin’ cigar out of his mouth and say: ‘Babygirl, let that be a lesson to ya: Never let somebody get between you and your money.’ And I never have.”

Tamika’s face always softened when she talked about her “daddy.” Suddenly, I felt an overwhelming wave of love for my mother washing over me. How could I even think of spoiling this moment with talk of Mr. Rick? But when I looked into Tamika’s eyes, she was giving the same look of love right back. In that moment, I saw unconditional love. Reassurance that no matter what, Tamika would always be my mother. Nothing would ever really keep us apart. Maybe Tamika was working on her own clean slate. Maybe this time would be different. The gleam in my mom’s eyes seemed to be encouraging me to take a chance. I took a deep breath and said, “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Tamika grabbed my hand and said, “There’s something I need to tell you too.” The gesture caught me momentarily off guard. She pleaded, “Oh let me go first, please? I’ve been dying to tell you.”

“Okay. You go.”

“Good.” She looked down at her shoes as if they held the words she was looking for. “I lied to you, Toya.”

“About what?”

“The reason I wanted to see you. Well, it wasn’t really a lie. I missed you—I was definitely missing you, but there was something else.”

“What?” *Please don’t say you’re engaged to Mr. Rick. Please don’t say you’re engaged to Mr. Rick.* The words echoed in my head, until silenced by the words...

“I’m pregnant,” Tamika said then squealed with excitement. She threw her arms around me. “Oh, I wanted to tell you, but I wanted to make sure we had one good visit in before I sprung this news on you.”

“Ma, are you sure?”

“Yes! Three months along. Heard the heartbeat and everything.” She

hugged me again and then studied my stunned face. “Blew your mind, didn’t it? Imagine how shocked me and Rick was when we found out. But it’s true. Ha! You always wanted to be a big sister and now here’s your chance. Isn’t that great news?”

I looked over at Miss Meagan, whose jaw was hanging wide open. I looked back at my mother. Tamika’s eyes were so eager, as if they would just shatter if I said anything but yes, so I played along. “Yes. I’m happy for you.”

* * * * *

Getting dressed for church the next morning, I could still hear my mom’s shrieks, gushing over her good news. I never did get to tell her about Mr. Rick. Tamika’s bombshell changed everything, though I wasn’t sure how. I had to regroup. To consider how this bundle of joy fit into the equation. If my mom was pregnant did that mean she would be marrying Mr. Rick? Not necessarily. They had been living together this long, why would a baby make a difference? Marriage or not, Mr. Rick would be a part of our lives forever now. I was never going to be able to get rid of him. The baby sealed the deal. What if it was a girl? Would she need protection from her father? If the baby was a girl, I would definitely have to move back home to make sure she was safe.

I slid back the closet door and studied all of my options. Just living with Miss Angie these past few months caused my wardrobe to triple in volume. Miss Angie was a shopaholic, but she was also very generous. Never in my life had I had so much! Clothes, shoes, my own room and every little trinket and toy a teenaged girl’s heart could desire. I would have to give all this up. Moving back wouldn’t be so bad, would it? I was older and stronger now. Surely, I would be able to fight off Mr. Rick if he tried anything. If he touched me again, I’d kick him square in the nuts—at least I hoped I would.

This was such a nightmare. And yet my mom was so happy! She kept going on and on about how we were going to be a family again. She was going to see if Miss Meagan could arrange for me to go with her to my grandmother’s 60th birthday party in the spring. And Thanksgiving was coming up soon. Maybe we could bake a pie during her next visit. The agency had a kitchen we could use. It was all so sudden. One day, I resigned myself to the fact that I might never see my mother again, now there was talk of becoming a family again.

“...And of course I’m gonna need you to help me paint the baby’s room,” Tamika told me that day. “Then there’s the shower. I’m going to need everything.” A thought popped into Tamika’s mind that tickled her. “Never thought I’d be picking out a crib again. I got your crib from my girl, Ginger. She had four kids, so by the time you got it, it was all cruddy with spit up and milk and dried up old Cheerios.”

Then she reached out and cupped my face. “Don’t get me wrong, I was grateful to have it. But there was no way in hell I was gonna let my baby sleep

in that mess. I spent all day scrubbing, then sprayed it down with Lysol. And you wasn't no help," she nudged me.

"Me? I wasn't even born yet. What did I do?"

"As soon as I start spraying that Lysol, you'd have me running off to the bathroom to throw up. I'd rub my belly and say: 'Come on, Chile, I'm doing this for you. Cut me some slack.'"

"My dad didn't help you?"

Tamika shot me a look, as if to say: *Are you serious?* But I was always hungry for any little details I could learn about my father. "Let's just say, your father wasn't big on housework."

Obviously, he wasn't too big on being a father either, I thought.

Now, as I brushed my hair in the mirror, I seemed to be moving in slow motion. Miss Angie had already yelled upstairs twice to hurry me up. Then she sent Chelsea to see what was taking so long.

"I'll be right down," I said.

"You missed breakfast, so I put some bacon and eggs on a bagel for you. You want some orange juice?"

"No thanks."

"Okay. I'll wrap it up in some aluminum foil so you can take it with you," Chelsea added, then thudded back downstairs. Her dressy shoes made her feet sound like horses' hooves clomping down the steps. Chelsea was still on her *I'd-better-be-real-nice-to-Toya* kick, still feeling guilty about getting me in trouble.

My mom might have been pregnant, but my foster sister was not. On the last day of my punishment, Chelsea got her period. She burst through my door that day, dancing and singing that her "monthly visitor was back," then went to bed early because her monthly visitor was giving her cramps. I brought her a couple of Pamprins, a glass of ginger ale, and some sound teenage wisdom: "Keep your panties up and your legs shut."

It wasn't like Miss Angie hadn't had this talk with Chelsea since she was first old enough to ask, "Mommy, what's a dildo?" But there was a look in Chelsea's wide eyes when I spoke that let me know she was listening. We must've talked for two hours. Chelsea asked a lot of questions—the kind of questions a thirteen-year-old girl wouldn't dare ask her mother, but might possibly ask a big sister. After listening for a while, it became clear to me that the stuff Chelsea and Alonzo were doing would have never resulted in a baby anyway—but Chelsea didn't need to know that yet. The pregnancy scare had freaked her out enough to make her content with just holding hands for the next ten years. Good. One problem solved. Now my mind was free to worry about an even bigger problem: A sleazy, gold-tooth-wearing problem, with a baby on the way.

* * * * *

At church, my mind was all over the place. I was one step behind throughout the whole service. I sat when everyone else stood. I was still standing when the others sat down. I was silent when they all said “amen.” But when the pastor said it was time for prayer, I was the first one at the altar.

There was a crowd of people kneeling at the altar. Lots of folks wanting to talk to the Lord about their aching bodies and the troubles on their minds, but I managed to squeeze in between Mother Pearl and another plump woman in a pale pink suit. Nestled in between the well-padded women, I felt safe; like I could let go and have a soft place to land. So, I prayed hard. I squeezed my eyes shut and poured out my heart to God: my worries about my mother, my own safety, this baby, the baby’s safety. I wanted God to reach down and pluck me out of this mess. “God, please help me,” I pleaded again and again. “Please, help me!”

A warm sensation fell over me. For a moment, I thought it was the hand of God resting upon me, then quickly realized it was Mother Pearl’s arm around my shoulder.

“It’s all right, baby,” she said. “Tell the Lord all about it.”

Next, I felt a set of hands grasp my hands. The hands were much larger than my own. I peeked out of one eye and saw that Pastor Ewing had come down from the pulpit and knelt beside me. Clearly, the man was an expert at prayer. His words were much grander and more impressive than mine. “Bless her, Lord. Remove this yoke from her shoulders, Jesus!”

“Yes, Lord,” Mother Pearl chimed in, and some other voices joined her.

I felt another hand rest on my shoulder.

“...This is your child, Lord!” The deep bass in Pastor Ewing’s voice rocked the altar. Surely, God heard this prayer. “She needs you, Lord.”

“She needs you,” Mother Pearl echoed.

Pastor Ewing wrapped it up with, “Fight this battle for her, Lord. And give her the victory, right now. In the name of Jesus we pray, amen!”

“Amen!” chanted the rest of the congregation, followed by a chorus of “Hallelujah’s” and “Thank you, Jesus!”

I climbed to my feet and found myself wrapped in Mother Pearl’s arms like a warm, down comforter. “God’s gonna make a way, baby. Just you wait and see.”

When Mother Pearl released me, I could see the woman had tears in her eyes. *What was she crying for?* I wondered. I looked around and realized the crowded altar was now empty. It was just me, Mother Pearl, and Pastor Ewing. The hand that had been on my shoulder was now rubbing my back. I looked back and saw that the hand belonged to Miss Angie. She looked like Florence Nightingale, from my history book, standing there in her crisp, white, usher’s uniform. Miss Angie also wiped a tear from her eye. My eyes were bone dry. If I was the one with all the problems, why was everyone else doing all the crying? I was perplexed by the whole scene, though grateful for

their support.

As I walked back to my seat, I saw Terry staring at me. I could tell by the look on his face, he was just counting the minutes for service to be over so he could corner me to find out the scoop. Miss Angie had the same look on her face. So did Chelsea. Bitterness settled in my heart. All of a sudden, everybody was all in my business. Their ears were itching to hear all about what kind of trouble the problem child got herself into now. I pictured them looking down their stuck-up noses at my mother, judging her for being damn near forty and knocked up again—out of wedlock, no less, with a kid in foster care. As soon as service was over, they would all come running up to me with fake ass concern on their faces. I wouldn't tell them a damn thing.

This was family business.

CHAPTER 15

“Man, God really does hear Pastor Ewing’s prayers.” I had to laugh to myself as I practically skipped all the way home. Not only had it been more than two weeks since I’d seen Mr. Rick lurking around my school, but tonight I would be going out with my future husband. I was actually going on a date with Terry—though he still didn’t know about the future husband part yet. In fact, Terry had no idea he was going out on a date with me at all.

“Let me get this straight. Terry asked you out?” Emily asked. She was talking on the phone with me, but I was sitting so high up on cloud nine that I could barely hear the girl. By then only two hours had passed since my whole world had changed and nothing made sense coming out of my mouth.

“He didn’t ask me out,” I said.

“Oh, so...What? You asked him out?”

“No. I just told him to be at Friendly’s at seven o’clock on Saturday.”

“For a date,” she said.

“Yes!”

“With you.” Emily was growing more and more confused by the second.

“Yes! I-I mean no. With the girl of his dreams.”

“Not you.”

“It is me, Em! Only he don’t know it yet.”

There was a momentary gap in the conversation as Emily tried to fit the pieces of this puzzle together. “I don’t get it.”

I flopped back on my bed and sighed into the phone. “Okay, okay...Let me take it from the top. Remember how I was so mad cuz Terry missed another tutoring session with me?”

“Uh huh,” Emily said then blurted out, “Oh, I get it. He’s meeting you at Friendly’s to tutor you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Now, how’s he gonna tutor me at Friendly’s. We’d get ice cream all over our books!”

“But you said—”

“Look, do you wanna tell me what I said or listen to what I’m trying to say?”

Still so confused, Emily answered sheepishly, “Umm...listen to what you’re trying to say?”

“Well, then shut up and listen.”

With Emily now quietly listening to what I was trying to say, I began my story all over again. I took Emily back two hours earlier, when I arrived on Terry’s doorstep with fire in my eyes. This was the third day in a row he hadn’t shown up to tutor me. Not that I still needed his help. I was now getting a solid B in that class. It was the fact that I treasured that alone time with Terry almost as much as I treasured my visits with my mom. And on top of all that, he didn’t even bother to call. That was just plain rude. I had been around plenty of rude boys in my life, but not Terry. I couldn’t tolerate it from Terry.

I rang the bell and pounded on the door for two whole minutes, not even caring if Terry’s mom was home. The woman already thought I was not a decent girl, so kicking the door in wouldn’t really hurt my reputation—besides I knew Terry’s mom didn’t get home until after six. I started to leave, but then I heard footsteps. Someone was moving around in there. I rang the doorbell again. Still no answer.

Around the back of the house, I saw that the sliding patio door was open. Could I be arrested for burglary if the door was already open? Maybe Terry had a seizure and was lying on the floor unconscious. Maybe that was the reason he wasn’t answering the door. Maybe he was on the floor, lifeless, just waiting for me to come to the rescue and there I was standing right outside like a chicken. I took a deep breath and went inside.

There was Terry, mopping the floor so hard the tiles were turning clear. Headphones blasted Jay-Z in his ears. No wonder he couldn’t hear me knocking. Nor could he hear me yelling: “Terry...Terry!”

Finally, I tapped him on the shoulder. Terry wheeled around so fast with that mop, I ducked out of fear that he was about to knock my block off.

“Toya! What are you doing in here?”

I snatched the headphones from his head. “The question is, what are you doing in here? You’re supposed to be tutoring me.”

“Oh. That.”

“Yes. That. You didn’t even call or nothing.” I noticed my voice had a little whiny twinge to it.

“I’m sorry!” Terry sighed and I noticed he wasn’t making eye contact with me. “Look... It’s just that I’ve got so much work to do around here. When I’m finished the floors, I’ve gotta vacuum the living room and dust the blinds and then polish the—”

“Why so much work? Wait! Are you on punishment?”

“What?” Terry was offended. “No! I told you before, I clean things when I’m stressed out.”

“If you ask me, running around here like a slave is stressful”

“Nah. It relaxes me,” Terry said then dipped the mop back in the water and began sloshing it back and forth across the floor.

I hopped up on the counter and watched him. He had on blue Michigan State gym shorts and a plain white T-shirt. I found myself being hypnotized by the muscles in his back as they made the mop sway back and forth, back and forth. I forced myself to blink and that snapped me out of my trance. “So, what’s got you so stressed out?”

“Nothing.”

Now I was offended. “You’re not going to tell me?”

Terry stopped mopping long enough to fire back, “Are you going to tell me what had you so stressed at church that day?”

My mouth remained silent.

“See that? You’ve got your secrets to keep and I’ve got mine.

Terry with secrets? Now I really had to know what was going on. I braced myself on the counter like I was about to jump off. “Terrence Christopher Miller, tell me your secret or I will track mud all over this floor.”

He shrugged. “Do it. I won’t mind. More to clean.”

I watched Terry mop an already perfectly clean floor for two more minutes; but when he whipped out the toothbrush and started scrubbing all the nooks and crannies in the tiles, I had enough. “Okay fine. You don’t want to tell me what’s going on, don’t tell me.” I scooted my hips off of the counter and marched to the patio door. “I’ve got a pile of junk at home, if you run out of things to clean here.”

Just as I reached for the door handle, I heard Terry say it. “She dumped me.”

I was frozen in my tracks. Had he just said what I thought he said?

He said it again. “She dumped me.”

“Mercedes?” It was a stupid question, but it was all I could think to say.

Terry thought it was stupid too because he rolled his eyes at me like I was stupid. “Yes, Mercedes! Who else would I be talking about?”

“Sorry. I mean, y’all seemed so happy. I thought...I mean, it’s just so sudden,” which was a lie. I saw this coming weeks ago. Ever since I saw Mercedes talking to her ex-boyfriend at the infamous football game. The girl was practically glowing in his presence. I had seen Mercedes smile and act all silly around Terry, but never saw her glow around him—and lately she looked downright bored. As soon as I saw that, I knew that Mercedes and her ex still had unfinished business. This was great news for me, but terrible news for my friend. Terry looked up from his mop, with those lonely puppy dog eyes and my heart melted. “What happened?”

“Nate.” Terry spat the boy’s name out like a cuss word. “That’s what

happened.”

“Her ex-boyfriend?” I asked, as if I hadn’t already figured the whole thing out. “I thought he was away at school.”

“He is. But when he found out that Mercedes was seeing me, he lost it. Started texting her love notes and dedicating her favorite songs to her on the radio. You know how much she loves Kool and the Gang.”

“Oh no!” I gasped. “Any guy who would go so far as to request Eighties pop music on the radio, would stop at nothing.”

“Exactly! And I knew something was going on. I just didn’t want to admit it. I mean, Mercedes was the girl of my dreams. I was enjoying living my fantasy so much, I didn’t want to ruin it with reality.” Terry rubbed his hand over his head and mumbled. “I feel so stupid.”

“That’s not true, Terry.” Somehow, I found it within myself to console him, even though his last words had wounded me. Mercedes was his dream girl. That definitely hurt. But I pushed past it and said, “Mercedes is the one that’s stupid. She had a prince for a boyfriend, and she traded you in for a frog like Nate Lewis.”

“Come on, Toya. It don’t work like that. If I was all that, she wouldn’t have left me.”

“She would if she was stupid, which she is,” I said.

“Don’t...don’t put her down like that.”

“I’m not putting her down, I’m speaking the truth. Do you know how many girls are out there just dying to go out with you?”

Terry gave me a sideways glance, not believing a word that I said. “How many?”

“A lot.”

Terry walked away, into the living room, picking up a can of furniture polish along the way. He knew I was just trying to pump up his ego and he wasn’t in the mood for it.

I followed him into the living room, still rambling on. “Okay. Maybe not a lot; but enough. A whole lot more than Mercedes Jackson. I mean, seriously what did you ever see in her in the first place?”

He stopped in his tracks. “Are you serious? What did I see in her? First of all, she’s gorgeous!”

Yawn. Typical teenage boy answer. “Uh huh and what else?”

“Um...she’s fun to be around and...” Terry was quickly running out of steam. “She, she...makes...really good...Jell-O.”

I shook my head. “And that’s your idea of a dream girl?”

“Yeah?” Even Terry knew his answer was weak.

“See, that’s your problem. You’re only looking at the surface. You gotta go deeper.”

“Deeper?”

“Yes! Deeper. Honestly, Terry, I’m surprised at you. I didn’t think you

were that shallow.”

“Shallow? I’m not—”

“A cute face and good Jell-O is not the stuff that makes true love,” I chided. “What do you two have in common? Does she laugh at your jokes? Does she listen to your problems? Does she call you because she knows there’s something on Discovery Channel that you’d really love to see? Does she come out and cheer for you, whether you’re starring in a play or riding the bench at a football game?”

“Come on, now. What girl is gonna do all that?”

Me dummy! *It’s me!* I wanted to shout. And that’s when it hit me. The opportunity I had been waiting for. The chance of a lifetime. I seized it. “Actually, I know the perfect girl.”

Terry’s eyes lit up. “You do? Who?”

“I can’t tell you.” Of course, there was no way I was going to just blurt out: *Me! It’s me! I’m your dream girl, silly!* What if he laughed in my face? I would have to play this cool. “Let me talk to her first and set something up.”

“Well, can’t you just give me hint or something?” Terry said, all perky now. “No.”

“Is it Sharmaine Atkins? She always gives me extra fries when I go through her line at McDonald’s.”

I laughed. “I’m not telling you, Terry! So, you might as well give it up.”

“Okay, okay.” He sprayed some polish on the coffee table and was just about to start polishing when he paused, “Is it Allyson Reese?”

I fired a throw pillow at his head.

He ducked. “Okay...I’ll let it go. I’ll let it go.”

An hour after leaving Terry’s house, I called to let him know that I’d spoken to the mystery girl and she agreed to go out with him. Saturday at seven o’clock at Friendly’s.

“Oh my gosh, Toya!” Emily squealed on her end of the phone when I finished telling my story. “I can’t believe you did that?”

“You think I’m evil, don’t you?”

“Are you serious? I think what you did was amazing! So bold. I’d be scared to death to step to a boy like that.” Emily sighed, gushing with admiration. “I envy you, Toya. You know what you want and you go get it.”

“Aw! Thanks, Em,” I said, flipping through my copy of *Essence Magazine*. “You know what I wanna go get now?”

“What?”

“Those leather boots we saw at the mall.”

* * * * *

The next day, Thursday, after school, me and Emily hopped on the bus and rode over to the King of Prussia Mall. We spent four hours and half of my savings picking out the perfect outfit for “the surprise date.” I wanted to

look sexy yet casual, flirty but not desperate. I settled on a cashmere sweater—red, because it signaled passion. I paired that with a black mini skirt that made my legs look long and shapely, especially when I slid into my knee-length boots with the three-inch heels. Topped that off with gold hoop earrings and bangles for my wrists, and I was ready for the catwalk.

On Friday, I had to dodge Terry all day because every time he saw me, he tried to grill me about the date. He was like an eager little puppy waiting for me to throw him a treat. I was afraid I might give in and ruin the whole surprise, so I ate lunch in the Guidance Counselor's office and, after school, I raced home.

Miss Angie promised to really hook my hair up, and she delivered. She flat-ironed my hair bone straight and added some tracks of hair, giving me a long, sleek, polished look. When my hair was finished, I got a mani-pedi and then my eyebrows arched. Miss Angie called this beauty package her "Saturday Night Special." The price for this chic new look was two hours of questioning from Miss Angie and the rest of her clients.

"So, who is this boy, anyway?" Miss Angie asked, while spraying my hair in a cloud of sheen.

I buried my face in a hair magazine. "I told you there is no boy. I'm just hanging out with friends," which wasn't a total lie.

Miss Coretta poked her head from under the dryer and said, "Oh, really. All this fancy hair to hang out with friends. Now who does that?"

"I do," announced Miss Gladys. I get a press and curl every week before I go over to Felicia's to play Scrabble with the rest of the girls."

"That's because you know Felicia's brother's been staying with her since his wife passed away," Miss Coretta said. "And that man has the triple play."

"The triple play? What's that?" Miss Angie asked.

The two old ladies replied in unison, "All of his hair; all of his teeth, and all of his dead wife's money!"

The whole room erupted with howls of laughter. Even I was giggling. Until Miss Angie said slyly, "Ya know, I heard Terry's got himself a hot date on Saturday night. You know anything about that?"

All eyes locked on me. I squirmed in my seat, suddenly feeling extremely warm. "Why would I know what Terry's got going on this Saturday? I'm not his secretary."

"Hmmm. Somebody's a little defensive." Miss Gladys shot a wink in Miss Coretta's direction. She winked back.

"I'm not being defensive."

"Of course not, baby," Miss Gladys said in a motherly way. "You just squirming in that chair cuz that's the latest dance craze."

"I'm not squirming," I said, then noticed my right leg bobbing up and down like a jackhammer. I had to grab my knee to make my leg stop jumping. "Well, if I'm squirming, it's because it's so hot in here."

The women were giggling, and I couldn't figure out why. "What? I mean, it's not hot cuz we're talking about Terry."

Giggles turned to snickers.

"I meant, it's hot because I'm sitting too close to the curling irons—Miss Angie, make them stop!" I looked up and saw Miss Angie was laughing too. "Forget it." I hopped up and stormed out just before the room erupted with raucous laughter.

Saturday. The big day. I could barely sleep the night before. Now I was up at six o'clock in the morning. My mind was racing with all kinds of thoughts. I pictured the look on Terry's face when I walked into Friendly's. Would he smile? Would he kiss me? This time tomorrow, I might be able to say that I kissed Terry Miller. I might finally be able to call him my boyfriend—out loud. The Christmas Dance was in a couple of weeks. Maybe we could go together. I saw this gorgeous red gown at the mall. Terry could wear a black suit with matching red tie. Or maybe he could wear a white suit. Our colors could be red and white, just like on our wedding day.

With that thought, I climbed out of bed and started to go for a run, but changed my mind. The sweat would ruin my hair. It was 6:30 in the morning. Only twelve and a half more hours to go, and it was killing me. How was I ever going to make it to 7:00?

A strange smell came wafting into the room. I inhaled. It took a moment for it to register with my nose: pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon. I followed my nose downstairs to the kitchen. Miss Angie had the table all decked out with a breakfast feast. In addition to the pancakes, scrambled eggs, and bacon, my nostrils detected home fries, fruit cocktail, biscuits, and a big pot of grits.

"What's all this?" I asked, still in awe.

Miss Angie was standing over her electric skillet flipping flap jacks like a master chef, humming along to the radio. "Oh, hey, Sleeping Beauty."

"Hey. What's all this?"

"Oh, I don't know. I just woke up this morning with a taste for pancakes. Grab the syrup for me, please?"

I did as was requested. As I walked to the cabinet, Miss Angie went back to humming while she poured another round of batter on the skillet. It sizzled and made me think about Sunday mornings at my grandmother's house. That sizzle sound used to wake me up out of the deepest sleep. I almost expected to see Granny Jean sachet into the kitchen in her Sunday best, humming, *Nearer My God to Thee*. Instead, it was a Miss Angie in her silk robe, humming Whitney Houston's, *Saving All My Love*.

"Are you okay, Miss Angie?"

"Of course, I'm okay? What? A girl can't whip up a little breakfast when she wants to?"

"A little breakfast? You got enough here to feed a football team." And

that was saying a lot, considering our normal Saturday breakfast consisted of cold cereal and toast or bagels and cream cheese.

"Well, you don't have to eat it if you don't want to."

My original plan was to skip breakfast and eat a very light lunch. I didn't want to accidentally eat too much and not be able to fit into my new skirt. Besides, I didn't think I would have much of an appetite. But one whiff of Miss Angie's cooking and my stomach sprang to life. "No. I'll eat."

"Good. You're going to need your strength for tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yeah, your big night out with your friends." She made air quotes when she said the word friends.

I was too hungry to argue, but I had to keep up the charade. "How many times do I have say it? I'm not going out with Terry. I really am going out with friends."

"That's what I said, didn't I? Your big night out with friends." Miss Angie had a smirk on her face, as she grabbed a plate and loaded on some pancakes. I grabbed a plate too. *How did she know?* How did Miss Angie always know? My first thought was that Chelsea spilled the beans, but I remembered that I didn't tell Chelsea. Was it just written all over my face? *I've got a secret date with Terry!* If it was that obvious, maybe Terry knew too.

No way. Terry wasn't that good of a liar. If he knew, I would know that he knew. I sat with Miss Angie and ate in silence, but I could feel the woman reading my mind. Thankfully, the thudding of Chelsea's feet on the stairs, meant help was on the way. Chelsea would do enough talking to keep the whole table confused and distracted. She burst into the kitchen and darted for a plate and fork. "Oooh! Pancakes! Why didn't you call me, Mommy?"

"I thought I'd let the pancakes call you."

As Chelsea loaded up her plate, she chattered on, "Ya know? I had the strangest dream."

"Really? What was it about?" I would have listened to Chelsea give her Student Council presidency speech, if it meant I didn't have to listen to Miss Angie's brain waves penetrating my mind.

"I dreamed I was scuba diving in the Pacific Ocean, and I found this sunken ship," Chelsea said. "I thought it might have treasure inside, so I swam and guess what?"

"What?" I said, surprised at how intrigued I sounded.

"Inside was a school of hippocampus guttulatus!" She could hardly contain her excitement. Me and Miss Angie had the same lost look in our eyes, until Chelsea shouted, "Sea horses! Long-snouted seahorses." She drowned her pancakes in syrup and between mouthfuls she added, "Anyway, I said to one of the horses: Hey, can I have a ride? And he said, okay. So, I hopped on, and we rode and we rode, until finally we ended up in this underwater city."

It was times like this when I remembered how young Chelsea really was. She had the brains of a rocket scientist and the imagination of a six-year-old.

"An underwater city?" I said.

"Yeah, like Atlantis—but it wasn't Atlantis. They took me to their leader. He had long white hair and a beard and a golden crown. And he invited me to a feast, so I said: okay. And you know what we had at the feast?"

She looked at us with wide-eyed expectation, as if we should know the answer.

Miss Angie took a guess. "Um...Pancakes?"

Chelsea cackled, bits of bacon poking out of her braces. "No, Mommy! You can't eat pancakes underwater. They'd get all soggy." Chelsea shook her head and chuckled to herself. "Pancakes."

Miss Angie and me kept staring at Chelsea as she shoveled eggs into her mouth. I couldn't take it anymore. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"What did you eat?" we asked, exasperated.

"Duh! Fish Food. They had bowls and bowls of those little dry flakes we used to shake in the fish tanks. Tasted pretty good, though."

After three helpings of pancakes and four goofy Chelsea stories, I made my way back to my bedroom. My stomach was so full that all I could do was collapse into bed. A minute later, I was sound asleep. I dreamed of Atlantis. Living in a plush penthouse apartment overlooking an underwater city, with my handsome husband, Terry—only Terry had long white hair and a long white beard. Stupid Chelsea! How dare she contaminate my dreams with her preschool nonsense!

The benefit of Chelsea's dream was that it caused me to sleep for hours. By the time I woke up, it was almost 3:30 in the afternoon. Just enough time to get ready for my date. Emily showed up at around four o'clock and helped me get dressed. She brought with her some of her older sister's perfume, *Be Delicious*, which she snuck from her sister's dresser. Emily's sister, Erin, who was away at college, swore it drove the boys crazy. I squirted on a double dose of the stuff.

"Oh, Toya! You look amazing!" Emily gushed, staring at the modelesque figure standing before her. I did a couple of poses in the full-length mirror in my closet. I did look good—better than good. I was smoking hot, as Miss Angie liked to say. The black boots hugged my legs right up to the knees. I wore black tights with a funky striped pattern underneath my black mini skirt, which was short but not trashy short. Top it all off with the rose red cashmere sweater that fitted nicely over my curves. I tugged at my bra making

sure my boobs weren't lopsided. No makeup, though I did slide on some strawberry lip gloss. One more toss of the hair and I was ready to go.

"Terry is going to go freakin' bananas when he sees you!" said Emily.

"I hope not. I hate bananas." I said, still mussing my hair, trying to decide if I should wear bangs or not. "I'll just be happy if he doesn't laugh in my face."

Emily was silent for a moment, quietly considering something. She said, uneasily, "Yeah, but what if he does?"

"What if he does what?"

"You know, laugh in your face."

I was barely listening to her since I was so busy tossing my bangs around. "You just said he was gonna go freaking bananas, now he's laughing in my—"

"I know. I'm just saying, it is possible that he might not feel the way you do."

I stopped messing with my hair and wheeled around, my eyes locked dead-on Emily, who suddenly looked queasy.

She raised her hands in a defensive manner. I guess she thought I was gonna slap her. "Hey, I'm not trying to bring you down—"

"Coulda fooled me."

"I just don't want to see you get hurt, Toya."

"Why would I get hurt? No matter what, Terry's still my friend."

"Yeah, but has he ever given you any signs that he wanted to be more than friends? I mean, you've known him since what, August?"

"Yeah, and?" I could feel my face getting warm.

"And he never asked you out or anything."

"That's because he was hung up on Mercedes. Now that she's out of the picture, he's ready to really see me." I flung my hair over my shoulder and flashed myself a sexy grin in the mirror. I could tell by the pained look on Emily's face that she wasn't buying it.

But then it was as if she flipped a switch. Emily put on her best smile and said, "You're right. I was being a worrywart. I'm sure this date will be fabulous." She sprang to her feet and gave me a hug. "You'd better call me as soon as it's over and give me every detail."

"I will."

I spent the next forty minutes in my bedroom, flipping through channels on the TV, just killing time until I was ready to go. At 6:15, I turned off the TV and headed for the door. In less than an hour, I would be living a dream or a nightmare. Before I could reach my bedroom door, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Something caught my eye. The outfit still looked good. My hair was still perfection. But something I saw in the mirror wasn't quite right.

Mercedes Jackson was Terry's dream girl. I saw a pretty girl staring back at me from the mirror, but I did not see Mercedes Jackson. And if Mercedes

was his dream girl, what was I? His buddy? His homegirl? But not the girl he dreams about. I wasn't a dancer. I wasn't cheerleader-cute with a bubbly personality. I wasn't the kind of girl college boys dedicated songs to on the radio. And as Terry's mom pointed out, I wasn't even a decent girl.

My stomach suddenly twisted itself in a knot. Up until now, I always pictured Terry as being overjoyed when I showed up to meet him at Friendly's. Now, all I could see was a look of disappointment. Or even worse, a polite smile so he wouldn't hurt my feelings. I didn't want that. *Pity. Poor Toya. Had to trick a boy to get him to go out with her.* What was I thinking? How could I put myself out there like that to be made a fool of?

A strange sensation came over me. My chest felt tight. I couldn't breathe. I raised my hand to my chest and noticed my fingers were trembling. I was having a full-fledged panic attack.

"Oh, God! I can't breathe. I c-can't..." Feeling lightheaded, I staggered back to the bed and sat down, desperate to catch my breath. The images that flashed through my mind were growing uglier. Now, instead of looking disappointed, Terry looked absolutely disgusted. "You?" I could hear him say. "You actually thought I'd go out with *you*?" He pointed at me and laughed a cruel laugh. He slid his arm around Mercedes, as she joined him, laughing at me.

"Why would he want you? I'm the girl of his dreams!" Mercedes cackled like witch.

The sounds echoed in my head. I felt like I was losing my mind. I made an effort to take in a long deep breath. That seemed to help a little. When my fingers stopped trembling, I managed to dig out my cell phone.

"Hello."

"I can't. I can't do it." I managed to say.

"What? Toya is that you? What are you talking about?"

"I can't go through with this date, Em."

"Is this because of what I said?" I could hear Emily groan. "Toya, I am so sorry. Don't listen to me. I was just nervous for you. I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, you were just looking out for me. And you were right."

"I wasn't. Look, I'll come back. I'll go over there with you. I'll hold your hand and make sure you're okay. But you have to go through with it. You'll never forgive yourself if you don't."

For once in my life, I had nothing to say. I was waiting for Emily to give me a dose of courage; to say something that would make my fleeting confidence turn around and come back to me.

"Toya? Say something," Emily said when the silence became unbearable.

"Terry is my friend. If I show up there and he doesn't like me, we could never go back to being friends again."

"But he will like you. He likes you already."

"I'm not talking about that kind of like, Em."

"Aw man! I hate that I said anything. I'm so stupid. I am so freaking so stupid!" It sounded to me like Emily was in tears.

"Stop that! I'm the one that was stupid. I should've waited for Terry to make the first move. I should've waited for a sign that he was into me."

"So, what are you going to do now?"

I blew out a stream of air as I thought. I already knew what needed to be done, I was just looking for the nerve to say, "I need you to get a girl to go up there and meet him for me."

"What? Toya, no!"

"Yes! Emily you have to."

"Why can't you just call him and tell him his mystery date cancelled?"

"I tried. It went straight to voicemail." I was telling the truth. My first thought was to call Terry and make up some lame excuse about his dream girl getting in a car accident, and the date had to be cancelled. I prayed that it would be enough to get me out of this. But when the phone went to voicemail, I knew God wanted no parts of that prayer. I had started this mess, and He was not about to let me out of it the easy way.

Emily tried hard to bring some logic to my foolishness. "Why would Terry turn his phone off if he's going on a date?"

"I don't know. You know how Terry is with that dumb phone. He probably forgot to charge it. That's why you have to help me. He's just going to be sitting there thinking he got stood up."

"But...how can I...it's not like I've got a bunch of girls hanging around here. I'm not a pimp."

She had a point, but I was desperate. "You're in chorus. There's lots of girls in there. Ask one of them. Or somebody from the chess club. I'm sure they're all home on a Saturday night."

"Excuse me?"

"You know what I mean, Em. Just find somebody."

"And then what? What if he ends up liking the girl I hook him up with? Then what are you gonna do?"

Having been around some of the girls in the chorus and the chess club, I knew the chances of that happening were slim—but then again, anything is possible. "If that happens, then I guess me and Terry weren't meant to be."

"Just like that, huh?"

"Yes! Look, I can't worry about that now. Right now, all I'm worried about is leaving Terry out there hanging. Every second he sits at that table all alone, his self-esteem is just gonna drop lower and lower, so you've got to find him somebody, Em. Anybody. Please!!!"

"Okay. Okay. I'll see who I can find. But I'm not promising you anything. There really isn't much time."

"I know, so hurry. Hurry!"

An hour later, I calmed down. I changed into my sweats and pulled my pretty new hair into a ponytail. I also had a tall glass of ginger ale to sip on. Miss Angie was curious as to why I was still home. I told her she wasn't feeling well, so out came the ginger ale. Now that I had time to think about it, I realized I was being silly. Even if Terry wasn't interested in me like that, we would have laughed it off and sat down and had a nice dinner. Maybe tomorrow I would call him and tell him the truth. I'd apologize for forcing him to have dinner with one of Emily's creepy friends from the chorus. Everything would be just fine between us.

Emily called me a half hour earlier to check on me and let me know that she did manage to find someone. "Everything's under control," she said. I was relieved. The thought of Terry sitting all alone in a crowded restaurant feeling like a loser, was just too much for me.

But now, I was curious to find out who the lucky girl was that ended up having dinner with my date. It was probably Lucinda Baxter. She'd definitely appreciate a free meal. The girl was five feet tall, three-hundred pounds and had a bad case of eczema, but a whiz at chess and the best tenor on the chorus—way better than any of the boys. I had seen her on a couple of Saturday nights at Starbucks, playing chess with any old body who sat down across from her. I almost felt sorry for the girl, until I remembered the only reason I was out at Starbucks on a Saturday night was not because I was on a hot date, but because Miss Angie sent me there to get her a caramel macchiato since she was going to be up late putting micro braids in a client's hair.

Terry on a date with Lucinda Baxter? That was something I had to see. Not that I had anything against big girls. My cousin Shay was about the same size as Lucinda, but she carried herself like she was a size 2; and she was always dating some fine-looking honey. Lucinda didn't have the "Shay confidence." She was generally quiet and shy, unless she was talking about chess. I wouldn't have been surprised if she brought her chessboard with her and had it all spread out on the table at Friendly's. Terry knew how to play too. They'd probably be there until the place closed, eating ice cream and yelling checkmate, or whatever it is they're supposed to say. This, I had to see.

A minute later, I announced to Miss Angie that I was feeling better and was on my way to Friendly's. I slipped on my coat, hopped on Chelsea's bike, and was on my way. As I pedaled along, I couldn't help but smile. I hadn't intended to, but I actually did a good deed. Even if it wasn't Lucinda Baxter, some poor, lonely wallflower was on a date with a boy she could have never landed on her own. Whoever she was, the girl should be putting my name at the top of her Christmas list. She should name her firstborn child after me—though Terry better not be the father.

When I arrived at Friendly's, I knew better than to walk through the front door and gawk at Terry and his date. I crept around the side of the building and hoped they had a window seat. They weren't sitting by any window. I

had to strain to look beyond the couples with the window seats to see the tables in the middle. I spotted what I thought was the back of Terry's head. And when he turned his face to the side, I knew it was him. But his head was blocking my view of his date.

From what I could see, Terry seemed to be having a good time. He was laughing and inhaling french fries like they were going out of style. At last, he shifted in his side of the booth, and I got a full glimpse of his date.

A tiny yelp slipped out of my mouth. I ran around the side of the building, nearly crashing into a family of four, and through the front door. I had to get a closer look. Peeking around the corner, like a secret agent, I had a perfect view of the girl.

She was not Lucinda. In fact, she was about one-third the size of Lucinda. And where Lucinda was dark-skinned, this girl was White. Cute and perky, just the way Terry liked them. When she laughed, she casually slung her wavy blonde hair over her shoulder. No nerves. Not at all shy. The last time I saw that hair, it was pulled back into one long braid. The last time I saw those green eyes with the eyeliner and eye shadow, they were behind a pair of glasses. The last time I heard that voice, it was on the phone telling me she had everything under control.

Emily.

CHAPTER 16

Forget the clean slate. Who gives a damn about a clean slate? I wanted nothing more to do with a clean slate—unless I could use it to bust Emily in the head. I waited for Emily outside of Friendly's that night, but realized I couldn't let Terry see me there, so I left. I rode Chelsea's bike straight over to Emily's house, as fast as my tired legs could carry me. I hid the bike around the side of Emily's house and ducked into the bushes waiting for them to arrive. I played Fruit Ninja on my cell phone while I waited and prayed no one would walk by and wonder why that bush was making all those weird beeping noises.

At a quarter to midnight, Emily still hadn't come home. What in the world could she and Terry be doing until midnight? I didn't even want to know. Then Miss Angie called and reminded me of my curfew. I had to go. It was probably for the best. I would have keeled over if I saw Terry on the doorstep, kissing Emily on the mouth. I would have literally had a heart attack right there in the bushes and no one would have even noticed until my rotting corpse started stinking up the place.

The next morning, at church, I could hardly concentrate for watching the clock. As soon as church ended, and I squeezed myself out of Mother Pearl's bear hug, I bolted for the door and onto Emily's house. I planned to talk to Terry after service, but he bolted after service ended too. *He'd better not be on his way to see Emily*, I thought, as I raced to the bus stop.

I sat on Emily's doorstep, waiting, ringing the bell twenty times. No answer. Then I remembered Emily had Pilates class on Sunday mornings—the heathen, didn't even go to church on Sundays. I parked myself on the top step and waited. A half hour later, Emily showed up. She and her mom, Pam, hopped out of the car, both lugging Pilates mats over their shoulders. Pam was a good six inches taller than Emily and looked like a Barbie doll. A tall, blonde, beautiful drink of water, with 34 DD's. Once,

Emily showed me some pictures of her mother when she was a teen. She looked like Emily's twin sister. Staring at the Emily's mother now, I had a sudden flash of Adult Emily and Terry frolicking on the beach on their honeymoon. My stomach lurched. Maybe the vision wouldn't come true. Maybe Emily inherited her father's genes. He was only an inch taller than the 5-foot-6, Emily and going bald.

"Hello, LaToya," Pam said, sweetly. "You stop by for one my famous spinach-mango smoothies?" The woman wasn't so much famous for her smoothies as she was for the fact that she hadn't eaten solid food in ten years. I bet she would make a smoothie out of steak and potatoes if they'd fit in her blender.

"Uh...no thanks. I can't stay long."

"Are you sure? I just picked up a batch of that extra-firm tofu you love so much."

"Maybe next time," I said, politely, though inwardly wondering where in the world this woman got the idea that I actually loved tofu. How could I love a food that had no taste, no smell, and looked like colorless Play-Doh?

"Suit yourself," Pam said and bounced through the front door.

"I'm glad you stopped by, Toya. I was going to call you when I got home," Emily chirped.

I looked at her strangely, almost forgetting why I was there. Oh yeah: *Kill Emily*. That was my mission: To murder my so-called best friend and New School Buddy. I stood up and stared Emily down. There was no sign of guilt. She looked as innocent as a lamb—a backstabbing, man-stealing, lamb.

"Did Terry tell you about the date?" Emily asked, since I wasn't saying anything.

"No. I figured I'd let you tell me." I kept a tight, polite reign on my voice.

"Oh. It was great. I didn't realize how cool Terry is. Did you know he was born in Germany? His dad was in the military and—"

"So, was this your plan all along?" I said before Emily could get rolling with her charming little story about my man.

"Huh?"

"You heard me! Was this your plan? Mess with my head so I'd be too scared to go out with Terry."

"Why would I do that?"

"So, you can have him for yourself." I took a step closer.

Emily took a step back. "What are you talking about, Toya? You were the one who told me to find someone to go out with him. I didn't want to, remember? I was the one who said you—"

"Oh, I remember exactly what you said: *'What if he does laugh in your face, Toya? It's not like he's ever asked you out or anything'*," I said in a whiny, air-heady version of Emily's voice.

"I only said that because I was scared for you."

"Yeah, you looked real scared sitting at the table, grinning in his face—*with no glasses on!* Since when did you start wearing contact lenses?"

"I always wear contacts when I go out."

"Since when do you go out?!! "

"I go out. I go out more than you." Emily could tell by the way I rolled my eyes, that I didn't believe her. That sparked a surge of boldness in her. Suddenly, she was the one stepping to me. "See, that's the problem. You didn't think a boy like Terry would be interested in a girl like me. That's what's bothering you, isn't it?"

"No. What's bothering me is, I didn't think my *friend* would be low-down enough to try and steal my man."

"He's not your man," Emily scoffed. "How can he be your man if you're too chicken to go out on a date with him—a fake date at that? At least I had the guts to show up."

"Like I said, you showed up after you got me so freaked out, I was afraid to go. Admit it!" I dared her.

She dared me right back. "Admit that a girl from the chorus, a girl from the chess club, did what you couldn't do?"

"What? Steal my man."

"Your man? Last time I checked, I was the one who went on the date with him."

I laughed out loud, "Oh, and that makes him your man!" then laughed some more.

But Emily wasn't laughing. She said, smugly, "Well, he did ask me to the Christmas dance."

Low blow. It caught me completely off guard. I couldn't even hide the stunned look on my face. "You're...you're going with him to the dance?"

"I wasn't. But if you're gonna act like this, I just might change my mind."

"Baby, don't do me any favors!" I could feel my neck rolling. "You want him? Take him. Why would I want a boy who'd be interested in a dork like you?"

"Well, this dork has a really cute date for the Christmas dance, what do you have?"

I couldn't believe it. This little runt was trying to stand toe to toe with me. Did she know who she was messing with? Did she know how many girls I had sent home crying to their mommies? My face was heating up, my right hand itching to curl into a fist. With fire in my eyes and an icy cool voice, I said, "I think you'd better back the hell up before you get yourself hurt."

Emily must have had a quick flashback of the beat down I'd put on Jenelle that day in Communications class, because she took a step back. Calmly, she said, "It doesn't have to be like this. Just say the word, and I won't go with Terry to the dance."

"Ha!" The thought of Emily doing *me* a favor. Turning down a date with

Terry to help out her poor, pitiful friend? My ego wouldn't allow it. "I hope you and Terrence will be very happy together."

That was the high point of the week. It was all downhill from there. On Monday, Terry was a no-show for tutoring—again. He didn't call—again. And when I called him, the phone rang once or twice, then went to voicemail. If I didn't know any better, I would've sworn he hit the "Ignore" button on me. It wasn't until the third period on Tuesday that I ran into him in the hallway. Actually, I had to run him down in the hallway because he brushed right by me as if I wasn't there.

"Hello!" I yelled, grabbing Terry's arm to get him to hold still.

"Hey." His voice was flat, his eyes barely making contact with mine.

"Hey? Is that all you can say to me?"

Terry shrugged. "What do you want me to say?"

"How about: Sorry I missed our tutoring session again, Toya. Sorry I didn't call again, Toya. Sorry for being a complete—"

"Listen, are you almost through chastising me like a little kid? I'm going to be late for class."

I was stunned. Where did this Terry come from? The chip on his shoulder, the narrow eyes, the hard edge in his voice. I would have found him sexy, if all this attitude hadn't been directed at me. "What's up with you, Terry? Why are you acting like you got PMS or something?"

"I don't have PMS. I just don't have time for your drama today." He cinched up his book bag on his shoulder and started to walk away. Just like that. No "goodbye." No "we'll talk about this later."

"Hey!" My brain was spinning. I had never felt the wrath of Terry before, and I didn't like it—especially because I didn't know why I was feeling his wrath. I was the one who should've been mad. He stood me up, not the other way around. He was supposed to be chasing after me, not the other way around. But there I was, pushing my way upstream against a sea of students, struggling to keep up with Terry's long, determined strides. "Terry! Wait up! I'm not finished saying what I have to say."

He kept on walking.

In a fit of frustration, I yelled, "What? You got yourself a little White girlfriend and suddenly you're too good to be friends with me?"

That stopped Terry dead in his tracks. It seemed like the entire building went silent. He turned on his heel, and in two steps, he was right in my face. "You know what? Maybe I am."

"Excuse me?"

"No, you're not excused. I'm sick of this!"

"Sick of what? Sick of me?" I heard myself shouting.

Terry lowered his voice. "Sick of trying to be friends with a girl who's,

who's... loud and rude, and..." one by one, Terry ticked off my faults on his fingers. "...and ignorant—"

"Ignorant?" I could only laugh, not wanting him to see how much he just wounded me. "If anyone here is ignorant it's you. You non-football playing, dorky-girlfriend having, can't even work your cell phone, ignorant ass!"

The way he blinked, I knew my words stung him hard, if only for a moment. "Ya know, I never thought I'd say this but," and in the coldest, cruelest voice I ever heard, Terry said, "My mom was right about you."

He might as well have punched me in the stomach, because I felt physically ill. Like I could've vomited, fainted, and had a massive stroke all at once. The only thing I could think to do was run. In a flash, I scrambled down the hallway, past the principal's office, out the front door, then all the way home.

The vice principal must have seen me leave the school grounds and called ahead, because as soon as I stepped through the front door, Miss Angie was waiting for me.

"Girl, have you lost your mind? What are you doing here?"

I opened my mouth. No words came out. My chest was pounding too hard to talk. I was fighting to catch my breath, while at the same time, keep from crying. Miss Angie didn't know whether to ground me or call 911.

"Sit down," she ordered. I sat.

A moment later, Miss Angie returned from the kitchen carrying a tall, fizzy glass of ginger ale. I took a tiny sip. My hands were trembling. Miss Angie watched me take a deeper gulp of the soda. "You ready to talk now?"

I shook my head and gave her a *noe is me* look.

With a raised eyebrow, Miss Angie said, "Try."

I took a deep breath and let it out. I had another sip of ginger ale. Then for the next half hour I poured my heart out to Miss Angie. Half of my heart. I didn't mention my crush on Terry, or the absolute betrayal by my supposed friend, Emily. However, I did tell her all about the missed tutoring session, the blow-out we had in the hallway, and the hurtful words Terry had spoken to me. Miss Angie listened intently. She gasped at the words Terry had spoken to me—and the words I had spoken to him.

After I downed my second glass of ginger ale, Miss Angie grabbed her car keys and marched me to the door.

"You're making me go back? I can't go back."

"Of course you can. You just hop in the car and walk right through the same door you ran out of."

"But, but, Terry's there," I whined, as I dragged my feet to the door.

"He sure is. And he'll be there tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. You're gonna have to learn to deal with it."

"Yeah, but not today. Please? Can't I stay home today?"

"Hurt feelings do not earn you a get outta school free card, young lady." Miss Angie leaned her back against the door and jingled the keys in her hand.

I made one last desperate attempt to stay home. “I can help out around the salon.”

“No ma’am.”

“Why not?”

“The salon’s my job. Your job is to go to school.” Miss Angie slid on her sunglasses and held open the door for me. I trudged over to the door, then stopped. “What am I supposed to do when I see Terry?”

Miss Angie smiled. “Say hello.”

* * * * *

Thankfully, I didn’t have to say hello to Terry. I managed to avoid him for the rest of the day—though I was constantly checking my phone in case he texted an apology to me. No text message came. And no voicemail. What did I do wrong? I was the one who supposedly set Terry up with Emily—by accident—but the result was still the same: Terry had a new girlfriend. And how did he repay me? By not showing up for tutoring and then yelling at me in the hallway in front of the whole school. Then it hit me: Emily! Emily must have been bad-mouthing me to Terry after our argument on Sunday. She must have told Terry that I came down to her house and cussed her out; and how she was all scared to death that I would beat her down like I did to Jenelle. That had to be it. Why else would Terry be so nasty to me? Emily poisoned him against me. I had already seen, firsthand, how good Emily was at playing head games. Who knew that cornball could be so scandalous?

Wednesday morning, I woke up feeling hollow inside. What was there to look forward to? Lunch with Miss Wallace, the guidance counselor? There was no way in the world I would set foot in the cafeteria again and watch Emily and Terry sitting together like a couple of love birds. More like love rats. I rolled over and checked my phone. No message from Terry. I groaned. And I could forget about pretending to be sick. Miss Angie would have demanded to see a broken bone or a fever of 110 degrees before she let me miss school again. As I made my way to the shower, I saw Miss Angie in Chelsea’s room.

“Hey.” I said, groggily.

“Hey.” Miss Angie and Chelsea grunted back, they seemed to be caught up in an intense conversation. Way too intense for six o’clock in the morning. I shrugged it off and disappeared into the bathroom. I had my own drama to worry about.

An hour later, I had showered, dressed, then pulled my hair into a ponytail. I must have taken longer than I thought, because by the time I got downstairs, Chelsea was gone. “Well, excuse me!” I said, then shrugged it off and proceeded to spread some strawberry jam on a piece of toast. *Chelsea probably snuck off for an early morning bump and grind with Alonzo*, I thought as I stared at my toast. I lost my appetite.

At 3:50, I arrived home feeling quite proud of myself. I survived “The Day with No Friends.” I even made some new friends. Since Emily had moved her seat to the other side of the room in English Comp class, the seat next to me was now occupied by Greg Gilmore. He was kind of cute. A little pudgy around the waist, but he was so funny. BET’s Comic View-funny, not “I’m-only-laughing-at-your-dumb-jokes-to-be-nice” funny, like Terry.

Maybe if I flirted with Greg a little, he would ask me to the Christmas dance. A nice suit jacket would cover up that gut easily. At least I knew I’d have fun. He would be cracking jokes, and I would be cracking up laughing; and Terry would be all miserable stuck with Emily—who danced like she had concrete blocks on her feet. Sweet Revenge! But my dream was quickly dashed when class ended and Greg stood up. He was a good two inches shorter than me. Oh well, I could always where flats.

I picked up another friend at lunch time, Kayla Briggs, the first and only Black hippie I had ever met. Kayla called herself a naturalist. No perms in her hair, she preferred dreds. She didn’t care about designer labels, instead choosing natural fibers. No makeup. No soda. No candy. No fun—in my mind. But the girl was a bundle of energy and positivity. The only reason I crossed paths with this bundle of sunshine was because Kayla liked to volunteer in the Guidance Office, hanging up motivational posters and serving as a peer counselor during her lunch break. That was the reason Kayla told the counselor she was there. But she told me she was there because she couldn’t bear to be in the cafeteria with Jenelle and her plastic posse.

“Their energy is so negative,” she told me, between bites of hummus, “All of that gossip and hate, totally ruins my appetite.” The sight of that hummus was ruining my appetite, but any enemy of Jenelle’s was a friend of mine, so the two of us became fast friends.

The other benefit of *The Day with No Friends* was, I caught myself actually learning. Because I wasn’t spending all my time daydreaming about Terry and drawing his name in little hearts in my notebooks, I basically had nothing left to do but pay attention in class. Friendless but on the honor roll. That wasn’t such a bad deal, was it?

In any event, I survived the day. I flopped onto my bed, feeling quite pleased with myself. On the windowsill, my African violet plant was starting to come to life and seemed to be smiling at me. I smiled back, remembering one more benefit to *The Day with No Friends*. Not running my mouth in study hall today, meant I got my homework done in school. Now, I was free to kick back on my bed and watch a little Judge Judy before dinner.

Boom! The door flew open—more like kicked open. I sat up with a start. “Chelsea! Girl, what is your problem?”

Chelsea stormed into my room with fire blazing in her eyes. “You told!”
“Told what?”

“Don’t play dumb, Toya. I know you told Mommy.”

“Told her what?”

“You told Mommy that I’ve been having sex with Alonzo.”

I smirked. It seemed so stupid. Like I didn’t have bigger problems on my mind than worrying about Chelsea and her miniature boyfriend. The grin on my face made Chelsea’s face turn sour. “You think it’s funny?”

“No.” I said, biting my lip. “Well, maybe just a little funny. I mean, what makes you think I told Miss Angie about you and Lonzo?”

“Because you’re the only one I told. She was in my room first thing in the morning trying to have a talk.”

I cringed. “So that’s why you two were so serious this morning.” I had to laugh, thinking about the look on Chelsea’s face. Now that I thought about it, Chelsea did have that *I’d rather be dead than have this conversation* look that I normally had when being lectured by Miss Angie.

“It’s not funny!” Chelsea grabbed a book from my desk and fired it at me. I ducked. I wasn’t smiling anymore.

“Listen, little girl, you’d better chill the hell out! Now, I promised you I wasn’t going to say anything to your mom, and I didn’t.”

“Then how did she find out?”

“How should I know? She’s a mom. Mom’s just find things out.” I rolled over on my side and shifted my gaze back to Judge Judy.

But Chelsea wasn’t finished. She stepped right in front of the TV, her hands clamped on her skinny hips. “Well, I didn’t tell her, and Alonzo didn’t tell her. So that just leaves you.”

“Why would I say anything?”

“Because you’re jealous.”

I turned the TV off. I must not have heard her correctly.

“You heard me,” Chelsea said, with all the courage she could muster. “You’re jealous cuz I got a man and you don’t.”

“Ain’t nobody thinking about you and your little Sesame Street romance?” My voice was shrill. I was pissed that I was being forced to defend myself against the accusations of this child.

Chelsea waved me off. “Whatever. We’re happy and you’re all alone, so you want to bust up our relationship.”

I set down the remote and sat straight up. I had to sit up, so my neck could roll properly. “First of all, I’m not trying to bust up your relationship. You don’t even have a relationship. You’re just two little kids playing with some new toy. Dummies! You weren’t even doing it right, anyway. I wish I had been the one to tell your mom, because you two had no business messing around like that.”

“Oh, it’s okay for you to do it but—”

“It wasn’t okay for me either. You could’ve gotten pregnant, STD’s...”

“End up taking your clothes off on the internet,” Chelsea said with a

smart-ass look on her face.

I was speechless. Was it a full moon or something? Another little geek just stepped to me; dared me to bust her in the mouth. I jumped to my feet and let my full height tower over Chelsea. Glaring down on her, I said through clenched teeth, "You'd better get outta my room before I squash you, you little cockroach."

Chelsea flinched a little but did not back down. "I don't have to leave. It's my house. You get out!"

That stung—though I tried hard not to show it. That was the thing, after all. No matter how many times these foster families smiled in my face, gave me nice stuff, and told me I was part of the family, they always had that one trump card up their sleeve. *"It's my house, get out!"* In other words: you don't really belong here, LaToya Young. You don't belong anywhere. You don't have anything. So just disappear.

"Chelsea!"

Miss Angie's voice pierced the silence that filled the space between me and Chelsea. A few seconds later, Miss Angie could be heard hustling up the steps. "I could hear you two all the way out in the driveway."

"Mommy, she—"

Miss Angie put up a hand, which shut Chelsea up. "I don't want to hear it. That is no way to talk to Toya. Now apologize."

Tears sprang up in Chelsea's eyes. "I won't do it! I hate her, Mommy! I hate her!" Chelsea ran to her room, wailing like a fire engine. Her door slammed. Then came the squeak of her mattress as she collapsed into bed, screaming into her pillow.

Miss Angie turned her eyes to me. "You okay?" Though the words didn't come out like a question as much as a demand.

I nodded.

"You want to tell me what that was all about?"

I shook my head.

"Well, I'm not going to force it right now. Let's all just stay in our rooms and cool off."

I nodded.

Miss Angie was about to leave, but something about the faraway look in my eyes must have made her pause. I was clearly thinking about something, churning it over and over in my mind. Miss Angie said, "What Chelsea said shook you up, didn't it?"

I didn't move.

"Well, she's right about one thing. This is her house. But who pays the mortgage around here?...Huh?"

"You do." My words were barely audible.

"So, who decides who stays or who goes?"

"You do."

“You got it. So, before you go packing your bags and running away in the middle of the night, just remember one thing...”

“What?”

“All this pretty weave I put in your hair? Not only does it look good...” She brushed the bangs from my face. “It comes with its own tracking device too. So, you can run, but you can’t hide. Remember that.”

I smiled. I didn’t want to, but Miss Angie always had a way of seeing right through me and knowing just what I needed to hear. At that moment, I needed to hear that I still had a home.

Check one more friend off the list. I hadn’t thought of Chelsea as a friend, but there was a definite void in my life without the Motor Mouth. As cool as Miss Angie was, she would never sit up all night and watch a *Real Housewives of Atlanta* marathon on TV. That was Chelsea. It was Chelsea who walked to school with me every morning and told me little-known facts about squirrels and other animals we passed along the way—at least she used to. But for the past two mornings, Chelsea got up an hour earlier, scarfed down her breakfast, then raced out the door before I could even finish my shower.

And since Chelsea wasn’t speaking to me, that meant Alonzo wasn’t allowed to talk to me either. That wasn’t too much of a loss for me, except for the fact that his mom always packed him little snacks in his book bag—because he got light-headed when he went more than three hours without eating. So, he always shared his snacks with me during art class. I had endured the past two days with my stomach instinctively growling during sixth period, yearning for a fruit roll-up or a granola bar.

Now it was Friday, and I walked home from school, alone again, pondering how my life had changed so quickly. Last Friday, I was getting my hair done, all hyped up for my big date with Terry. Last Friday, I didn’t have a lot of friends, but I had a few good friends, which was more than enough. Last Friday, I felt like I belonged. Now it was gone. Like a pickpocket snuck up behind me and snatched my happy little life away. I walked with my head down, my eyes on the ground, as if hoping to find pieces of the happiness I had lost down there.

“Hey, beautiful.”

I stopped in my tracks. No. I dared not look behind me.

“Want some company?”

That voice. It was heavy and oily, sliding down my spine, making me ill. It couldn’t be. Not today. Of all days. My creepy stalker was back. But there was something I didn’t hear. The sound of an engine, like that first day when he followed me home from school in his giant, black Escalade. I didn’t hear the hum of his engine. The crackle of his tires on the gravelly road. I just heard that voice. And the sound of his breathing. And the sound of his

footsteps. I willed myself to peek over my shoulder. My heart sank. Mr. Rick was walking right behind me.

CHAPTER 17

I didn't know where he came from or how long he had been walking behind me. I didn't even know why it was that he popped up during what had already been one of the worst weeks of my life. And I wasn't sticking around for any answers, either. As soon as I saw Mr. Rick, his gold tooth glittering in the sun, I took off running. There was no way he could have caught up to me in those cowboy boots, but I didn't look back.

As I hurdled over the third fence and nearly got bit by the Rodriguez's gigantic German shepherd, Tiny, while scrambling through their backyard, I made up my mind. I would not spend one more day running from Mr. Rick. I would call my social worker as soon as I got home. My relationship with my mother was on the line, but it was a risk I had to take. If Tamika couldn't accept the truth, that was her problem. I got used to making it without her before, I could do it again.

Who was I fooling, anyway? Were things ever really going to be the same between me and my mother? I couldn't turn back time and pretend all those horrible things hadn't happened between us. Yes, things were getting better, but there was still a huge gap dividing us—a gap filled with lies and accusations, cruel words and deep wounds to the heart that all of the ginger ale in the world could never soothe away.

But ginger ale was just what the doctor ordered to soothe my nerves today. As soon as I forced my trembling fingers to unlock the front door, I made a beeline for the kitchen. The cool fizzy drink raced down my throat and battled the anxiety that feverishly attacked my stomach. I sat down and closed my eyes for just a brief moment. Instantly, the image of Mr. Rick stalking behind me with a sinister grin on his face, flashed before my eyes. I popped right up and searched for my cell phone. I had Miss Meagan's number on speed dial.

In the dining room, I rooted through my book bag for my phone, which

must have sunk down to the bottom under a ton of books, papers, pens, a hairbrush, and a bag of potato chips. Pulling the phone from the bag, I caught a glimpse of something from the corner of my eye. Sitting on top of today's mail was a box. I saw the box was from Amazon and instantly knew it was for me. A week ago, I went on Amazon.com to do some Christmas shopping. My gifts were here already.

Last year, I didn't really have anybody to buy gifts for, except for a couple of friends at school. This year, I had a bunch of people to shop for—though, lately, the list was beginning to shrink. I even picked up a little something for Chelsea, in spite of the stank attitude she'd been giving me recently. A gift basket filled with lotion, soap, and body butter. Peaches and cream scented. However, I was seriously considering returning it and using the money to buy my own sweet-smelling stuff.

From Amazon, I ordered a copy of *The Wiz* on DVD for my mom. Holding the DVD in my hands, it transmitted a memory to my brain: dancing around that tiny apartment with my mother singing *Ease on Down the Road*. Next, I saw a fuzzy red foot dangling out of the box.

"Elmo!" I gushed. A Tickle Me Elmo Doll. I held the fuzzy red creature with the bug eyes in my arms and gave him a squeeze. He giggled and jiggled in my hands. I sighed. It was the gift I bought for my future brother or sister. Already, I had fallen in love with the idea of being a big sister. Taking the baby out, buying it cool clothes. If it was a boy, I would go to his football games and teach him all about girls. If it was a girl, I would protect her from Mr. Rick.

I stared at my cell phone. Making the call to Miss Meagan meant I might not ever get the chance to see my brother or sister play with Elmo; nor would I get to hear my mom sing to *The Wiz* again. What could it hurt if I waited another ten days? If I waited, I could still have Christmas with my mom. We made all these wonderful plans. I looked forward to this visit for weeks. In a way, telling my social worker about Mr. Rick, would be like allowing him to take this special Christmas away from me—and he had already taken so much from me.

I put the phone back in my bag. I was a fast runner. I could dodge Mr. Rick for ten more days.

* * * * *

"You've gotta do me a favor." Who knew such simple words would be the password that would open the door to the craziest Christmas Dance in the history of Christmas Dances?

"No need to beg, girl. You know I've got your back." The voice of Dwayne Kennedy, a boy I knew from my old neighborhood. We grew up together. He was the son of my mom's good friend, Miss Jasmine. I have known Dwayne since birth. We played Batman and Robin together. Chased

after the ice cream man together. Made mud pies, got in mud fights, and ended up taking baths together. He was like a brother to me. But something happened when puberty struck good old Dwayne. He turned into another horny, teenage boy who was always trying to climb into my pants. He had no shot. Having once sat up in the emergency room all night with Dwayne and his mother because he got a quarter stuck up his nose, there was no way that I could ever see him as anything other than “Dwayne the Pain.” Dwayne, the pain in the butt, who once ate all my Play-Doh and threw up on my Easter dress.

But whenever I needed him, Dwayne was there.

This time, I really needed him.

At first, I had no desire to go to the Christmas Dance. Especially after Greg Gilmore got suspended indefinitely for smoking a blunt in the boys’ bathroom. Fat, funny, and stupid were such horrible qualities in a man. After I got over my initial disgust at the news, I took this incident as a sign that I really didn’t need to go to the dance. Spending four hours getting all dressed up just to hang out with a bunch of people I didn’t like? I’d be much happier curled up on the sofa, eating a Cinnabon, and watching Law & Order reruns on TV.

However, after spending the rest of the week creeping through back alleys, trying to dodge Mr. Rick, I was worn out. A night out in a pretty dress and a fancy hairdo was just what I needed to unwind. There were a lot of boys from my past I could have called who would have come up, in an instant, to take me to the dance. But they would all want something in return. And I wasn’t up for a wrestling match in the backseat of some dude’s car. I didn’t have to worry about that with Dwayne. Not that he wouldn’t try to put the moves on me. I just knew how to handle him.

“So, what should I wear to this little shindig, huh?” Dwayne asked.

“Something classy.”

“Girl, everything I’ve got is classy.”

“No, Dwayne.” I rolled my eyes. Flashes of Dwayne in a red derby, red velvet suit, and red crocodile shoes were still burned in my memory. That was what he wore two years ago when his mom got married. To be fair, the bride was wearing a white leather mini dress, which was short enough to show off the tattoo of a black panther, crawling up her size 16 thighs. So, Dwayne got his bad taste honestly. “Not ghetto classy. I mean, GQ classy. This school ain’t in da hood. You’ve got to—

“Don’t worry, Boo. I’ve got just the thing.”

“What? What is ‘the thing?’ I need details.”

“Don’t you trust me, Toy?”

I responded with silence.

“Toya, I’ve got your back. Trust me, I’m gonna be looking so fine, all the girls’ll be tearing off their panties and the boys will be crying in their Dock

Siders.”

That did not make me feel better. “Whatever. Just don’t embarrass me.”

Dwayne tried to sound hurt. “Aw, come on! I wouldn’t embarrass you—at least not on purpose,” he snickered.

“All right then. I’ll see you on Saturday.”

Just before I hung up the phone, I heard Dwayne yell, “Yo Toya, wait!”

“What?”

“I was just thinking...that dance is going to be wrapping up pretty late. Too late to drive all the way back to Philly. Where am I gonna sleep? Your place? Or should we uh...book a motel room?...Toya?”

Dial tone.

* * * * *

Saturday night. Dwayne blasted the horn on his Ford Taurus outside of the Hughes residence at 11:00 pm. The dance started at 8:00. Dwayne leaned on his horn for the fifth time when I called his cell to inform him that Miss Angie would not allow me to go anywhere with him until he came inside and introduced himself like a gentleman. He double-parked and raced inside.

Inside the house, Dwayne shook Miss Angie’s hand, helped himself to a handful of mints from the candy dish, and scoped out the big screen TV in the living room. Chelsea was still grounded, so she couldn’t go to the dance; therefore, she stayed in her room sulking the whole time Dwayne was downstairs. Surprisingly, Dwayne was holding his own with Miss Angie. He told her all about himself: His part-time job at Target, his plans to go to college to be an astronaut, his volunteer work reading to the blind. All lies, but he was still making a great impression. All the way up to the point where he caught a glimpse of me coming downstairs in an ice blue, strapless cocktail dress.

“Damn, girl! You look good!” He blurted out.

I thanked Dwayne, graciously, and then hustled him out the door before he said something else that would make Miss Angie pull a plug on this whole night—or take out a restraining order on him.

“I thought you were going to bring the Range Rover!” I whined, watching Dwayne strain and struggle to pry the car door open. “I couldn’t. Moms had to work late.”

“Oh. How is Miss Jasmine?”

“Fat.”

I shoved him. “Don’t say that! She’s your mother.”

“She knows she’s fat. Told me to make sure I bring her a doggy bag from the dance.”

“If they’re still serving dinner. We’re three hours late. I told you to be here

at—”

“Look, you don’t know what I had to go through to get to you, girl. Didn’t have no gas money. So, I had to hop on the bus to see if my dad had some. He was broke, as usual, so I was back on the bus, down to my mom’s job to bum some money off her.” As he ranted, Dwayne continued to wrestle with the door. “She cussed me out. I had to promise her I’d get a dozen donuts while I was out. And then they was all out of glazed donuts at the donut place, so I was driving all over the city looking for some damn glazed donuts. Then I come here and get grilled by that mean lady, and now you want to get on my back cuz I’m late.”

One last jerk and the door popped open.

“I’m sorry.” I genuinely felt bad. “I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t know,” Dwayne pouted. “Cuz you didn’t ask. I haven’t seen you face-to-face in almost two years and you didn’t even give me a hug.”

“You’re right. My bad.” I reached up and gave him a hug. Dwayne had gone through a growth spurt. Even in heels, I needed to stand on my tiptoes to get my arms around him. He was still skinny, though. With long, lean arms and big hands that were slowly inching their way to my butt.

I pushed him away. “Dwayne!”

“I couldn’t help it. It just looks so, so...delicious.”

“Delicious, huh? More delicious than that Play-Doh you stole from me, and ate it,” I teased.

He buried his face in his hands. “Are you ever going to let me live that down?”

“Not tonight,” I said sweetly.

There were less than two hours left in the dance, but that was more than enough time for Dwayne to make his mark. The Excelsior High School cafeteria had been magically transformed into a winter wonderland. Twinkling lights surrounded the room, decorated in silvery blues and whites, with enormous snowflakes dangling from the vaulted ceiling. The DJ spun a mix of pop, rock, rap, alternative and techno music, but the dance floor was empty. Everyone was huddled up in their little cliques, talking and laughing...or looking bored out of their minds.

Me and Dwayne handed over our tickets and vlogged for pictures at the door. Someone had the brilliant idea of sticking a piece of mistletoe over the entrance to the cafeteria. I posed for my picture, then turned to find a pair of lips bearing down on me. I ducked and Dwayne ended up kissing the soda machine.

“Thirsty?” I said, playfully as I strolled inside.

Thankfully, Dwayne heeded my warning not to embarrass me and came in

a conservative black suit. Sure, it was a black suit with a snakeskin pattern. But it was so dark in the room, no one would notice. All they could see was me on the arm of a tall, dark, handsome stranger.

Dwayne was in awe of all the glitz and glitter. “Man, this jawn is nice!” he said. “You weren’t playin, Toya. If I went to a school like this, I’d go to school every day—or at least twice a week.”

My eyes automatically scanned the room for Terry. No sign of him or Emily. But I did spot Jenelle, laughing like a hyena—a hyena in a sparkling red gown, with a plunging neckline, desperate for attention. Devon brushed by us carrying two cups of punch in the direction of the hyena. I dragged Dwayne in the opposite direction.

Most of the tables were full, but I spotted a couple of empty seats with Kristi Wells and the cheerleaders. Not the super popular ones, but the second-string cheerleaders. The ones that formed the base of the pyramid when they cheered at the basketball games. Not popular yet, but patiently waiting their turn for the upperclassmen to graduate. Next year, they could claim their rightful place at the top of the pyramid. There were three cheerleaders, including Kristi, at the table, and their dates, a couple of bench warmers from the football team. They reluctantly made room for me and Dwayne.

Dwayne was only at the table for a hot minute because he could see they were starting to clear out the buffet.

“The food!” he yelled, then seemed to vanish into thin air. A moment later, Dwayne was back, carrying a plate weighed down with rack of lamb, lobster tails, two baked potatoes, asparagus tips and dinner rolls. He wrapped the lobster tails in a napkin and whispered to me, “Can you put these in your purse?”

“What? No!”

“Please? It’s for my mom.”

Through clenched teeth, I said, “I am not putting that mess in my purse. Now, put it down. Put it down!”

“Fine.” Dwayne dumped the tails back onto his plate. For the next three minutes, he inhaled his food in silence.

“Did you get me anything?” I asked, noticing that the buffet had been cleared out. My stomach started grumbling.

Dwayne offered me an asparagus tip. I knocked his hand away and snagged a dinner roll from his plate. “Hey!”

I shoved half the roll in my mouth, before he could snatch it back.

“So, uh...Dwayne,” Kristi chimed in from the other side of the table, “What school do you go to?”

Dwayne stopped shoveling food in his mouth long enough to say, “Oh, me? I don’t go to school.”

The cheerleaders’ eyes widened.

I nearly choked on my dinner roll. “Y-yes, he does! He goes to Overbrook.”

“No. I *used* to go to Overbrook,” Dwayne corrected me, then turned back to Kristi. “But I dropped out.”

“You dropped out? Why?” Kristi asked.

“It’s a waste. I make much more cheddar hustling.”

Now the football players’ eyes widened too. “Hustling? You mean, like, selling drugs.” Barry Stewart, Kristi’s date, asked in a hushed tone.

“Hell yeah!”

“Hell no!” I interceded. “He’s just joking. He’s always joking like that.” I tried to shove a lobster tail in his mouth to shut him up, but he dodged me.

“See, Toya knows me as *Deemayne*, but on the streets they know me as Detox.”

Paris Green, who was seated next to Dwayne, cocked her head, “Detox? That’s a weird name for a drug dealer.”

“It’s called irony, Baby! Man! Don’t they teach y’all nothing in this fancy school? Besides, the name messes with the cops’ heads...” And he was off. I knew that if I didn’t rein Dwayne in soon, he’d never come back to earth. I wore a smile on my face, but beneath the table, I kicked and pinched Dwayne with all my might. The boy wouldn’t shut up. Just when I was about to lose my cool and strangle Dwayne with my bare hands, something caught my eye: Terry and Emily on the dance floor.

The DJ was playing a slow Maroon 5 tune, which drew a few couples to the dance floor. Terry looked so handsome in his black suit and white bow tie, which matched Emily’s frilly white dress, with a big satin bow in the back. They weren’t dancing as much as they were swaying and talking. What could they be talking about? The more they smiled and laughed, the deeper my heart sank. Emily wore a corsage on her wrist. Terry certainly bought it for her. I forgot to buy the corsage that Dwayne was supposed to give to me. But then again, drug-dealing gangstas don’t give their women corsages—even fake drug-dealing gangstas.

“...So, then I rolled up in my Hummer and pulled out my gat—uh that’s slang for my gun,” Dwayne explained to his eager audience. “I put the gat to his head and said: I’m gonna count to three and you’d best have my money or else I’ll—”

I sprang to my feet. “Let’s dance!” I couldn’t bear to hear anymore of Dwayne’s blatant theft of plotlines from that TV show, *The Wire*. Before he could answer, I grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away.

Kelly Clarkson now serenaded the young couples on the dance floor. “Yo, I can’t dance to this. That DJ don’t know no Usher or Neyo. I’ll even take something old-school like, Jodeci or Luther Vandross.”

I shook my head. “Anything is better than listening to you and your wild ass stories. Why are you putting on a show?”

"Aw, relax, I'm just having a little fun." He slid his arms around my waist, and we moved to the music. "Besides, I ain't the only one putting on a show."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. What's his name?"

"Who?" I hooted like an owl, pretending I had no idea what Dwayne was saying.

"You know who. The dude that's got you all worked up, dragging me out to the burbs to represent for you."

"There is no dude," I said.

"Good," he said. "Cuz I already don't like him."

"Why? I-I mean, assuming there was a dude—and there isn't—but if there was one, why don't you like him?"

"Because he's dumb. He's got a fox like you interested in him, and he's not standing here dancing with you. He must be stupid—or blind."

That made me smile. This was why I could never date Dwayne. I never wanted to lose this part of him. I rested my head on his shoulder and sighed.

"Don't change, Toya," he said. "I'm happy you're in a better place and all, but don't let this place change you."

"I won't." I tore my eyes away from Terry and Emily and looked up at Dwayne. "Why would I change? I'm the girlfriend of the baddest gangsta on the streets of Philly."

Dwayne laughed. "Now you're talkin'! I'm the king of the ghetto and you're my ghetto queen." He kissed me on the forehead, then tried to steal a kiss on the lips. I blocked him with the palm of my hand. He sucked his teeth. "Come on! The King of the Ghetto can't get no lovin'?"

I gave him a playful punch in the gut, followed by a hug. As I embraced Dwayne, I felt a strange lump press against my hip. "What is that?"

Dwayne gave me a devilish grin, "It's all me, baby. It's all me."

I rolled my eyes, as I stuck my hand in his pocket. I pulled out an oval-shaped object wrapped in tin foil. "Is this a baked potato?"

"Hey!" Dwayne snatched it back from me and shoved it back into his pocket. "It's the only place I could put it. You wouldn't let me use your purse."

I snickered. "You are so crazy." A sudden wave of gratitude washed over me. I was so glad that I came tonight. I was so glad to be laughing, instead of sitting at home feeling sorry for myself. I was so glad to be there with someone I didn't have to put on airs for. After all, I may have seen Dwayne eat Play-Doh, but he saw me eat a mud pie. I rose up on my tiptoes and kissed my good friend on the cheek.

"What was that for?"

"Cuz I'm glad you're here."

"Not too late to get that motel room."

I laughed, "Go on and get the room. I'm sure you and your baked potato

will have a wonderful night together.”

* * * * *

We danced to one more song. The DJ didn't have any Jodeci but he had some vintage Michael Jackson. At Dwayne's request, he played "The Lady in My Life." Dwayne spun me around, dipped me, while singing in his best Michael Jackson voice. When the song was over and we returned to the table, Dwayne resumed his role as Detox. This time I played along.

"Tell them about the time you got in a car chase with the cops, Detox, baby."

"Hey! I think I saw that on the news," Kristi gasped. By now, Dwayne's audience had more than doubled, everyone crowding around the table to hear Detox's death-defying adventures.

Then he shifted gears on them. He started telling them how he'd been considering getting out of "the game." His music career was about to take off. Detox was a rapper too. To prove it, Dwayne broke out into the worst free-style rap I ever heard. The rest of the crowd thought he was amazing, urging Dwayne to take the microphone from the DJ and spit some rhymes.

Of course, he did. Before I could say: "Detox no!" Dwayne yanked the mic from the DJ and paraded across the stage, lettin' it flow. If he did this back in Philly, he would have been booed off the stage. Obviously, there weren't a lot of experts on rap here at Excelsior, because right before my eyes, Dwayne became a rock star. He had the whole crowd moving. The dance floor was jam-packed. I never laughed so hard. I staggered to my feet and made my way through the masses to the girls' bathroom—which was easier said than done, since a couple of boys got a hold of another piece of mistletoe and were working their way through the crowd, stealing kisses from the girls.

The bathroom was unusually empty for a school dance. There was typically at least one girl in there crying because she didn't get asked to dance or some stupid boy broke her heart. Usually, girls had to wait in line just to get to the mirror. I could only hear one girl sniffing in one of the bathroom stalls. I took a quick whiz, washed my hands, then checked myself out in the mirror. My hair was perfect, not a strand out of place. I pulled out my compact and dabbed the moisture from my face.

The sniffing girl flushed the toilet. I was torn between hurrying up and getting out of there so the girl could have some privacy, or taking my time so I could be nosey. Before I could make up my mind, the stall door opened. Emily stepped out.

"Emily?" my lips announced, before I could catch myself.

"Hello Toya," she replied, flatly. Emily strolled over to the sinks with her head held high, like her eyes weren't all red and puffy.

"Were you in there crying?"

She ignored me, scrubbing her hands raw, then reaching for the paper

towels. I blocked her path. “What happened? Did Terry—”

“Oh, you’d just love that, wouldn’t you?” Emily snapped. “I can’t believe you! Standing there pretending to be all concerned, when really you’re hoping—praying—that Terry and I had broken up.”

“Don’t get nasty. I told you, I don’t care about you and Terrence. I was just trying to be nice.”

Emily scoffed—she actually scoffed at me. “You? Nice? That’s the funniest thing I’ve ever heard. Thanks, Toya. I needed a good laugh.” She strolled out of the room, leaving me speechless. And before I could blink an eye, Emily was back.

“Oh, and by the way,” she leaned her slender frame against the doorway. “Terry and I have never been better.” She spun around and sashayed away.

“Who the hell was that?” I mumbled.

Another toilet flushed. Truly startling me. I didn’t think there was anyone else in the bathroom. Jenelle stepped out with a satisfied grin on her face. She stumbled onto something juicy, and she knew it.

“Hey.” She had that sing-songy tone to her voice.

“You were in that stall a long time, Jenelle. What’s the matter? The lobster tails giving you the bubble guts?”

“Oh, no. I wanted to make sure I had a good seat for the show.”

“Oh, you wanna see a show?” I stepped to Jenelle. I may have been willing to put up with Emily’s mouth, but I was not about to take it from this little wench. “I can give you a show!”

Jenelle shrank back. She did not want to give me a chance to ruin her eight-hundred-dollar gown, or her makeup, or any other parts of her body that were within my reach. “S-s-stay away from me,” Jenelle whimpered, “I mean it!” She slid past me and ran out of the bathroom, not even bothering to wash her hands.

I walked out of the bathroom shaking my head. I went in feeling giddy, having so much fun with Dwayne, a.k.a. Detox. Now, I felt like something that needed to be scraped off the bottom of a shoe. Yet, as soon as I made it back to the cafeteria, my spirits lifted again.

Detox stopped rapping, mercifully, but he hadn’t relinquished the mic. He was on stage hyping up the crowd by chanting, “Party people in the house, get your hands up! Get your hands up!”

The crowd responded by pumping their fists in the air.

“All the ladies in the house say: Rock it.”

The girls chanted: “Rock it...Rock it...”

“All the fellas in da house say: Ho!”

Deep male voices yelled, “Ho!...Ho!...Ho!”

Pretty soon, the male and female chants blended together: “Rock it...Ho!...Rock it...Ho!...Rock it...Ho!”

“Rock it, Ho?” That didn’t sound quite right to me, but nobody else

seemed to notice, so I joined in, "Rock it...Rock it..."

Detox yelled, "All the ugly people be quiet!"

The crowd screamed at the top of their lungs.

The next time I looked up, Kristi and Paris joined Detox on the stage, swinging their blonde hair and gyrating their hips against his body, like the girls in the music videos. I wondered if Dwayne still had that baked potato in his pocket. I laughed to myself. Soon, tons of students were climbing onto the stage, against the futile protests of the chaperones. The rowdy teens started chanting, "Detox! Detox! Detox!"

A hand reached down and tapped my shoulder. I looked up and saw the hand belonged to the man of the hour, Detox. I grabbed his hand and he hoisted me onto the stage. It had been so long since I danced like that. Sweat poured down my body, matting my weave to my head, but that didn't stop me. I kicked off my shoes and let the music carry me away. While I was on stage, I was in another place. I was a million miles from my troubles. Some place where everything around me was beautiful.

From the stage, I could also see the doorway. The mistletoe hanging from it. The very spot where Terry leaned over and pressed his lips against Emily's for a kiss. It seemed, to me, to last for hours. I thought I heard myself scream, but it was Paris actually shrieking because the DJ just put on her favorite song. Amidst a sea of pulsating bodies, I was frozen. I couldn't take my eyes off that doorway. It wasn't until Terry took Emily by the hand and led her away, that I regained the feeling in my legs.

* * * * *

Instead of being the next girl sniffing in the bathroom stall, I found comfort in Dwayne's car. I lifted the keys from the pocket of his suit jacket back at the table and found myself sitting in the car listening to love songs on the radio. No tears. I thought I'd be crying. I wanted to cry, but not one tear came.

It was officially over for me and Terry. Somewhere in my heart, I hoped that one day he would come to his senses, and we might still have a chance. Not anymore. The sight of him kissing Emily tainted him. He was no longer pure in my eyes. Never again would I be able to look at his face and not see Emily's lips attached to it.

The love songs were interrupted by a commercial for some Mexican restaurant. I could go for a burrito right now. All I had to eat was that dinner roll and a piece of asparagus. Too bad I didn't have a driver's license. I would have to get Detox to take time out of his busy drug-dealing/rapping schedule to teach me how to drive. Then I could go and get my own burrito. That's what I felt like doing, stuffing my face with burritos and nachos with cheese until I was four hundred pounds. But that thought reminded me of Taco Bell and that day Terry rescued me from the evil gas station attendant on his

motorcycle. How he fed me Taco Bell and listened as I poured out all my troubles. I remembered how safe and secure I felt, riding on the back of his bike, clinging to him as if my life depended on it.

“Man!” Even burritos reminded me of Terry. What a nightmare!

A thud came at the driver’s side door, causing my head to jerk. It was Dwayne, yanking the door open. “There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“I’ve just been sitting here. I don’t feel good.”

Dwayne flashed a big smile. His teeth seemed to glow in the dark. “Ah. I know what you need. You need a little Detox.”

I raised an index finger to my mouth and made a gagging motion. “No thanks. You mind taking me home?”

“So soon? The night is still young.” He pointed at the dashboard clock, which read 1:09 am. “There’s supposed to be an after-party at this girl Jenny’s house. I heard it was going to be the hype. Her pops is supposed to be this big time gangsta rapper.”

I lifted my head from the headrest. “Jenny? You mean, Jenelle?”

“Yeah, Jenelle. That’s her name.”

As much as I wanted to see the look on Jenelle’s face when I plopped my butt on her mom’s expensive leather couch, I just didn’t have the energy. “Nah, I’m beat.” Releasing a big yawn. “Just take me home, please?”

“Well, do you mind if I go without you?” Dwayne asked, unsure if he was violating some unknown Toya-rule like: *Thou shalt not be allowed to have fun if your date is miserable.*

“Huh? Oh yeah, sure. Go. Have fun.”

Dwayne’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. “Really?” He immediately stuck his head out the window and yelled, “Yo! It’s cool. She said I could go.”

I looked through my window and saw that he was talking to Kristi and Paris, who did a little cheer from the sidewalk. The two girls, apparently, had ditched their dates because, a second later, they were piling into Dwayne’s car.

“Since when do drug dealers drive Tauruses?” Kristi asked, as she slipped on her seatbelt.

“Come on, now. A young Black man, driving through the suburbs in a black Hummer? I’d be begging for the cops to pull me over.”

Paris nodded, then looked at Kristi like she was clueless.

“Yeah, I keep this car for nights like this,” Dwayne continued, “when I want to go incognito.” He cackled and the cheerleaders cackled with him. Another sappy love song poured from the radio.

“What the hell?” Dwayne mashed the off button. “Yo, this music’s bringing me down.” He flipped through the radio stations until he found a Meek Mill song and cranked up the volume until the windows quaked. As the green Taurus squealed out of the parking lot, I slumped down in my seat and prayed for this night to hurry up and be over.

CHAPTER 18

Mercifully, the night did come to an end. But the image of Terry kissing Emily haunted me for the rest of the night. To make matters worse, the hussy actually showed up at church the next day. They had a big Christmas service at the church, with lots of music, poetry and the most spectacular dancing. Terry performed a dramatic monologue he had written. Emily must have come out to support him.

It was a very moving piece. Terry was dressed in a robe and wore a headpiece on his head, a shepherd telling the story of his journey to see Baby Jesus. When he got to the part where he saw a brilliant star in the sky and was visited by angels, the congregation could sense his excitement. They felt his fear, in attempting to outrun King Herod's soldiers, after his decree that all the newborn males should be killed. They shouted with joy, right along with Terry, as he beheld the babe wrapped in swaddling clothing. The congregation rose to their feet and applauded Terry—genuine applause, not the polite kind people give when they don't want to hurt someone's feelings.

The only one not standing was me. Not because I didn't think he was good. I thought he was amazing. I just hated him at the moment. I hated him for not liking me. For skipping over me and giving his heart to someone else. My rational side knew I was being irrational. This was America, after all. Terry had the right to give his heart to whoever he desired. But I wasn't interested in being rational. I just wanted love. His love. And if he couldn't give it to me—wouldn't give it to me—then he couldn't have my applause.

Pastor Ewing even preached a powerful sermon exhorting the congregation to give the greatest gift they could ever give this year, love. Love your God, love your neighbors, love your enemies, love those who hate you, and despitefully use you.

"Everybody gets love but me," I thought.

"You can't love anyone until you start loving yourself." Pastor Ewing

seemed to answer me, though he was really addressing the congregation.

So that was the problem! And I knew it. How could I love myself and, therefore, love my neighbors, if I wasn't feeling very lovable at the moment? If anything, I was feeling very freakish: rejected, lonely, broken. Probably the biggest pity party I ever had in my life, sitting right there in the church. That made me sit straight up.

Enough with the pity. There was so much joy on the faces surrounding me. I wanted some of that joy. Needed some of that joy. Since I didn't have any of my own, I decided to borrow someone else's. I jumped to my feet and started clapping my hands, like others in the congregation. A plump woman in a red sequined hat shouted, "Hallelujah!"

I shouted, "Hallelujah!"

Old man Rodgers in the front row hollered, "Glory to God!"

I hollered, "Glory to God!"

Another woman started dancing in the aisle.

I did not dance, though I was starting to feel good. The more I clapped my hands and gave God thanks, the lighter my heart began to feel. After all, I did have a lot to be thankful for. My foster mother was cool. No more foster parents who treated me like an old alley cat. I lived in a nice house—a safe house. Sure, my report card had some C's on it, but there were also a couple of B's and an A. On top of all that, my mother was back in my life. And a new baby was on the way.

"Glory to God!"

So, what if Terry didn't like me. He wasn't the only one boy in the world. I was still cute. I'd meet somebody else. Somebody cuter, funnier, who could actually play football and remain conscious. Maybe even a college boy.

"Hallelujah!"

Joy began to bubble up inside of me. My own joy. It felt like those bubbles of joy were going to lift me right out of my pew. I closed my eyes and basked in the warmth of love that enveloped me. I could feel my hands float in the air and my mouth release a sound. It wasn't a hallelujah this time. It was more like laughter. It was strange. Nothing was funny, but I couldn't stop laughing. My entire body was completely beyond my control now. The organ churned out a rhythmic riff and Terry pounded out a driving beat on the drums. My legs couldn't help but dance to it.

"Go on and praise Him, Chile!" Mother Pearl chanted. I could feel the woman's meaty palms patting me on the back, urging me to "Go on and praise Him!"

And so, I did.

* * * * *

The school bell rang. I slammed my locker shut for the last time this year. Christmas fell on a Friday this year, which meant the last day of school before

Winter Break was today, Tuesday. To my surprise, we didn't even get a half-day. It was a full day of doing absolutely nothing. Most of the kids didn't bother to come to school. That didn't matter to Miss Angie. "If the school's open, that means you're supposed to be in it," she said this morning, as she shoved me out the front door. Of the teachers who bothered showing up for school, most planned Christmas parties, where they ordered pizza or brought in cupcakes and let the students play around on their phones. The substitute teachers showed movies. Only in history class were we given actual work. That's because Mr. Wilcox's real name was Scrooge, and he loved to torture children and small animals for fun.

All in all, it was a good day. I got credit for coming to school and I didn't have to do anything but stuff my face and run my mouth. For the last hour, my head was filled with images of the day after tomorrow: my Christmas visit with my mother. I had been planning it for so long. Now, it was just around the corner. As soon as I got home, I would wrap my presents, then pick out my outfit.

I followed the crowd that flowed out of the doors, giddy with Christmas excitement, but had to quickly double back because I forgot Miss Angie's present in my locker. Since Miss Angie was infamous for making random searches of mine and Chelsea's bedrooms, my school locker was the only place I knew where the gift would be safe. I stuffed the gift in my book bag, then made a quick pit-stop at the bathroom. The hallways were empty now. Everyone was eager to get started with their Christmas vacations. For a moment, I worried that if I didn't hurry, they might lock me in the school. Wouldn't that be just my luck? Finally, a chance to spend a nice Christmas with my mom, and I got locked in the school, with only stale, leftover cafeteria cookies to sustain me. I smiled at that thought, then picked up the pace. I wished Miss Levine, the school secretary, a Happy Hanukkah, as I floated outside.

The cold air greeted me with a kiss on my cheek. I wouldn't have been surprised if I saw Santa Claus and a chorus of tiny elves singing Christmas carols in the parking lot. As a little girl, I loved Christmas, but the past few hadn't been so merry. Yet, ever since that church service, those warm, fuzzy feelings had been revived. Ah, Christmas! The scent of eggnog and gingerbread was in the air. And just when I was about to get completely dizzy with thoughts of Christmas trees and twinkling lights and all the holiday specials that were going to be on TV tonight, I bumped smack dab into Mr. Rick.

"Oh my God!" The words escaped from my lips. He was right there. Not one thousand feet away like the restraining order required, but six inches away. Grinning at me like a hungry jackal waiting to pounce on his prey. I went rigid, my body reacting before my mind had time to fully process what it was seeing. I was frozen—not because of the frigid winter air blowing through

me. It was a natural reaction to the coldness in Mr. Rick's voice when he said, "I knew you couldn't hide from me forever."

"W-why...why are you—"

His eyes slid up and down the curves of my body, then he grunted, "Man! I thought you looked good from a distance, but damn you sure are fine up close, girl!" He licked his severely chapped lips. I wanted to vomit.

Again, I tried to speak. "Why are you here?" I took a step back, putting some space between my body and his.

"Why? I came to see you."

"No. Why? I mean, how did you find me?"

"Oh, that? Yeah, I'm opening up a new shop just a few blocks from here..."

Oh no! I thought. Now I was going to have to move again.

"...So, one day I was up there checking up on the construction," Mr. Rick continued, "and on my way home, I drove right by this school and was like: 'Mmmm! Check out that fine-looking honey over there!' And I realized it was you." He smiled down at me like I was a piece of hot, juicy, fillet mignon. I felt the need to zip up my coat as far as it could go. "I tried to say hi to you, but you ran away. Man, you can run, girl. You could be in the Olympics, you know that? But you didn't have to run. You don't never have to be scared of me."

He took a step closer to me. I tried to go around him. He blocked my path. "Leave me alone!" I looked around the parking lot to see if anyone heard me. Of course not. It was winter break. That parking lot had emptied out like a bomb was about to go off. I tried stepping around him again. He blocked me again. Frustrated, I spat out the words, "What do you want?"

"I have a present for you." He saw me look down at his empty hands. "It's in the truck."

"Hell no!"

"Come on, girl. Let me take you to the mall. Buy you whatever you want. Clothes, shoes, jewelry, bet you could use a new iPod."

I was not impressed. This man seriously thought he could roll up here in his flashy car, throw around some money, and he could do whatever he wanted to me. I sighed and said, "I'm not eight years old anymore, Mr. Rick. I'm not afraid to tell on you."

He kept right on talking, as if I hadn't said a word. "You know where your mama is right now?"

I stared at him blankly.

"She's at the salon, getting her hair done for her big date with her little girl. She had me in the mall all day Saturday picking out the perfect outfit. Now that she's starting to show, none of her clothes fit right. She wants everything to be perfect. We even got you a present. Wanna know what it is?"

"No." The anger in me began to rise. I knew exactly what he was doing.

He was threatening me. Dangling my Christmas plans with my mother in front of me and threatening to take them away.

"I can tell you what your present is. I bought it. I paid for everything. Then guess what your mama asked me." He smoothed his hand over his head and snickered to himself. "She asked if I would agree to leave the house some weekends after the baby is born, so the social worker would let you come spend the weekend with her sometimes. You believe that? Me? Leave my house?"

"You don't have to—"

"I told her I would. I'd leave my house. Cuz I know that'll make y'all happy. Now what you gonna do for me?"

I could tell by the satisfied grin on his face that Mr. Rick thought he had won. He pulled out the ace card that would let him have his way with me. I wasn't about to give in. Anger sparked a boldness in my heart. "You know what I'm gonna do for you?" I wagged a finger in his face. "I'm going to give you five seconds to get out of my face before I call the police on your perverted ass—"

Like a cobra striking at its victim, Mr. Rick gripped my arm. "You think you bad enough to step to me, little girl?" he hissed, then yanked me so close that I could smell the stink of Colt 45 on his breath. "I will snap your neck in half right here in this parking lot." He continued to spit his venomous words, but I could hear none of them. All my attention was on the feel of the flesh of his hand against my flesh. I hadn't felt his touch in over five years. His ashy hand was icy cold and seemed to burn through my skin like acid. I was in a time warp. I was eight years old again, and Mr. Rick's hands were on me again. His hands between my legs. His hands cupping the tiny buds that would become my breasts. His hands around my throat, squeezing, telling me to keep my damn mouth shut or he'd choke the life out of me.

His dead eyes burrowed through me now just as they did then. He was a demon. He clenched my arm so hard, I was sure he would drag me back to hell.

At that moment, I stepped outside of my body, just as I used to do back then. For the first time in a long time, I was outside of my body, floating just above it, where I would be safe. From there, I would watch Mr. Rick drag me to his big shiny truck, then off somewhere to rape me and rape me until I could no longer feel him inside of me. Mr. Rick continued his death grip on my arm as he spewed out hurtful, violent words in my face. I couldn't run because there was no life in my legs, because my heart had stopped beating, because I was no longer standing in my body. I was still out-of-body. Still hovering above, watching all of this take place. Waiting for Mr. Rick to force me into that truck.

I would die today. He was going to rape me one last time and murder me. Why was he still talking? Just get it over with. I couldn't bear it. I felt so

helpless standing outside of my body. Nothing I could do to protect that other Toya, except let out silent screams of “God make him stop! God, please make him stop—”

“Toya?”

A different voice rang in my ears. Not my own. Not Mr. Rick’s.

“Toya!” The voice said my name so forcefully this time that it yanked me from my hiding place outside of my body and placed me solidly back in my body. I focused my eyes and forced them to look away from Mr. Rick, over in the direction of the voice that insistently called my name.

Terry. Sitting on his motorcycle with a furious look in his eyes. “You okay?” he asked, when he was finally sure that he had my attention.

Mr. Rick let go of me, but I did not move. In a low, controlled voice, Mr. Rick said, “You better tell that nigga to go on, before I snap his neck.”

“I-I’m okay,” I mumbled, barely audible even to myself, then louder, “I’m okay.”

“Well, if you’re okay, walk over here so I can see you’re okay,” Terry said with such authority. A command that my feet had to obey. Without even thinking about it, I was walking in Terry’s direction.

“Yo! Go on home, boy. We talking,” Mr. Rick barked at Terry, but he did nothing to stop me from walking.

“Oh. Okay, you keep talking,” Terry sounded cocky now, not at all intimidated by Mr. Rick’s tough guy act. “That’ll give me time to memorize your license plate.”

Mr. Rick waved him off and then strutted back to his truck. By then, I had reached Terry’s motorcycle. Terry stared at me, waiting for me to look up. I couldn’t. Mr. Rick’s touch had left me feeling unclean.

“Are you okay?” Terry’s voice was so tender it soothed my ears.

I nodded.

“Need a ride home?”

I nodded.

He slid his spare helmet over my head. I managed to hoist my leg over the seat and climb onto the bike. I could hear the engine of Mr. Rick’s truck fire up, then fade away in the distance. Terry gunned the engine on his bike, and we rode off in the opposite direction.

I didn’t want to, but I cried. I hated to cry. It made me feel so weak. But these tears were necessary tears, purging me of Mr. Rick’s taint. I buried my face in Terry’s back and wept, thankful that my face was shielded by the helmet. Hopefully, I could shut off the tears by the time we reached Miss Angie’s house.

And yet, it was only a two-minute ride home on Terry’s motorcycle. Not nearly enough time to turn off a lifetime of tears. The bike pulled into the driveway, and Terry waited for me to let go. It felt a little awkward, me still holding on to him when the bike was no longer moving, but he was patient.

He could tell by how tightly I squeezed him, I needed this. His body to hold on to. His silence. Not asking questions, just giving me space to let it all out.

After a few more moments of silence, my grip relaxed. I let go. I had to peel my body off of Terry's leather jacket as I climbed off the bike. I knew that when I took the helmet off, Terry would see a mess. My puffy red eyes and my face, sloppy wet with tears and snot. I didn't care. He didn't seem to care either. He used his nice blue and green Old Navy scarf to wipe my nose.

"You wanna talk about it?"

I shook my head.

So, cautiously, he said, "Okay. We don't have to talk about it. We don't have to talk about it. But you should at least tell Miss Angie—"

"No!" That scared little girl in me, who now spoke up with conviction.

"Come on, Toya. The man was—"

"Nobody. He was nobody. It was nothing."

"Nothing, huh? That's why you're crying. Because it was nothing."

"Terry, it's Christmas. For once in my life, I want to have a nice, normal Merry Christmas. Please don't ruin it for me." Of course, that was a lie. I was trying to guilt Terry into letting this go. At least, he seemed to be considering it. He took my fingers in his hand. It was thirty degrees outside, and I forgot my gloves. My hands were ice cold. Terry rubbed them, gently.

I could feel my hands getting warmer as well as my heart. I missed him. I wanted my hands to be in his forever. I wanted to fold myself into the safety of his arms and press my lips against his. Until I remembered Terry's lips pressed against Emily's. It snapped me back to reality. The reality was, no matter how good it felt to have Terry fussing over me and being protective of me, it wasn't really for me. Terry was doing this because he was a nice guy, not because of any love he felt for me. He would have made the same fuss over some bag lady in the street. No matter how comforting and safe it felt to be around Terry, I knew I couldn't allow my heart to fool me again.

I snatched my hands out of his, abruptly, "So, are you going to keep this quiet or what?"

Terry was clearly caught off guard by the sudden sharpness in my voice. "I can't do that, Toya."

"Yes, you can! Please? I mean, why are you so concerned about me, anyway? Since when do you care?"

"I've never stopped caring about you."

A big SUV drove by. My heart stopped beating. Had Mr. Rick followed us here? A White man with red hair and a goatee rode by, bobbing his head to his music. I breathed a sigh of relief, and my heart resumed its normal rhythm. But I still couldn't shake the creepy feeling that Mr. Rick was somewhere nearby. He could have followed us home without Terry even noticing. I felt unsafe standing there on the street, exposed. He could be out there looking for me and see exactly where I lived. Worse, he could follow

Terry and hurt him for getting in the way of his plans. I would never forgive myself if something bad happened to Terry because of me. Every moment that we stood out there in the driveway debating Terry's next move was a moment that Mr. Rick could drive by and see us. I knew I had to get rid of Terry. Now.

"Look, if you really care about me. You'll mind your business and leave me alone."

"I'm not going to sit here and pretend—"

"I don't give a damn what you do! Just leave me alone," I snapped. But Terry still didn't move, so I shoved him. "Go! Go on back to your little White girlfriend and stay the fuck out of my life!"

I could actually see it in Terry's eyes. The swirl of hurt and anger and confusion. My words had served their purpose. Without saying another word, Terry crammed the helmet back onto his head, fired up his motorcycle and peeled off into the night. It killed me to hurt him like that when all he was trying to do was help me. But it needed to be done. It was for his own good. I reminded myself that I did that to protect him, not hurt him. Besides, I had something more important to do and it couldn't wait one more minute.

CHAPTER 19

The first, and only, time I ever ran away was when I was ten years old. I was only gone for about six hours; and when I came home my mother whooped my behind for what felt like another six hours. This time would be different. First, I was older and much more mature—not at all afraid of the dark, like when I was ten and got caught. That time, I thought I saw a yellow-eyed monster in the alley, which turned out to be a cat, and ran into the nearest open building, which happened to be the police department. Busted.

Another benefit of me running away now was the fact that I actually had some money saved: \$482, as compared to the seventy-eight cents I scraped out of the sofa cushions when I was ten. I could go a long way on \$482. I just needed it to carry me to California.

I barely remembered my father anymore, but I knew he had a sister out West, Sandra Bolton. I found her name and address in my case file, listed as my father's closest living relative. I knew it was a long shot that she would want anything to do with me. Even if she did turn me away, at least I would be in Los Angeles. Maybe I'd get discovered and become a movie star. That would shut everybody up. I would go to the hottest parties with Jay-Z, Nayo and Rihanna, mobbed by my adoring fans. From out of the crowd, I'd hear a faint voice yelling: "Miss Young! Miss Young! Can I have your autograph? Please? I'm your biggest fan." I'd look over and see it was Terry, holding a pen and paper, looking all pathetic. Then I'd plant a long, French kiss on my rich, pro football player boyfriend then laugh right in Terry's face. Of course, life never worked that way—especially my life. But even if I didn't go out to LA and become a big star, and even if Aunt Sandra Bolton couldn't help me, at least I would be far away from here.

After last night's run-in with Mr. Rick, I knew I had to go. I had hoped I could hang in there and make it work for the baby's sake, but it would never work. I knew that now. The way I froze up when Mr. Rick touched me, how

could I ever live in the same house with him? I would lose my mind and be absolutely no help to the baby. The best I could do for the baby would be to pray that God will protect him or her. Pray from a distance.

The last time I ran away from home, I snuck out the window in the middle of the night. This time, I walked out the front door in broad daylight. I woke up this morning and packed my gym bag. I threw in a couple of pairs of jeans, some sweaters, underwear, socks, toothbrush, deodorant, and my hairbrush. All the nice clothes and electronics that Miss Angie bought for me, I left behind. I felt like taking it would be stealing. Miss Angie was a good foster mother. She could give all that nice stuff to another foster child. One that wasn't so messed up. Besides, I needed to travel light. I left the gifts I bought in the closet with a note asking Miss Angie to pass my mother's gifts on to my social worker. I seriously considered running away after my Christmas visit, but when I thought it over, it would only make it harder to leave. This was the best way, and now was the best time.

This morning, I told Miss Angie that I was going to Pilate's class with my friend Kayla, from school, and strolled right out the front door. Now I sat on the bus, staring out the window, quietly saying goodbye. Goodbye to Excelsior High. Goodbye to the corner store where me and Chelsea used to satisfy our sugar jones. Goodbye to the mall. Goodbye to the Taco Bell where I ate lunch with Terry that day and talked about the future. Back then I pictured a different future: college and scholarships and a career. Now, I just hoped my future included a roof over my head.

I couldn't shake the last image I had of Miss Angie, standing there in the kitchen, making her favorite mint green tea. She wore her silk robe, with a scarf tied around her head and wore no makeup, but she was still beautiful. It was all I could do just to resist the urge to run over and give her a big hug. But since I never hugged Miss Angie any other time, she would've known something was up.

The bus made a stop in front of Grace Tabernacle, a nativity scene decorated the front lawn. Joseph, Mary, the wise men and a bunch of farm animals all hovered around the baby Jesus. "All that fuss over one little baby," I thought, then quietly prayed, "Jesus, please watch over me."

At the Greyhound station, I stood in one of five lines that were at least twenty deep. The holiday rush. But there was definitely no Christmas cheer in the bus station today. Babies crying, mamas yelling, people cussing out the ticket agents because the line was moving too slow. The air was hot and funky because a homeless man had fallen asleep in front of one of the radiators.

"Next!" the weary ticket agent announced. Thankfully, she was talking to me.

I lugged my gym bag up to the counter and let it plop down by my feet.

“Um, I need a one-way to Los Angeles,” I said, while digging a wad of money out of my pocket.

“Toya?” the agent said. I looked up.

I hadn’t even recognized her at first. The plump woman with the salt and pepper hair and black Greyhound sweater, looked completely different from the way I was used to seeing her every Sunday—in her pastel-colored suits, hair swept up in a French roll, with matching hats that sparkled when the light hit it just right.

“Mother Pearl?” I gasped. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s Miss Pearl when I’m in my uniform—and I work here. What are you doing here?”

“You work here, huh?” I echoed her, still hung up on that statement. Of all the lines I could’ve ended up in, I had to pick the one with the ticket agent who just happened to go to my church and be one of Miss Angie’s best customers. I didn’t even know Mother Pearl had a job. I figured the woman’s job was church since she was there so much.

“You didn’t answer my question, LaToya,” Mother Pearl said after quickly growing tired of waiting for me to finish staring off into space. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, me? I’m taking a trip.”

“I can see that. A trip to Los Angeles, apparently.” Mother Pearl’s tone was all prim and proper, though she pronounced Los Angeles, Los Angeleese. “And who is in Los Angeles?”

“My Aunt...On my dad’s side...” I was telling the truth but for some strange reason I felt like I was lying. “She lives in L.A. And I’m going to...to spend some time with her. You know, for the holidays.”

Mother Pearl raised an eyebrow. “I see. And Angie’s letting you take a trip all the way out to Los Angeles all by yourself. On the bus.”

“Uh huh.” I found myself fidgeting under her the heat of her disbelieving eyes.

“That’s strange. I mean, it’s so unlike Angie. She does everything with such flair. I would think she would’ve bought you a plane ticket.”

“Yeah, well, she wanted to, but my aunt didn’t want her to go through all that trouble.” More fidgeting. “You know how it is: keep it in the family and all. So, she sent me the money. My aunt...she, she sent me the money.”

“Uh huh. But still, you’d think Angie would’ve mentioned it. She was just telling us at the salon all about her plans for y’all for the holidays. She didn’t say anything about you going away.” Man, this lady was really making me work for that bus ticket!

“It kinda just happened. I mean, my aunt just sent me the money, which is why I’m just buying my ticket now.” I cleared my throat. “Um, can I get my ticket now?”

“Well, now that just depends.”

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on how big of a fool you think I am." Mother Pearl swirled her neck, "Girl, I've been working here for twenty-seven years, don't you think I know a runaway when I see one?"

"What? No! I'm not running away. I'm serious. It's just a visit—"

"Okay," Mother Pearl snatched up the telephone. "Why don't I call Angie right now and have her tell me all about your little visit."

I grabbed the phone. "Okay, okay, I'm running away—"

"Yo! Will you hurry up?" yelled an angry man holding a gigantic, stuffed snowman with a red bow around the neck. The rest of the crowd grumbled in agreement.

Mother Pearl smiled sweetly as she replied, "Sorry, I'm on my lunch break."

"Lunch? It's 10 o'clock in the morning!" the man fired back. But it was too late. She already posted the "closed" sign in front of her window.

Over the angry jeers of the people in line, Mother Pearl pointed to the employee break room and said to me, "Meet me at that door."

"That's okay. I'll just get my ticket in the other line." I started to sling my bag back on my shoulder.

"Young lady, you will meet me at that door, or I will introduce you to the security guard." She cut her eyes over to the young Black guy, with the bald head in the gray uniform leaning against the wall, looking bored to tears. He didn't have a gun, but I knew I probably wasn't fast enough to outrun him. Okay. No problem. I would go to that room, listen to Mother Pearl, tell me what she wanted to hear, then head over to the Amtrak station and catch a train to California. The train's faster anyway. I'd be halfway to Cali by morning.

The break room was tiny. Barely enough room for the one wall lined with lockers, a refrigerator, a vending machine, one card table, three chairs and a ratty old navy plaid sofa. I may have followed Mother Pearl into the room, but I did not sit down. I folded my arms and watched her pull two cans of Pepsi from the fridge, then silently waddle over to the locker where she retrieved her enormous, brown leather pocketbook. She took out her change purse and dumped a mound of change on the table. "Here. Get me a bag of that trail mix, will ya?"

I stared at her for a second, sighed, then scooped up a handful of change and proceeded to feed eighty-five cents into the vending machine. After the trail mix came tumbling down to the bottom of the machine, I handed the bag to Mother Pearl.

"Get yourself something too."

"I'm not hungry."

She snapped, "They don't sell sodas and peanuts on the bus, ya know?"

Lord, please don't make me cuss this old lady out! I snatched up some more

change and fed the machine. A Twix candy bar fell to the bottom of the machine. I picked it up.

Mother Pearl shook her head, ridding herself of her prim and proper tone. "That piece of candy ain't gonna last you from here to Harrisburg. Then what ya gonna do?"

"I've got money."

"You oughta save that money to buy yourself some common sense," she mumbled.

I'd had enough. "Is that why you brought me back here? To get on my case?"

"Somebody needs to do it!"

"Well, not you! The last thing I need is you on my back, okay? Not today."

Mother Pearl took a breath. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's just...Poor Angie! It kills me to think of that sweet thing working so hard to provide a good home for you and Chelsea. And after a hard day's work, she's going to go upstairs..." her breathing turned to hyperventilating, "And find you gone and, and, she's gonna be crushed." She rested a hand on her bosom to calm herself. "Look at that, got my pressure up." Mother Pearl guzzled down the Pepsi like a can of Budweiser. Next, she snatched up *my* candy bar and ripped open the wrapper. As she munched on my candy, Mother Pearl mumbled to herself, "And at Christmas too! Oh, poor Angie's gonna be devastated!"

I felt so low. I purposely blocked out of my mind the impact my decision might have on Miss Angie. Now, Mother Pearl was throwing it in my face. "I left a note," I said.

She recoiled, offended. "How about I write *you* a note? Will that take all your pain away? I didn't think so."

I slumped down in the chair across from Mother Pearl. "Can't you tell her for me? Tell her that I'm sorry and that this ain't about her?"

"Then what is it about?"

I didn't answer. I just stared at the floor.

"But Sunday...You seemed so—I mean, you were dancing and praising the Lord. I remember thinking to myself: Look at that LaToya go! You seemed so happy."

"I was happy," I said in a low voice, still remembering the warm feeling that had nestled in my heart that day.

"And?"

"And..." I shrugged. "I don't know. It's just... no matter how hard I try, I just can't seem to get my life together."

"Now, I know that's not true. Angie brags about you all the time. How your grades are up. You're behaving yourself at school. And you ain't sassing her at home. Sounds like you're getting your act together just fine to me."

"Yeah, that part's fine, but everything else is falling apart."

"Everything else? The everything else that you don't want to talk about." Mother Pearl nodded, seeming to understand the words I wasn't saying. She put my hand in her warm, soft hands. "Listen, I know you don't know me well enough to share your secrets with me. Honey, I'm not even sure if I want to know all your secrets. My poor heart won't be able to take it. But you've got to talk to somebody. You know they've got counselors at the church?"

"I've got a therapist," I added. "And a social worker."

"And I bet you don't talk to neither one of them."

"Not really," I said.

"What about prayer? Do you talk to the Lord about your problems?"

I sat straight up. "Come on, Mother Pearl. That stuff don't work."

"Oh really?" She released my hand. "That, coming from the girl who just three days ago was jumping up and down in the pews, yelling: Praise Jesus! Praise Jesus!"

"Yeah, and look what good it did me? Every time, every time I think things are finally going my way, *boom*, life comes in and knocks me back on my butt again."

Mother Pearl sat back and eyed me, diagnosing me. "You know what that is? That's the devil been whispering in your ears."

I picked up the other Pepsi and cracked it open, as I rolled my eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes at me, chile. I know what I'm talking about. You think me and Angie are the only ones who've notice you getting your life together?" Shaking her head. "Satan's got his eyes on you, too. And it just kills him that no matter what he throws your way you keep getting right back up. You're strong, Toya. Stronger than you think. Now, I don't know why the Lord allowed all that mess to go on in your life, but you can best believe God is gonna do something special through you. You're gonna help a lot of people one day."

"Help a lot of people? I can't even help myself."

"You don't have to. God is helping you."

There goes that eye roll again.

"I mean it, Toya. I've seen so many girls that have been through what you've been through. Lost. Either they're on drugs, or pregnant or done lost their minds all together. But not you. In spite of all you've been through, there's something deep down inside of you that keeps striving to get better. God put that something inside of you."

"It doesn't feel like it," I sighed. "It feels like I'm on my own."

Mother Pearl was quiet for a moment, thinking. Then her eyes lit up as she said, "Loretta Walsh!" she said, emphatically, as if those two words just settled the whole matter.

"Huh?" I said, unsure if Miss Pearl had a little touch of Alzheimer's.

"Loretta Walsh," she repeated, "She works here. Funny thing, Loretta loves Christmas! Loves putting up the tree with all the trimmings. And the

lights around her house! Lord, I wouldn't be surprised if you could see them all the way out there in where you live."

"What does this have to do with—"

"Don't rush me, I'm getting there." Mother Pearl paused long enough to smooth her hair then began her tale again. "Now, Loretta always has to have the biggest Christmas tree in town. Bigger than the one they got at the White House. So yesterday was her day off and she woke her husband, Roger, up bright and early to go get the tree. They were out for hours, going from place to place, until they found the perfect tree. Then she spent the rest of the day putting up the decorations, bossing her husband around like he was a slave." Mother Pearl snickered to herself, already tickled by the story. "Anyway, she must've been nagging poor Roger real bad, because he started drinking that eggnog, spiked with rum, extra early this year. By the time they got up all the decorations and were ready to put the star on top of the tree, old Roger was nice and tipsy."

I found myself smiling at this, though I didn't know why.

"And then," Mother Pearl continued, "Roger climbed up on the ladder with that star, but the top of the tree was just out of reach, so he got up on his tippy toes. And he lost his balance, see? Landed smack dab in the middle of the tree." She clapped her hands and hooted. "All Loretta could see was all that hard work about to come crashing down, so she raced to the other side of tree and tried to hold it up. And it was working, except Roger was a little queasy from the fall and drinking all that liquor; and he threw up all over the tree."

"Eww!" I felt my stomach turn sour.

Mother Pearl let out a honk of a laugh, like a stuffed goose, "But that's not all. When the vomit hit Loretta, naturally she let go of the tree and the whole thing toppled down on her, Roger and all. Only Roger must weigh a good hundred pounds more than Loretta, who don't weigh nothing but a penny, so when he landed on Loretta and the tree, Roger only ended up with a belly ache. And Loretta?" Mother Pearl shook her head, still snickering. "Poor, poor thing, she got herself a broken arm and a dislocated shoulder."

I let out a chuckle, nowhere near as big as her laugh. "Mother Pearl, why did you tell me all that?"

"Don't you see?" Now it was Mother Pearl's turn to roll her eyes. "Loretta was supposed to be at work today. Today was my day off. The only reason I'm here is because Loretta's stuck at home with her arm in a sling and wearing a neck brace. But if she was here, you'd be on a bus to California instead of sitting back here talking to me." She let those words sink in for a moment then continued, "So don't tell me you're in this thing alone. God is always watching over you. And if He wanted you in Los Angeles, He would've had you in Loretta's line, instead of the line of a busybody like me."

"I guess so." Suddenly, I felt disappointed. I was starting to realize that

my dreams of escape were slowly slipping away with each word uttered by Mother Pearl. There would be no running away this time either. I would have to stay and deal with whatever came my way.

"That must mean God has plans for you right where you are," said Mother Pearl.

"Well, I wished he'd hurry up and get started!" said me.

"He's already started, dear." Her tone soothed me. "Everybody wants an instant miracle, and sometimes the Lord moves that quickly. But most times, it's minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. Problem is, most of us aren't patient enough to stick around for the conclusion. We get tired of waiting on God, so we go running off with a head full of steam and make a bigger mess than the mess we started out with."

Like running away? I thought.

"Like running away," Mother Pearl said, as if reading my mind. "A pretty girl like you could run away and get herself in a whole mess of trouble."

"I can take care of myself," I said, weakly.

Mother Pearl sighed. "See that wall behind you?"

I looked back and saw a wall full of photographs. "Missing" posters of boys and girls—mostly teenaged girls—covered the wall like wallpaper.

"We get those flyers all the time. Some of them were kidnapped. A lot of them are runaways. Too many are just never heard from again. Guess how many of them girls up there thought they knew how to take care of themselves."

I hung my head.

"Point is, you don't have to take care of yourself. Let God take care of you. And right now, He's got you in a good place, surrounded by people who love you. Don't be so quick to walk away from that, cuz it gets harder and harder to find out there in the world."

"Mother Pearl. I know you're right, I'm just ...tired."

That put a smile on her face. "Baby, wait til you get to be my age and see how tired you are then. Look, when you feel tired, like the devil's been beating you down like an old rag doll, that's the time to dig in. Things are about to get better. The storm is coming to an end. Otherwise, the devil wouldn't be trying so hard to discourage you. But don't you worry about him, God's got all the power you need to walk all over the devil's big head. You just have to make up your mind to stay in the fight." She grabbed both of my hands. "Now, I want you to repeat after me. Say: Lord..."

I just looked at her.

"Go on and say it. Say: Lord..."

"Lord." I said, instantly feeling self-conscious.

"You said you would never leave me, and You would always fight my battles. Go on..." Mother Pearl said, her eyes cheering me on.

I repeated. "You said you would never leave me, and You would always

fight my battles.”

Mother Pearl: “Now, I’m trusting You to do just what You said.”

Me: “I’m trusting You to do just what You said.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Lord.” She squeezed my hand on that one. It hurt a little.

Me: “I’m not going anywhere.”

Mother Pearl: “I’m going to stay right where you put me and wait for you to work it out. No matter how long it takes.”

Me: “I’m gonna stay right where you put me and wait for you to work it out...until I can’t stand it here anymore.”

She tugged my hand. “Say it right.”

I grinned and said, “I’m gonna stay right where you put me and wait for you to work it out. No matter how long it takes.”

Mother Pearl: “And Lord, I pray You will give this child the grace and the peace and strength to hang in there. Thank You for the victory in this situation. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.”

Me: “Amen.”

The last time I ran away, when I was ten years old, I was gone for six hours. This time I was only gone for three and half hours. Just long enough to ride the bus to the bus terminal in Philly, wait in line, have a heart-to-heart talk with Mother Pearl, and ride the bus back home. I had unpacked my bag and was sitting on the couch watching the Law & Order marathon before Miss Angie even came up for lunch.

“How was Pilates?” she asked me from the kitchen, while slapping some mayo on a slice of bread.

“Uh...actually, I didn’t go to Pilates.”

“I know.”

How did she always know?

Miss Angie continued, “Kayla called here looking for you an hour after you left.”

“Oh.”

Miss Angie came into the living room and sat down on the couch next to me. She brought her sandwich with her, which let me know this was serious. Miss Angie never brought food into the living room. “So where were you?” she asked, her eyes drilling right through me.

“Remember when I told you I had finished all of my Christmas shopping?” The lie came easily off my lips. “Well, I lied. I’m sorry, Miss Angie. I didn’t know what to get you. So, I went out today to see if I could find something you’d like.” I held my breath and waited to see if the lie took hold.

The hard gaze on Miss Angie’s face quickly softened. “I keep telling you

and Chelsea not to worry about getting me presents. I've got everything I ever wanted already."

"Really? So, you don't want the Coach bag I just bought you," I teased.

"Come on, now. A girl can never have too many Coach bags." She took a bite of her sandwich. "And since when do you have enough money to afford Coach bags? I must be paying you too much."

"Not really. It's a fake."

"So, it's a Roach bag?"

I laughed. "Seriously, I didn't get you a bag, but I did find something nice."

Miss Angie played around in my hair—a hairdresser's habit. "I got room in my book at six; let me touch up your hair."

"You don't have to."

"Yes, I do. I can't let you go see your mom and have your hair looking a hot mess."

"Oh, she won't care." That was my third lie to Miss Angie today. I would have to do a good deed or something to make up for it. "You want me to shampoo some heads for you this afternoon?"

She nodded. "Got a lot of big tippers coming in today. You'd make some good money."

"Oh, I'm not worried about the tips. I just thought you might need some help." The truth was, I was feeling a need to be close to Miss Angie. At that moment, I was feeling really grateful that, since I wasn't going to be running away, we would have more time together. More time to hear Miss Angie's stories, her dating advice, her beauty tips. More time to hear the ladies in the salon gripe about the men in their lives, or the lack of men in their lives. More time to give God more time to get my life together.

CHAPTER 20

By the next morning, it was clear to me that God wasn't going to perform one of those instant miracles that Mother Pearl mentioned. Otherwise, I would have been awakened by a phone call from my mother that she finally kicked Mr. Rick to the curb, once and for all. Then the doorbell would've rang and Terry would've been standing there with a ring in his hand and declaring his undying love for me. No, I was not in line for an instant miracle, but I hoped the "slowly but surely" miracle didn't take too long.

First thing in the morning, Christmas Eve morning, I slept like a rock, but I could smell the french toast, bacon and eggs in the air. Miss Angie must've been throwing down in the kitchen! I was enjoying my sleep too much to get up just yet. This was the best sleep I had in a long time. I heard a tiny creak. My door was opening. Footsteps. A finger gently poked my shoulder.

A tiny voice whispered, "Toya."

I pried one eye open. The blurry image of Chelsea came into view.

"Can I talk to you?"

I flipped over and yanked the pillow over my head.

"I want to tell you I'm sorry," Chelsea yelled, struggling to pull the pillow off my head.

My voice was still raspy with sleep. "Go away!"

"Come on. It's Christmas. I'm trying to apologize."

I heard what sounded like sniffles. I sat up and saw tears in Chelsea's eyes. "Are you crying?"

Between sniffles, Chelsea whimpered, "I feel so bad Toya. I was wrong. I had it all wrong."

"What are you talking about, Chelsea?"

"You. You didn't tell mommy that I had sex."

"I told you that, already."

"I know. I know that now. And I'm so sorry that I didn't believe you,"

Chelsea sobbed. The girl was a mess. I didn't know what to do with her. Hug her? Pat her on the head?

"I told you I was going to keep your stupid secret," I said. "Why would I lie?"

"I know. I just couldn't understand how she knew. I mean, nobody else knew but—" a hiccup caught in Chelsea's throat, clipping the end of her sentence.

"So...how did Miss Angie find out?" I asked, once Chelsea's breathing calmed down.

"Oh. She read it on my Facebook page."

I knew Chelsea was on Facebook. I was even "friends" with her, but I never bothered to read anything Chelsea had to say on the site. I figured it would just be a bunch of nerds talking about science projects and what they read in National Geographic Magazine—sort of like Terry's page. Had I actually checked Chelsea's page, I would have seen that on the day that Chelsea finally learned she wasn't pregnant, she posted the following message: *Good news everybody! My cat isn't having kittens after all. OMG! I'm so relieved.*

"Man, Chels. For an honor student, you sure are dumb. You don't even have a cat. Of course, your mom was going to figure it out."

"How was I supposed to know that Mommy was checking my Facebook page? Did you know she was doing that?"

"Uh...no. No, I didn't." Now that I thought about it, there were some things on my Facebook page I didn't want Miss Angie seeing either. "How'd you find out that she read it?"

"Well, last night Mommy asked me if I needed money to buy you a Christmas present. And I told her I wasn't buying you anything. And she said, why not? Then I said, because Toya is a backstabbing, two-faced liar—oops!" Chelsea slapped her hand over her mouth, not meaning for that part to slip out. "I'm sorry Toya. I didn't mean it. I mean, I meant it at the time, but that was before I knew the truth and—"

"Just finish the stupid story, girl"

"Okay, gosh!" then Chelsea said in one breath, "So, long story short. Mommy asked me why I said that about you and I told her why; and that's when she told me how she found out." She paused and came up for air. "So, do you forgive me?"

I flopped back on the bed. "Nope."

"Why not?"

I popped back up, "Why not? You called me a backstabbing, two-faced, liar *and* tried to kick me out of your house!"

"Well," she whined, "that's because I'm used to being an only child. I don't know how to fight with a sister."

"I'm not your sister."

"Yes, you are! You're my foster big sister and it's your job to set the

example. You're supposed to forgive me."

I rolled over and pulled the covers back up to my shoulders, ignoring Chelsea.

The girl was determined. She leaned in close to my ear, "I brought you something."

"Leave me alone."

I could feel Chelsea climb off my bed, her heavy feet marching to the door as she said, "Okay. But not until I give you this..."

I peeked over the blanket in time to see Chelsea retrieving a tray from the hallway. "Breakfast," she sang, then set before me a feast of french toast, scrambled eggs, home fries, and turkey bacon.

My stomach made me sit up. "You brought me breakfast in bed?"

"No, I *made* you breakfast in bed."

I scoffed, "You can't cook."

"Yes, I can. I cook for my daddy all the time. Otherwise, he'd starve, the man is so skinny."

The butter on the french toast was starting to melt, blending with the syrup to create a warm pool of deliciousness in the center of the plate. I reached for the fork, but Chelsea was quicker.

"Not so fast." She held the fork hostage in the air. "This is a conditional breakfast—the condition being, things have to go back to normal between us."

I narrowed my eyes on Chelsea. "I can forgive you. But I don't think things can ever go back to normal between us." I snatched the fork out of her hand. "Cuz there ain't nothing normal about you, girl."

She let out a loud belly laugh. And while I devoured my breakfast, Chelsea filled me in on everything that happened in her life since she stopped speaking to me three weeks ago. Everything.

So, this is how a slow but steady miracle starts, huh, Lord? I thought. It wasn't such a bad start. I missed Chelsea, a little. It was good to hear her laugh again, to joke around with her and listen to her pointless stories again. On top of all that, the girl really was a good cook!

By one o'clock in the afternoon, I was in Center City Philadelphia hanging out with my mom. Just me and Tamika, no social worker in sight. Our first unsupervised visit. It was the next step in the reunification process. The Department of Human Services had listed the service goals for me as "reunification" with my mother. Technically that was true. But as Miss Meagan explained it, as long as my mother was still living with Mr. Rick, the goal was actually long-term foster care, yet we still had to go through the process. The first step was supervised visits, next unsupervised day visits, then came overnight, weekend visits and, finally, return to the family.

This was me and my mom's first unsupervised Christmas Eve Day visit.

Our first Christmas together in years. And we went all out! We got manicures at a little nail salon on Filbert Street, where we traded gossip and made fun of the blue-haired lady with nails six inches long, also blue. The air was frigid, but we were warmed by our laughter as we walked over to Macy's for the light show, gift bags in tow. Standing there in the crowded store, the air ringing with joyous Christmas carols, my heart overflowed with joy. I was so glad that I hadn't run away; so glad to be sharing this moment with my mother. If it wasn't for Mother Pearl, I would have been stuck on a bus, out in the middle of nowhere, all alone and completely miserable. I would have to get that woman a gift for meddling in my business, yesterday.

After the lights show, it was off to the Olive Garden for lunch. The last leg of our special day together. I wanted to savor every moment. While we waited for the waitress to bring out our soups and salads, we exchanged Christmas presents. From her oversized shoulder bag, Tamika presented me with a tiny, red box with a silver bow on top. Instantly, I knew it was jewelry. I opened the box and gold hoop earrings lit up my eyes.

"Whoa!" was all I could say.

"Twenty-four carat gold, baby!" was all Tamika could say. She let out a whoop then added, "Go on and try 'em on, girl."

I took out the little posts that I always wore and slipped in the hoops, which sparkled against my caramel skin.

"Now that's more like it!" Tamika cheered. "Show that foster bitch how we do things."

That struck a sour note with me. "Ma, Miss Angie isn't a—"

"Oh, here you go, again," Tamika rolled her eyes, "I'm just kidding. God forbid anybody should say anything about Miss Perfect."

I wanted to say something strong in defense of Miss Angie, but I didn't want to ruin the moment. I decided to take a more diplomatic approach: "You don't have to put her down. Miss Angie may be putting a roof over my head, but I know who my mother is. Nobody could ever take your place, Ma. Don't you know that?"

Tamika smiled, "I know, Tee-Tee." She fanned her misty eyes with her hands, "Oh, you'll have to excuse me. I forget how these hormones keep affecting me." She dabbed at her eyes with a napkin then slid a second box across the table. "Here. Open this one while I get myself together."

I carefully unwrapped the second box and squealed when I saw a brand-new iPhone. Jumping to my feet, I did a little happy dance and waved the phone at the couple at the table next to us. Wait till the kids at school see this! I bounced over to my mom and gave her a big hug. "Thank you, Mommy. Thank you!"

Tamika wanted so badly to brag that this phone was way better than that rinky-dink phone the foster bitch bought for me, but she behaved herself, "You're welcome, Tee. Don't be just calling up boys on that phone. And

make sure you call your mama every once in a while.”

“I do call you.”

“I know. Now you can call more often.”

I sat back down in my chair and pulled out the larger gift from her gift bag. “Okay. Your turn.”

Tamika cheered, quickly ripping off the paper with a big grin on her face. She pulled out the big red Elmo doll. The grin slowly slid from her face.

“Uh...”

“It’s for the baby,” I added.

Tamika breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, well, he’s gonna love it.”

“He?” I sat straight up in my chair.

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“No, you didn’t tell me. You found out the baby’s sex?”

“It’s a boy!”

Now it was my turn to breathe a sigh of relief. I didn’t have to worry about moving back home to protect my baby sister from her perverted father. Though it was possible that Mr. Rick could be into boys too. I didn’t want to think about that now. I was going to have a little brother. Already, I was picturing myself buying him toy cars and cheering at his football games. “I always wanted a brother.”

“Now you got one.” Tamika said, proudly, then quickly shifted gears. “Okay, what else you got in that bag? Something for me, I hope.”

“Of course.” I dipped back into the bag and pulled out my mother’s gift.

Tamika opened it in one swift move. I watched her eyes, but didn’t see what I thought I would see. No squeal. No happy dance. No sudden rush of emotion at the sight of a treasured memory. *Oh no!* I thought. It was brief, but it was definitely there. A tiny glint of disappointment, which Tamika quickly masked with a courteous smile.

“You don’t like it,” I stated as a fact.

“I do. It’s *The Wiz*. I love this movie.” The enthusiasm in Tamika’s voice quickly faded.

“I know you love it. That’s why I got it for you. You already have a copy?”

“No, but...I mean, it’s always on TV so...”

How stupid could I be? I completely forgot who I was dealing with. This was Tamika Young. My mother. I had known her from the womb. The woman didn’t have a sentimental bone in her body. What on earth made me think that the sight of something that symbolized one of the happiest memories in my life, would touch Tamika? The only thing that moved her was M-O-N-E-Y. The more money it cost, the more it moved her.

“I bet she didn’t get the foster bitch a damn video,” I actually heard my mother mumble under her breath, as she stared at the DVD.

Oh God! This is horrible. *Miss Angie’s gift did cost more money.* If Tamika

found that out, she would be pissed. She was already mumbling, soon she'd be pouting, and then the waterworks would come. Not to mention the fact that Tamika's hormones were raging too. I knew I was about to witness a total meltdown. I had to do something. *Think, girl. Think!*

Then it hit me. I knew exactly what to do. I took a deep breath and let out a huge fake laugh.

Tamika cut her eyes at me. "What's so funny?"

"Gotcha!" I laughed even harder now, and Tamika looked even more confused. "I can't believe you fell for that, Ma."

"Fell for what?" Tamika let out a little chuckle, wanting to be in on the joke too.

"Come on! You think that's all I got you for Christmas?"

"It isn't?"

"No!" I laid it on real thick now, holding my stomach and forcing out a long, "Whooh! I was just messing with you. Of course, I got you something else. It's just that I couldn't carry it on the train. Dwayne's bringing your other present when he comes to pick me up."

"Oh!" Tamika gasped, laughing more freely now. "Girl, you really got me. Bringing me this old played-out movie. I can't wait to see what you got me for real."

"Trust me, you're gonna love it," I added. My stomach was in knots, but at least I bought myself a little more time.

When the waitress brought the main course, I took the opportunity to excuse myself to the ladies' room. I rounded the corner and scrambled down the long hallway to the bathroom, digging out my cell phone as I ran—the old cell phone that Miss Angie got for me. Bursting through the bathroom door, I hit Dwayne's number.

"Hey girl, lunch over, already?" he said in his usual laid-back tone.

I was hysterical. "Dwayne, you've gotta help me. She hates it. And now she thinks I like Miss Angie more than her, because I didn't—"

"Yo, yo, yo, slow down, Shorti! I can't understand a word you're saying."

I took a breath. "Okay. I'm here at lunch with my mom and we just exchanged gifts. She got me these really nice, expensive gifts—"

"Whaaaaat!" Dwayne interrupted, "What'd she get you?"

"That's not the point, Dwayne! The point is, she hates my gift."

Dwayne snickered. "What did you get her?"

"Don't worry about what I got her."

"That bad, huh?"

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. The earrings dangling on my ears seemed to mock me, yelling, "Cheapskate, cheapskate!" I muttered into the phone, "I bought her a copy of that movie *The Wiz*."

"Aw! I remember y'all used to watch that movie all the time when we was kids. That's sweet, Toya."

“Don’t tell Tamika that. You would’ve thought I bought her a Chia Pet or something.” I had been so caught up with Christmas fever, I completely forgot who I was buying presents for. When it came to Tamika, Christmas was payday. In that way, she was still like a little kid, only her toys got more expensive.

“Well, what does she expect? You’re a teenager. It’s not like you can go out and buy her Gucci.”

“Actually...” I remembered my savings. After my attempted-runaway episode yesterday, I hadn’t had a chance to put my money back in the bank. It was still in my purse, just waiting to save the day. “I need you to go out and get her a present.”

“You need me to what?”

“I have the money. All you have to do is stop by here, pick up the money, run over to Macy’s and pick out something expensive—oh, and make sure you get it gift wrapped.”

“Forget it, Toya. Your mom needs to learn the true meaning of Christmas, anyway.”

“Excuse me, aren’t you the one who had a temper tantrum in the middle of the mall when your dad told you he wasn’t going to be able to buy you those LeBron James sneakers?”

“I was a just a kid!”

“It was last year!!!”

“Whatever, I’m still not doing it.”

“Why not? You’re coming over to pick me up, anyway.” I could hear him huffing and puffing into the phone.

“Because...” Dwayne whined. “Man, I was just gonna swing by and pick you up. Now, I’m gonna have to park. You know how much that’s gonna cost me?”

“I’ll pay for it.”

“And I was about to fix myself a sandwich. But to help you out, I’d have to leave right now.”

I sighed, “I’ll buy you lunch.”

“You will? Man, you want me to get this present bad, don’t ya?”

“I do. And if you pick out something real nice, I’ll pay you twenty bucks as a bonus.”

“Twenty bucks, huh?” Dwayne slipped into his Mack Daddy voice, “Listen, uh...why don’t you just keep the money and give up the panties, instead.”

“Boy! I’m about to bust you in the—”

“Calm down. Calm down. Can’t blame a brotha for taking a shot.” There was silence on Dwayne’s end of the line, as he thought it over. “All right, fine. I’ll do it. But you better have my money—cash!”

Twenty minutes later, I was enjoying a hearty serving of Fettuccini Alfredo when my phone vibrated in my pants pocket. I jumped. “Ooops! Gotta go to the bathroom.”

“Again?” Tamika crowed, as she watched me dash off.

In 30 seconds, I was standing outside. I looked up and down Chestnut Street until I heard a horn blast. Dwayne swooped in beside me in his ride. I almost didn’t recognize him, since he was driving his mother’s silver Range Rover. He rolled down the window. I shoved the money in his hand. As Dwayne peeled off, I yelled after him, “And bring me my receipt!”

When I returned to my seat, I was greeted by my mother’s stony glare.

“What?” I squeaked, with a guilty tone to my voice.

Tamika stared at me for another moment. “I’m the one that’s pregnant. Why are you doing all the peeing?” Her eyes narrowed. “You’re not pregnant too, are you?”

“Huh? No!” I let out a nervous laugh, “Just too much soda.”

Tamika kept staring at me, as if scanning me with her pregnancy detector.

“Stop staring at me like that.” I said, still squirming in my seat. “What, you want me to go pee on a stick?”

Tamika relaxed. “No, I believe you.” She pulled a piece of warm, buttery bread from the basket and added, “Though, it might not be a bad thing. I looked up that school of yours on the internet. There’s a lotta rich kids up there. You get knocked up by one of them and you’d be set for life.”

“Yeah. And my baby would only be nine months younger than his uncle.”

Tamika was offended. “So what? You’re Uncle Tyree is only two years older than you. You judging your grandmom, now?”

“No! I’m not judging anybody,” I groaned, wondering how I ended up in this bizarre conversation. “I’m just saying, there’s a difference between an accident and planning to screw up your life on purpose.”

“Well, whatever! I’m just trying to help you take advantage of an opportunity.” Tamika petted the mound in her stomach with a satisfied look on face. “You meet anybody up there, yet?”

“I’ve met a lot of people.”

“You know what I mean. A boy. You got a boyfriend?”

“Uh...no.”

“I’m not surprised.” Tamika leaned closer as if about to share some motherly secret. “Those rich boys ain’t like them boys in da hood. You gotta come at them in a whole other way.”

I wanted to ask my mother how she knew this, since her dating track record consisted of a bunch of drug dealers and one child molester. Instead, I sipped on my soda and hoped I’d have to pee again soon—real soon.

“They like a girl they can take places,” Tamika rambled on, “Nice places, like cotillions and yacht clubs and debutante balls. So, you can’t be all loud

and rowdy, or else they'll be afraid you'll embarrass them in public. Oh, and you can't be walking around in tight clothes and stuff. You gotta dress like those girls in them Old Navy commercials..."

Just when I was sure my mom was about to teach me the top ten things to do in bed to snag one of these rich Excelsior boys for life, my cell phone buzzed. A text message.

God must've heard my desperate prayer, "That's Dwayne, he's five minutes away," I said eagerly, as I flagged the waitress down for the check.

Outside, Dwayne greeted Tamika with a big bear hug, "Hey, Miss Tamika."

"Hey, Dwayne, baby!" She gave him a squeeze, then pushed him aside. "Where's my present?"

Dwayne cut his eyes at me. I was completely mortified. Dwayne chuckled, "Uh, Santa's got it right here." He reached through the window and pulled a large box from the passenger seat. The box was extravagantly wrapped: red, velvety paper with gold ribbons and tiny gold bells. The kind of wrapping that could only be done by professionals. That didn't stop Tamika from tearing through it like a greedy bear digging through a picnic basket.

Standing in a pile of pretty red paper and bows, Tamika removed the lid from the gift box and just stood there, her face completely blank.

Dwayne looked at me.

I looked at Dwayne.

We both looked at Tamika.

We didn't know what was running through her hormone-injected brain, until she shrieked, "I love it! I love it! I love it!" Tamika jumped up and down and smothered me in kisses, "Oh, thank you, baby! Thank you!"

"You're welcome," I said, stunned. I strained to peek over my mother's shoulder to see what in that box could have gotten her so excited.

Finally, Tamika returned to the box and held up one of a pair of long, black patent leather boots. Long, as in thigh-high, with a four-inch stiletto heel. A tiny silver chain decorated the ankle. They looked like a hooker's boots to me, but to see my mother with tears in her eyes, made me love the boots too. Dwayne climbed back in the car to give us some privacy.

"How did you know I wanted a pair of these?" Tamika gushed.

I shrugged, "We have the same taste, don't we?"

"I don't know. Lately, I was starting to wonder. Anyway..." She hugged me one more time. "Thanks. Oh, this is the best Christmas!"

A horn tooted in three short blasts. We both looked down the block and saw Mr. Rick's Escalade waiting.

"That's my ride. You want to come and say Merry Christmas?"

I looked at my mother like she was an alien.

"He's ready to put the past behind him, Tee-Tee. Why can't you?"

“Ma, we’ve been having such a good time up til now. Let’s not ruin it.”

“Okay. But he is part of the family now, Tee.” Tamika said proudly, as she patted her belly. “I want my baby to come into this world to a happy family. Promise me we can work on it.” She took my hand and placed it on her stomach, as if me, my mom, and the baby were making a pact. “Promise?”

It pained me to say the words, but I said them anyway, “Okay. I promise.” I didn’t mean it. I would have said anything to get out of there, now, before all my toasty, warm memories of this day turned to ice.

I watched my mother practically skip down the street with the baby’s gift and the played-out, old DVD in her shopping bag; and her precious leather hooker boots in her arms. I climbed in the car, hoping not to get a glimpse of Mr. Rick at all. When I sat down, Dwayne was looking at me with a cheesy grin on his face.

“I did good, didn’t I? I told you I’ve got taste, girl.”

I just stared at him. “What in the world made you pick out those hooker boots for my mother?”

“Hooker boots? That just shows you don’t have a sense of fashion. Those boots are sexy. As soon as I saw them, I thought: Now they’ve got Miss Tamika’s name written all over them.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? My mom looks like a hooker?”

“No, dummy! Your mom is slammin!”

I shook my head in disgust. “And she’s pregnant! How’s she going to wear spike heels when she gets to be six months pregnant?”

“It’s not like she’s always gonna be that way. As soon as she drops that load, she’ll be dying to put on some jeans and show off them long sexy legs and—”

I socked him in the arm.

“Ow! Damn, girl! All I’m saying is, I see where you get your—”

I raised my fist to punch him again.

“Okay. Okay,” Dwayne lifted his hands in surrender. “But you saw how much she loved them, right? I mean, that’s what you went through all this trouble for.”

“You’re right.” I rubbed the spot on Dwayne’s arm where I hit him. “I’m sorry. Thanks for coming to my rescue—again.”

“You might not be thanking me when you see the receipt,” mumbled Dwayne as he pulled out into traffic.

“Why? How much did—”

Dwayne stuck the receipt in my face, before I could finish asking my question. Those boots. Those hooker boots that brought tears to my mother’s eyes, just cost me \$399.99. I was speechless.

“If it makes you feel any better, you don’t have to pay me the twenty bucks you said you’d pay me,” Dwayne spoke into my silence. “And I found a meter with 30 minutes on it, so I didn’t have to pay for parking either.”

“Thanks.” My throat was dry. The boots took up most of my savings, but it was worth it. Tamika’s birthday was in September. I knew I’d better start saving now.

It was a quiet ride back to the suburbs. The Range Rover was naturally quiet, compared to the shake, rattle and roll of Dwayne’s Taurus. And even though Dwayne was singing along to the radio, I was too deep in thought to notice. He had come through for me again. I bought him a present to say thank you for being my date to the Christmas Dance—an event that made my cool points soar through the roof at Excelsior. Kids were always coming up to me and asking about my thugged-out boyfriend, Detox. “Oh, I had to let him go,” I’d say. “It was getting to be too dangerous.”

Last week, I called Dwayne to arrange to meet up with him in the city when I came for my Christmas visit with my mother. Dwayne suggested that he give me a ride home and get his present then, since he was planning to come out to the suburbs today, anyway. So, it all worked out perfectly. I survived my visit with my mother. Now I was riding back in style with Detox.

Watching Dwayne get all caught up in singing a Christmas tune by the Temptations, made me smile. He could always make me smile. And he was kind of cute. I never thought about Dwayne in that way before, but I could see why a girl might find him attractive. He had a little peach fuzz on his chin, a clear sign of his budding manhood. His full lips looked soft, like they might be fun to kiss. His rich, brown eyes were expressive, always letting you know how he felt. Best of all, Dwayne was good to me. Whenever I called, he was always there. Even if he fussed a bit, I knew he would eventually come through for me. Could it be that easy? Could I have been searching and searching all over for true love only to find it right under my nose all this time?

I entertained those thoughts as the Range Rover made its way up the expressway. I would invite him in to watch a movie. I would laugh at his jokes. And this time, when he begged me for a kiss, I would give in. Not a peck on the cheek. A long, deep kiss to let Dwayne know I was ready for him.

We pulled in front of Miss Angie’s house. “Well, here we are,” he announced.

“Thanks again, Dwayne. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Don’t sweat it. That’s what homeys are for, right?”

There was an awkward silence between us. I was waiting for him to make the next move. To tell me I could thank him in the backseat, like he normally did. But he was quiet too.

“Oh. I almost forgot.” I reached into my shopping bag and handed Dwayne his present.

“Thanks, Tee.” His voice weakened. “I-uh...I would’ve got you

something, but my funds were low and—”

“Are you kidding me? Dwayne, I couldn’t begin to pay you back for all the ways you’ve helped me out. I already got my present from you.”

“Well, since you put it that way...” Dwayne tore off that wrapping paper, almost breaking Tamika’s record. He held up a bottle of Eternity, my favorite cologne. “Aw, yeah! The lady’s love this stuff.”

He doused himself in a shower of the stuff, causing me to sneeze. Even though he put on way too much, the spicy scent still made my heart melt. Just one more reason to fall in love with the boy. Now, he smelled good too.

“Thanks, Tee,” Dwayne leaned over and kissed my cheek.

“You’re welcome. Hey, you want to come in for a minute? I know you didn’t eat yet. I could fix you something.”

“Nah, that’s okay. I’ve got myself a hot date with a cheerleader. You know her...Kristi.”

“Kristi Wells! From Excelsior?”

“Yeah, we hooked up after the dance. The girl’s been calling me ever since. Girls can’t get enough Detox.”

My heart didn’t break, and it didn’t sink. Only a slight dip into the sea of disappointment. The more I thought about it, I was relieved. Dwayne was my one true friend. The one I could always depend on. I didn’t want to risk all that over what would probably start out as a passionate fling, but likely end up in a blaze of yelling and screaming and hurt feelings. Dwayne was way too important to me to gamble with. So, I kissed him on the cheek and wished him a Merry Christmas.

“Come over here and sit on Santa’s lap, that’ll make me feel merry.”

I shoved him hard, disgusted, but inside I was giggling. *You still got it going on, girl.*

* * * * *

And it was definitely a Merry Christmas. Last year, I spent Christmas in my room. My foster parents had their entire family over. The house was jumping with laughter and music, and the food was smelling so good. But the vibe from my then-foster mom was *you stay in your room and don’t embarrass me, and I won’t embarrass you*. This year, Christmas at the Hughes residence involved just the three of us. Most of Miss Angie’s family lived in New York, and she did plan to go visit them, but since Chelsea would be leaving the next day to spend the rest of the break in Texas with her father, Miss Angie wanted Christmas Day to be “just us girls.”

At 5:30 in the morning, Chelsea’s lead feet stormed into my room, waking me so I could come and open presents. I trudged downstairs and opened the gift from Chelsea: two packs of Oreo cookies. The only thing they had at the supermarket that Chelsea knew I would like. Since she had only decided to buy me a present the day before, Chelsea found herself severely limited in her

choices. I would have thrown a fit, a la Tamika, if it wasn't for the fact that I really did love Oreos. These were double-stuffed, at that. I hugged Chelsea and presented her with her gift. Before she even opened her present, Chelsea was in tears, realizing that I had bought her something even though she hadn't spoken to me in three weeks. Then when she saw that my gift was an expensive gift basket of fancy toiletries, Chelsea really lost it.

"You are the best foster big sister, ever!" she cheered.

"Whatever, just don't let me catch you wearing that stuff around Alonzo, or I'll be an only child."

While Chelsea bathed herself in the body spray and lotions that I bought her, I fell asleep on the couch, clutching my Oreos like a teddy bear. Miss Angie came downstairs two hours later. She made us a breakfast of home fries, western omelets, and bagels. Then we opened more presents. Miss Angie loved the Toni Morrison poetry book that I bought her. She didn't even bother to ask me how much it cost. Miss Angie got both of us girls new jeans and sweaters, socks, and underwear. She also bought me a new coat and my own flat iron—so I could stop sneaking into her room and borrowing hers. Miss Angie bought Chelsea a book called, *The Teenager's Guide to Celibacy*, which made the poor girl groan. She also got her a new aquarium, which made the girl squeal.

We stayed in our pajamas the rest of the day. We stuffed ourselves with turkey and macaroni and cheese, watched movies, then played Scene It, Monopoly, and Uno. We watched music videos on TV; and did each other's hair and makeup. Just three little ladies filled that place with so much love and laughter until it oozed out of every crack and crevice of the house. I went to bed that night feeling so full—and not just from all the sweet potato pie and homemade ice cream I ate. I got full on being loved and accepted by my new family. Not once did I think about Mr. Rick or even Terry, though my mother did pop into my mind every once in a while. These were good thoughts, too. The look of sheer joy on Tamika's face when she saw those boots. I was grateful for that look. Slowly but surely, things were getting better, weren't they?

CHAPTER 21

All of my New Year's resolutions could be summed up in one word: Avoid. Avoid giving my heart to any boy who wasn't truly interested in my heart. Avoid Terry at all costs. Avoid Mr. Rick like the plague. The first one—avoiding giving my heart away—was going to be easy. I planned to be too busy to mess around with boys and their nonsense this year. Instead, I would be busy rebuilding my savings, which had been severely drained by the infamous hooker boots. I would also continue my efforts to rebuild my grades.

On the first day back to school after Christmas break, all the seniors were herded into the auditorium for a special assembly. It suddenly dawned on me: this time next year, I would be heading into that assembly. Then, five months after that, I would be graduating. My guidance counselor assured me it wasn't too late to plan for college. I could even take some classes over the summer to get rid of some of those ugly D's and F's I picked up during my freshman and sophomore years at my other high schools.

Before coming to Excelsior, I stopped dreaming about college and replaced it with dreams of hitting the lottery or maybe even becoming a stripper—since I already had some experience. All of a sudden, my college dreams had been revived. But I needed to get on the ball. No time for boys: texting them, chatting on the phone with them late into the night; daydreaming in class about prom dates and fantasy weddings; sleepless nights wondering why they stopped calling: Was I not pretty enough? Not classy enough? Too loud? Too broken?

Avoiding Terry wasn't much of a challenge either. I hardly ever saw him anymore. Even when I ate in the cafeteria at the same time as Terry, I didn't see him. It was as if I had trained my eyes to see right through him. Two weeks had now passed since the night he rescued me from the evil grasp of Mr. Rick. I half-expected Terry to tell Miss Angie about the incident, but he

didn't. He had respected my desperate plea to let it go, and I appreciated that. But still, he could've at least called to check up on me. He was probably too angry with me. I could still picture the horrified look in Terry's eyes when I cussed him out that night. He'd probably never been cussed out like that by a girl before in his life. Mercedes and Emily were much too nice to get down and dirty like that. It pained me to think about how I wounded Terry that night when he was only trying to look out for me. Oh well, just one more reason why things could have never worked out between me and him anyway. It would've been too much pressure for me to be sweet and nice all the time. Eventually, the real Toya would have revealed herself—the loud, hot-headed one—and Terry would have run for the hills.

Avoiding Mr. Rick had been tricky, at first. But I had it down to a science now. I just made sure I switched up my routine as much as possible. Some days I stayed late and got a ride home from a friend. Or left on time and walked in a group, even if I didn't know the people in the group. Sometimes, I'd go out the front door, other times the side doors, and every once in a while, I'd go through the gym and out the back door. It was while taking this back door route, one afternoon, that my world changed.

Standing in the lobby near the back doors, I noticed an unusual number of cute boys in tight pants hanging out by the locker room. They weren't from the basketball team because the basketball team was already on the court, practicing. Some of the boys had on T-shirts that said, "Track and Field," "Run 4 Your Life," and "Speed Kills." One of the boys stopped to stretch before heading outside. I picked that moment to grab a soda from the soda machine, as I slyly watched him stretch and pull his long, lean muscles. I gave up on chasing boys, but watching them was still allowed.

"Are you trying out too?" said a voice from behind me. Kayla. The girl who had struck up a friendship with me over lunch in the Guidance Office. Until I saw her standing there in cotton sweats and a long-sleeve shirt, I hadn't even realized there were girls out there too. I forgot that Kayla was even on the track team. I was focused on the boys. Too focused. I had no clue what Kayla was even talking about, until she pointed at a sign taped to the soda machine: "Spring Track and Field Tryouts."

"You trying out?" Kayla repeated.

I snickered, "Now, what would I look like running track?"

"You said you like to run when you're stressed out."

"Yeah, but I'm not stressed," I said—*no more than usual*, I thought.

"Doesn't matter! If running makes you feel free, why not feel free all the time?" Kayla said, breezily, "Why wait until you're stressed?"

It was a good point. One of the reasons why I liked hanging around Kayla was because, whenever she opened her mouth, it seemed like nothing but rainbows and butterflies came out.

But I wasn't in the mood to chase Kayla's butterflies today. "Nah. I just

got my hair done. I don't want to sweat out my perm."

"Have it your way." Kayla shrugged and headed for the door. She was never one to argue or force her opinion on anyone—unless she caught you littering or failing to recycle. Otherwise, she didn't want to get her spirit bogged down in a pit of negativity. "I'll call you when it's over."

"Uh huh. I'll be thinking of you out there in the cold running and sweating, while I'm home nice and warm, watching Judge Judy," I teased, then chugged down the rest of my soda.

"You're not trying out?" A deeper, raspier, sexier voice now spoke to me. I whipped around and nearly choked on my soda. A face I had never seen before. Smooth, deep chocolate skin, sleepy brown eyes, with an iron chin. His tall, muscular frame did wonders for the Body Armor shirt that clung to the contours of his biceps and pectorals.

Still choking on the soda, I coughed and hacked out the words, "Y-you, you go here?" I figured he was new to the school. Transferred in during the break. There's no way someone that fine could have been walking around this school without pinging my radar.

"Used to. I graduated a couple of years ago," he said, "but I come back every year to help with tryouts. The name's Brandon." He extended his hand, which took me by surprise, momentarily. A gentleman.

"Toya Young." I realized his hand was still hanging in mid-air, so I shook it. "So, you used to run track?"

"Still do. Just at college now."

A college man, huh? I could feel a twinge in my stomach and tried hard not to smile. "What school?"

"Villanova."

A rich college man. I said, "Really? What's your major?"

Brandon completely ignored my question and substituted it with his own. "So how come you're not trying out?"

"Huh? Oh," I shrugged it off, "It's not really my thing."

"Yeah?" He leaned his body against the soda machine, moving within inches of me. "So, what is your thing?"

My throat went dry. I could feel a silly smirk on my face but was powerless to make it go away. "My thing? Oh, I don't know. I haven't figured it out yet."

"Then how do you know track isn't it?"

"I don't know," I replied, and wished my voice wouldn't make that embarrassing squeaky sound when I was nervous.

Brandon persisted, "Then it's possible that track is your thing?"

"I...I guess...it's possible, but I—"

"I think it is."

"You do." I took a step back. Whether it was his eyes or his crisp, spicy cologne, or both, I was beginning to feel like I was being hypnotized. I

crossed my arms and added a little sass to my voice, "How would you know? You just met me."

"Baby, I've been running track since I was old enough to walk. I know a runner when I see one." His eyes scanned me up and down, "Tight abs, long legs, muscular thighs and butt ..."

I didn't know if I should feel complimented or like a racehorse on the auction block.

"Take it as a compliment," Brandon said. "Like it or not, you're a natural-born runner. You might as well embrace it."

I'd rather embrace you. I thought. Down girl! Remember that New Year's resolution. I struggled to suppress the sudden surge of hormones that threatened to carry me away in the warmth of Brandon's eyes. I took in a deep breath and restored my common sense. "No thanks. I'll be embracing my books for the rest of the school year."

"I see. Sorry. Guess I had you all wrong," he said. And I couldn't shake the feeling that he was still trying to charm me. "I mean, you're right. Excelsior's track team isn't for everybody. They have been state champions five out of the last six years."

I wasn't impressed.

"And they have had three people make it to the Olympics."

I raised an eyebrow, but since I couldn't remember the last time I watched the Olympics, I really wasn't moved.

"Not impressed, huh?" Brandon said.

"Nope."

"Oh well. Can't say I didn't try." He brushed by me, and my skin got all tingly. Brandon headed for the exit. Just as he was about to push the door open, he paused. "Oh, and did I mention that our best athletes usually get full scholarships to the top schools in the nation?"

Bingo!

* * * * *

Fill out a form. Take a number. Listen to a speech from Coach Haney. Stretch. Get in line. Wait. Wait....Wait.

Finally free.

From the first whistle, I shot ahead of the pack in every race I ran and never looked back. One-hundred-meter dash. Four hundred meters. Eight hundred meters. My heart was pounding, my sides ached, and sweat poured off of my body, but I was happy. With each step I ran, I heard Kayla's words of wisdom pounding in my ears: "If running makes you feel free, why not feel free all the time?"

Why not feel free all the time? It was like a revelation to me. Something that made me feel this good, this powerful, was within my grasp all the time and I hardly ever used it. Maybe because deep down inside, I didn't think I

deserved to feel that good. Pure good. The kind that came from some place deep within myself—not because of something I had or what someone had done for me, but a natural source of goodness bubbling up inside of me. Sort of like that day the Spirit filled me at church. But that was only for special occasions, right? I couldn't possibly expect to feel that much joy every day. Yet here I was feeling it. I spent so much of my life feeling ashamed, feeling dirty, feeling guilty—even when I'd done nothing wrong. So, when I did have that momentary spark of happiness, I could never relax and just enjoy it for fear that someone would come along and snatch it away.

Off to the side, I caught a glimpse of Brandon holding a clipboard, jotting down times as Coach Haney read them off his stopwatch. He looked up and saw me eyeing him, then gave me a quick wink. I felt myself getting all soft and mushy inside. I wanted to go over there and check on my times, a perfect opportunity to flirt with Brandon. The only thing stopping me was the fact that my baggy gym clothes were not exactly sexy, nor was the sweat that matted down my hair, though it didn't seem to bother Brandon. Wherever I was on the field, he seemed to be stealing glances at me. I knew this because I was stealing glances at him.

"Young!" A harsh voice barked my name from across the field. I felt busted. I stole one too many glances at Brandon, now I was going to be kicked off the team before I even made it.

A husky-looking, White woman wearing a baseball cap, Coach McCoy, the girl coach, was waving me down from fifty yards away, "Let's go! Hit the showers!"

After all that running I did at tryouts, I would have never imagined I'd be running all the way home. But there I was, running like a five-year-old on the playground. I burst through the front door, barely able to speak in coherent sentences. "Miss Ang—...I...I was...They asked me to—"

"Where the hell have you been?"

For a moment, I thought it was my mother who just yelled at me. But at second glance, I saw that it was Miss Angie, standing on the steps with one hand on her hip and flames in her eyes.

"Answer me, Toya. Where have you been?"

It took a moment for me to get my words together, but I finally said, "I...I stayed after school."

"For what?"

"Tryouts. For track."

Miss Angie took a step down the stairs. "You didn't say nothing about track, this morning."

"I know. I didn't know I was trying out until just before it started."

"Oh, I see. So, you just decided to come home three hours late, and you

didn't—"

"I wasn't hanging out. I was at tryouts. But I came home right after it—"

"And was your phone broken?"

I hesitated. Uh oh. I forgot all about calling home. I messed up, and I knew it. And Miss Angie knew it, as she stomped down the rest of the steps, fuming. "You and Chelsea think you're so grown. Do whatever you want. Don't have to listen to me. I might as well go live on an island somewhere and let you two grown women run things," she said to no one in particular. "I must have called you ten times in the past three hours. Didn't you wonder why I was calling? My goodness! I could've been laying in the hospital or something."

"I'm sorry, Miss Angie. I left my phone in my locker during tryouts, then I was in such a hurry to get home, I forgot to check it. I'm really sorry."

"You will be sorry," Miss Angie grumbled, as she shuffled off to the kitchen. "You're grounded for two weeks. I'll have to think about this track thing, since you just sprung it on me."

"What?" I shrieked, "But...but I said I was sorry."

"And I believe you. But I need you to understand how important it is for you to call me when you're late," Miss Angie yelled from the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of ginger ale and then headed back upstairs. She strolled right past a dazed-me, as I stood there counting up all the stuff I was going to miss out on over the next two weeks. Halfway up the steps, Miss Angie added, "Oh, and bring me your cell phone too."

"My phone?"

"For the rest of the week."

"Come on, Miss Angie!" I whined, now counting up all the people I was going to miss calling.

"If you need to call your mother, you can use the house phone. Other than that, no phone calls. See if that'll help you remember to call me when you're gonna be late."

I stomped around my bedroom quietly cussing out Miss Angie. I was past that stage of thinking that every time me and Miss Angie had a fight, it meant I was about to get kicked out. I knew Miss Angie might fuss, she might ground me, but it was only because she cared. It wasn't like me—this version of me—to stay away from home without calling. Of course, the woman was worried, but that didn't stop me from being pissed about being grounded. I dumped the junk out of my book bag and onto my bed. My cell phone was the last thing to fall out. I examined it and saw that I had eleven missed calls, all from Miss Angie.

"Don't let her get to you. She's been in a bad mood all day."

I tore my eyes away from the phone and saw Chelsea standing in the

doorway. Without bothering to wait for me to invite her in, Chelsea looked behind her to make sure the coast was clear, then shut the door.

“What’s she all worked up about—”

“Shhh!” Chelsea put her hand over my mouth. “If she hears us, she’ll ground us both for life.”

I yanked Chelsea’s hand from my mouth. “What’s going on?”

In a hushed tone, Chelsea said, “I think Mommy broke up with Uncle Kevin.”

“What?”

“Yeah! They broke up.”

I sat down on the bed. “What makes you think they broke up?”

Chelsea sat down too. “Well, I was downstairs doing the laundry an—”

“Doing what?”

“Okay, okay,” Chelsea rolled her eyes. “I was downstairs in the kitchen getting something to eat. It was late, like one in the morning and—”

“Wait! Were you the one who ate the rest of the sweet potato pie? It was half a pie left last night, and this morning it was gone.”

“Look, do you want to hear about Uncle Kevin, or sit around talking about some stupid pie?”

I gestured for Chelsea to go on, and she did.

“Thank you! Well, anyway. I snuck downstairs to get something to eat, and the house was so quiet I thought everyone was sleeping. But then Mommy came downstairs on the phone. I didn’t want her to find me, so I hid in the laundry room, but I could hear her say: *‘Look, don’t talk to me that way. I hate it when you do that.’* And then Uncle Kevin said something, and she was like: *‘Like I don’t have a brain. I have a degree too, remember? You should. We went to the same school.’* That’s when I knew she was talking to Uncle Kevin. And then he said something else, and Mommy was like: *‘I have the right to my own opinion. I call it like I see it and I see it as a messed-up thing to do to someone you’re supposed to care about.’*”

“What was a messed-up thing to do?” I interrupted.

“I don’t know. She never said. Then Mommy said: *‘Well, you’re entitled to your opinion.’* Then, I don’t know what Uncle Kevin said, but Mommy was real quiet for a while, then she started say, uh huh, uh huh, uh huh....You know how she does when she’s about ready to go off.”

“Uh huh,” I said, my eyes as wide as saucers.

“Next thing I know, Mommy went off. She started saying: *‘See, that’s where you’re wrong, it is my business!’*” Chelsea did her best to mimic every neck roll, every eye roll, and every inflection in her mother’s voice. “Then she got real hyped, Toya, and was like: *‘I don’t want to calm down. Now you’re the one who wanted to talk about it so bad, so let’s talk.’* I could hear Uncle Kevin yelling, but I couldn’t make out what he said. Then right in the middle of it...Mommy hung up.”

My jaw dropped. "She hung up on him?"

Chelsea nodded. "And he called right back. She hung up again."

"Oh my goodness!" Inside, I was cheering for Miss Angie. I liked Mr. Kevin, but whatever it was that got Miss Angie so upset, it must have been his fault.

"Next thing I knew, Mommy stomped upstairs, and she's been in a mood ever since."

"Okay. But that was last night, they probably made up since then."

Right on cue, a soft melody wafted through the door, followed by a bluesy voice. Chelsea cupped her hand behind her ear. "You hear that? Nina Simone. Mommy only plays her when she's sad."

The singer had a voice that was beautiful and sad and haunting all at once. I never heard Miss Angie play that kind of music before. Nina Simone was definitely singing a song of heartache, making me want to turn it off and turn it up at the same time. "So, what do you do when she gets like this?" I asked.

"Me? I stay out of her way."

A few minutes later, I knocked on the door to Miss Angie's room. She didn't answer right away, but eventually said, "Come in."

I stepped inside and timidly waved my cell phone in the air. Miss Angie seemed to have almost forgotten about it, but then stretched out her hand to take it from me. I closed the door behind me and walked across the room, which was dimly lit and smelled like lavender candles. As I placed the phone in Miss Angie's hand, I tried to get a glimpse at her eyes, but the room cast too many shadows. I stood there, watching Miss Angie stick the phone in her nightstand. When she looked up, I was still standing there.

"Did you want something?"

I shrugged. "Not really. Just wanted to talk." I took a page from Chelsea's book and sat down without being invited. "I mean, who do you talk to, Miss Angie, when you need to talk?"

She looked at me strangely, "Where is this coming from?"

"Nowhere." I leaned back casually and said, "It just dawned on me that, as a hairdresser, you spend all day listening to other people's problems. I was just wondering who listens to yours."

"You were just wondering, huh? I ground you and take away your phone, and all you can think about is who I share my problems with."

"Yeah. I just—"

"Chelsea!!!" Miss Angie hollered. "Get in here!"

I looked back and saw the door ease open. Chelsea peeked in. "How'd you know I was out here?"

"I could see those size 10s at the bottom of my door." When Chelsea and her size 10s slinked all the way into the room, Miss Angie said, "What's going

on? You and Toya been talking about me behind my back?"

"Not really." Chelsea fiddled with a piece of lint on her sweater. "I just mentioned to Toya that maybe you and Uncle Kevin might have broken up or something."

Miss Angie shook her head, half annoyed, half amused. Then her eyes lit up. "Were you down in the kitch—so *you* were the one who ate up the sweet potato pie!"

"Forget the pie, Mommy! Is it true? Did you and Uncle Kevin break up?"

"First of all, we didn't break up because we weren't together." Miss Angie said for, seemingly, the one thousandth time. "And second of all, what did I tell you about eavesdropping? One day you're gonna listen in on the wrong conversation and get your feelings hurt, young lady."

I tried to come to Chelsea's rescue. "Well, if you're just friends, why were y'all yelling at each other?"

"You yell at your friends sometimes, don't you? I mean, we haven't seen that little Emily girl around here in weeks."

"That's different! Emily was just a friend, Mr. Kevin was your special friend."

Miss Angie sighed, "All of my friends are special. Kevin is no more special than any other friend I've got. And sometimes we don't agree, which is why we could never be anything more than friends," Miss Angie let slip from her lips and instantly regretted it. "Forget I said that."

But it was too late. I pounced on that little tidbit of info like an eager puppy. "So, does that mean you would like to be more than friends, if you didn't disagree?"

"No. It means..." Miss Angie paused to study the faces that greedily waited for her answer. "It means, don't ever change. Stay the sweet, wonderful, young ladies that you are."

Me and Chelsea looked at each other, perplexed.

I tried to clarify, "So, you're saying, Mr. Kevin tried to change you. He wanted you to be something that you're not, so you dumped him."

"No, I'm saying. I am so blessed to have two beautiful, caring young ladies in my life." She reached out and stroked each of us on the cheek, "And I hope it stays that way forever."

Chelsea smiled but quickly realized her mother still hadn't answered the question, "So, wait...What does this have to do with you and Uncle Kevin?"

"Absolutely nothing. But I appreciate you two being so concerned about me."

Me and Chelsea groaned. We could tell by the grin on Miss Angie's face that she wasn't going to give us what we wanted. No juicy bit of gossip. No tiny glimpse into the world of grown-up love.

Chelsea stood up and whined, "Aw man, this stinks! You never tell us anything!"

“Oh, calm down, Chels,” I said. “Miss Angie has the right to her privacy,” I said. “If it was something we really needed to know, she’d tell us. If not, then we just have to trust that she knows what’s best for us.”

Miss Angie raised her eyebrows in surprise, “Well, thank you, Toya. You said it perfectly.”

I shot Chelsea a smug look, until Miss Angie added, “But you’re still on punishment.”

Now it was my turn to stomp and whine, while Chelsea pointed and snickered. “Aw, come on, Miss Angie! Two weeks? It ain’t fair.”

“I know,” she said, slipping on her glasses and cracking open her Toni Morrison book, “But think of it this way. Now you’ll have plenty of time to tell me all about the track team.”

CHAPTER 22

I absolutely loved, loved, loved, track! It was like being adopted into a brand-new family. We ate together, studied together, worked out together. Even on the weekends, we would meet up and run together. My grades were up. And I was running better than I ever had in my life. My track coaches were actually teaching me how to run. How to run out of the blocks. How to maximize my speed. How to care for my body in such a way as to get the most out of it. I was even outrunning some of the boys on the track team.

One day, when Brandon stopped by to watch practice. He was so blown away by my speed that he slipped on his track shoes and challenged me to a race.

"All right, Foxy, show me what you got." Brandon nicknamed me Foxy, because he said my running style was sly like a fox. I was deceptively fast. Now he wanted to test my speed.

I had a dilemma. There was a part of me that was confident I could beat Brandon. He was too bulky with muscles to be able to keep up with this fox. If I did beat him, then what? If I embarrassed him out there, he might never ask me out—and I was really hoping he would ask me out one day. On the other hand, I didn't want to hold back. I liked the challenge and welcomed the opportunity to test the limits of my new-found speed.

"What's the matter, little fox? Scared to run with the horses?" Brandon crowed, and the other boys egged him on.

I rolled my eyes, "I'm sorry, did you say horses? Or horse's ass?" Boys and girls erupted with cheers and cat calls. Even Brandon had a little smirk on his face. I unzipped my jacket and stepped into the blocks. Brandon whipped off his hoodie and took his place in the blocks beside me. I kept my eyes down on the ground, not wanting to be distracted by his sculpted biceps.

"Not too late to back out," Brandon said, with cocky grin.

"Okay, then back out." I shot back, then lowered my head, preparing to

bolt.

The whistle gave a short *brrrp*, and I launched myself from the blocks. In that moment, I made up my mind. Forget the date. I was going to put a beat down on Brandon. I was going to leave him in my dust. If his ego couldn't handle it, and he stopped flirting with me, and never asked me out, then so be it. He stoked up the natural competitor in old Foxy, and she couldn't hold back.

"Go Foxy!" I could hear my fellow track sisters cheer. My legs were moving so swiftly that I could barely feel them. Yet I could feel the nip of February air whizzing by my face. What I could not feel, nor sense, was Brandon's presence. A quick glance over my shoulder, and I knew he was a few yards back. I knew what he was doing. He was trying to lull me into a false sense of security. Trick me into thinking I was winning, so I would burn up all of my energy.

Nice try. I could play that game too. I dialed back my speed a few notches, making Brandon think I was running out of gas. Just like I thought, Brandon kicked it into another gear. It hit me like a wave. A Tsunami. The roar of the track boys, the pounding of Brandon's footsteps, the staccato panting of his breathing, growing closer, closer. He was right on my back, then by my shoulder, then blasting right by me. His arms and legs were churning together to propel his body through space like a missile. For a moment, I was stunned at this amazing freak of nature—lightning in human form.

Once I got over the shock, however, I remembered that I still had some gas in my tank. I dug down deep for one more burst of speed. I could feel the muscles in my thighs rippling, my feet practically kicking my own butt, I was lifting them so high. The gap between me and Brandon was quickly cut in half. I was no longer fueled by my own body, but the screams of my track sisters. And the surprised look on Brandon's face as I pulled up neck and neck with him. The finish line—an orange cone—was just ahead. Fifteen yards, ten yards, five, four, three... I gave it one more push, but there was no more gas in the tank. I hurled my body at the cone, hoping pure determination would defeat my opponent.

I didn't win. While the boys patted Brandon on the back and replayed every second of the race, I stood off to the side, resting my hands on my knees, trying to recapture the bits of myself I left all over the track.

"You really brought it, Tee," one of the girls said, patting me on the back.

"Yeah, girl! You were in the wind!" said another.

"As far as I'm concerned, you won that race," Kayla added. "Brandon is a grown man, and you almost beat him."

Almost doesn't count, I wanted to say, but I didn't have enough air left in my lungs. I looked up and saw Brandon walking toward me wearing that same cocky grin. When he saw the way the girls circled around me, protectively, he

raised his hands in surrender.

“Hey. Just coming to give Foxy her props.”

The girls didn’t budge, not melting at all under the warmth of his charm. He appealed to me. “Foxy. You gonna call off your bodyguards?”

I nodded to the girls, letting them know it was okay. They backed off, leaving Brandon and me alone. “Wow, for a minute there, I thought I was gonna get shanked,” he teased.

“What can I say, we Excelsior girls got each other’s back.”

“I can see that. Anyway...Good race.” He stuck out his hand.

I shook it. “It’s only good if I win.”

“I like that, Foxy. You think like a winner.”

“I should be calling you Foxy. I had no idea you were so, so...”

“Sexy?”

I nudged him. “Fast. I didn’t know you were so fast.”

He let his chest swell up. “Ah! You thought I was just another pretty face.”

“Yup. Sure did. Now, I know better.” I started to walk back to the school. He walked with me.

“Yeah, you’ll find I’m good at just about anything I put my mind to.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you good at shutting up?”

He stopped in his tracks. I stopped too, realizing he was staring at me.

Finally, I said, “What?”

“Wanna know what I’m really good at?”

“Nope,” I said, still wanting to give him a hard time. But I’m terrible at playing hard to get, so I quickly caved. “OK, what?”

He leaned in close, and I felt that hypnotic feeling wash over me again. “Can’t tell ya,” he teased. “But one day I’ll show ya.”

He planted a quick kiss on my cheek and ran off like he had just stolen my purse—or my heart. I LOVED track!

The only thing I hated about track was Kamisha Billings, the captain of the girls’ track team. If the track team was a family, Kamisha would be the wicked stepsister. She wasn’t so much wicked, as she was bossy. And she seemed to have nothing else going on in her life besides track. She fed the team a steady diet of emails, text messages, Tweets and phone calls, with running tips, dietary advice, and motivational quotes. She scheduled five-minute meetings that lasted an hour and called me at five in the morning to make sure I was going to be on time for our Sunday morning “optional runs.” She called me because I was the one who gave her the most trouble: always questioning Kamisha’s rules and challenging her authority. To which, Kamisha would reply, “It’s in the bi-laws.” Bi-laws, which no one had ever seen or voted for.

The one rule that aggravated me the most was the uniformity rule. At the

track meets, every member of the girls' track team was required to dress alike—as in identical. Of course, the track suits were the same, but this rule required that everything be the same, right down to the color of our nail polish. If one of us wanted to wear her hair in a ponytail, then everybody had to wear one. “If your hair isn’t long enough, then buy some,” Kamisha told me on day one. “If your teammate gets a zit on her nose, you’d better hope it goes away or draw one on your face too.”

Apparently, this had been a tradition of the girls' track team for years. No one seemed to question it, except me. Even Kayla would lay aside her naturalist beliefs on those days and paint her nails or wear a synthetic purple ribbon in her hair—for the sake of the team. Then detoxify herself for the next three days. So, for the sake of the team, I went along with the rule—running around the mall like a fool trying to find the right shade of purple ribbon, or gold laces for my track shoes. I even baked cupcakes for the bake sale. We had to raise money for the team to have the same purple windbreakers with gold trimmings.

Yet the more I cooperated with Kamisha, the more I began to like her. Kamisha started trusting me with special assignments and confiding in me secrets about runners on rival track teams. To my surprise, Kamisha even showed up as a customer at Sassy's. She needed a touch-up on her perm. And as I deep conditioned Kamisha's hair, she talked.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” she said, as I placed a plastic cap on her head to allow the conditioner to really sink in. “Coach Haney is thinking about making you captain next year.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I'm graduating and he has to start thinking about it now. It's a lot of work being captain, Toya. You have to start preparing for it months before the season starts.”

“I don't know if I'm cut out to be captain,” I pictured myself drowning in a sea of lists, schedules, and emails.

“Honestly, I didn't think you could cut it, either,” Kamisha added, “but when I saw the way you took on Brandon. I knew you had it in you.”

I twisted my face. What did that have to do with anything? “I lost that race.”

“Didn't you see how all the girls rallied around you? You lost the race, but you earned their respect that day.”

I removed the plastic cap and eased Kamisha back into the basin to rinse her hair. I was quiet. My mind was tripping all over itself with thoughts of this huge responsibility I was being asked to consider. And Kamisha's words: “*You earned their respect.*” The weight of those words sat heavily on my heart, distracting me, until Kamisha yelped. I just doused her hair with ice-cold water.

“Sorry. I'm so sorry. I wasn't paying attention. Sorry—”

"I freaked you out, didn't I?" Kamisha said, once I got the water to a soothingly warm temperature.

"A little. I mean, running is cool, but I don't know about all the rules and paperwork stuff you do."

"I'll help you. I'll put everything I have on a flash drive and give it to you at the end of the season."

"Why? Why would you want to help me?" All I could think of was all the grief I had given Kamisha over the past few weeks. Maybe this was a setup. Maybe this was payback for all of the headaches I inflicted on my devoted captain.

"You know who you remind me of?"

For some reason, I didn't want to know the answer to that question.

"Flo Jo. Florence Griffith Joyner. You ever heard of her?"

"She was in the Olympics, right?" I had never seen the woman run. I heard the name from my grandmother. Whenever she got the kids together to play games at the family reunions—kickball, tag, duck goose, I would run my legs off, and my grandmom would say: "Honey, you was running like Flo Jo out there!" I didn't know what that meant, but knew it was good. Now, Kamisha was also comparing me to Flo Jo.

"Toya, she didn't just run track; she was a star. Every time she took the field, you just knew something special was gonna happen."

"How would you know? Didn't she die a long time ago?"

"Girl, I am third-generation track. My mommy and daddy met running track. They're always watching old DVD's and talking about the greats: Carl Lewis, Michael Johnson, Gail Divers, Flo Jo." Kamisha's eyes sparkled as she called off these names. "Now, I'm not saying you're going to the Olympics or nothing. You're not nearly committed enough to be ready for all that. But I am saying you have something special. And if I can do anything to help you be a better runner—a better leader—then that makes me part of something special, too."

* * * * *

Kamisha was so hyped up about her love for Flo Jo that I just had to look her up online as soon as I finished work. What I learned blew my mind. As soon as the picture of the dazzling track diva flashed on the screen, I was mesmerized. The woman had her own style: fingernails like brightly painted talons and track outfits of hot pink, or white lace, or with one of the legs cut out to expose her lean legs of pure muscle. A one-of-a-kind star who blazed a trail that I longed to follow. First, Flo Jo took her running skills and turned them into a college scholarship, just as I hoped to do one day. She got her degree in Psychology. I was thinking about becoming either a psychologist or a lawyer. On top of all that, she also trained as a beautician. Now, that blew my mind—as I thought of all I was learning while working in Miss Angie's

salon.

Florence Griffith Joyner was beautiful and strong and everything I wanted to be. Yet, when she took the field, it wasn't for a fashion show. Flo Jo was there to "put her thang down!"—as my mother liked to say. She set world records in the 100 and 200-meter races, my strongest races. And won gold and silver medals in the 1984 and 1988 Olympics. They had some videos of her on the internet, and I watched in awe. This simple girl from the hood in L.A. was streaking across the track halfway around the world in Seoul, Korea—a wild mane of wavy hair flowing behind her—making the others eat her dust. "Go, Flo Jo!" my heart cheered.

Then my heart saddened when I read about my new track idol's sudden, tragic death, which occurred at age thirty-nine, ten years after she retired. She died due to suffocation in the throes of a seizure she suffered one night. Sadly, her death was surrounded by controversy and whispers of steroid use, rumors that were never proven. *Haters!* It seemed like Flo Jo's entire track career was haunted by rumors and whispers. That was something else that I had in common with her. Despite that, Flo Jo managed to rise above her critics and shine on the field. Even after her retirement, she was still making an impact: dabbling in fashion and acting, writing children's books, starting a children's foundation, and earning yet another fan, more than fifteen years after her death, in a troubled, sixteen-year-old-girl from Philly.

I was not just a fan of Flo Jo, I was becoming a Flo Jo junkie. I made a Flo Jo wallpaper for my computer, tablet, and my cell phone. Taped up pictures in my locker, wrote her initials on my track shoes—which violated Kamisha's track rules, but I didn't care. Kamisha couldn't be too mad. After all, she was the one who opened my eyes to the wonderful world of Flo Jo. Now, there was no stopping me. When I ran, I could almost feel myself channeling the spirit of Flo Jo. I stepped onto the field with a new level of confidence. I no longer ran out of the blocks, I charged—attacking each race with the boldness of a woman who just got a glimpse of her future and liked what she saw.

I could see myself running track in college, setting world records. I envisioned myself on the podium getting my gold medal. These visions began to dominate my mind when I ran and helped push me into another gear. One day I ran so hard that I ran right out of my shoes and toppled to the ground. As I lay on the ground, clutching my ankle, I looked up to the sky. I could've sworn I saw Flo Jo looking down at me from heaven, waving a long finger with a gold-painted tip, and saying, "Take it easy, girlfriend. God only gave you one set of legs, don't wear them out."

It was a mild ankle sprain. Nothing a little ice and heat couldn't cure. But to be safe, I was given the rest of the week off from practice. Our first meet was a week away, and I wanted to be one hundred percent. But the time away

from running was torture for me. I missed my track family, though they called and texted me every day. Yet nothing could fill the void I felt from not being able to run. How I missed that free sensation I got whenever I burst from the blocks and let my legs carry my mind to another level. As I sat on my bed, with my right foot taped and elevated on a pillow, I felt like an eagle with a broken wing, looking toward the blue sky like a long-lost love.

It was while thinking of love that my phone rang:

“Foxy. What’s up, girl?”

I felt an instant flutter inside, as if all the energy my body had been focusing on my ankle suddenly rushed to my heart. I took a deep breath and played it cool and breezy, “Hey Brandon, what’s going on?”

“Oh, nothing much. Just checking to see how the patient is doing.”

“In other words, ya missed me.”

He let out a tiny chuckle. “I guess you could say that. I mean, I don’t drive all the way up there to see a bunch of kids run. I come to see Foxy!”

I grinned so hard that my cheeks hurt. It suddenly dawned on me that Flo Jo eventually married a man who was also an Olympic track star, Al Joyner. Maybe Brandon was my future Al Joyner. We talked for over an hour, mostly about Brandon. The boy may have been lightning on the track, but his academic skills were sorely lacking. I learned that he was a sophomore, but as a freshman, his grades were so bad, his folks made him commute to school and live at home where there would be less distractions.

Apparently, Brandon was distracted easily by girls, and video games, and parties, and more girls—anything but books. He didn’t have a major because he had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. He had some big shoes to fill, though. His dad was a successful dentist, which explained why Brandon had such great teeth; and his mom was an English professor at Temple University. He was the youngest of three boys, with one brother in medical school and the other in his last year of law school.

“I was thinking about dropping out of school and starting my own band,” Brandon told me.

“Can you sing?”

“No. But isn’t that what the black sheep of the family does? Start his own band, get addicted to heroin, or both. And I love my body too much to start using heroin, so I might as well stick with the band.”

I love your body too, I heard from some place deep inside of me. “Can’t you just run track professionally? People make money doing that, don’t they?”

“Yeah, the super, super, super, elite athletes. The ones who end up on the Wheaties box. The rest are lucky if they can afford a box of Wheaties.”

“Well, if you keep training, you could be one of the super, super, elite.”

He sighed. “Aw, that’s sweet, Foxy, but not at all realistic. Look, I may not be on the Dean’s List, but I’m smart enough to know running is a hobby for me, and that’s all it will ever be.”

I didn't know how to respond to that because for me, running was so much more than a hobby. Not only was it my source of happiness. I was hoping it would be my ticket to college. But right now, I wasn't a runner. I was a cheerleader, charged with the task of pumping Brandon up. "Don't worry, Brandon. One day, it'll just hit you, that thing you're supposed to be doing with your life. And whatever it is, I'm sure you'll be good at it."

"You think so, huh?"

"I guess so. I mean, you still haven't told me what it is you're really good at."

Instantly, his voice turned flirtatious, "No, I said I was going to *show* you what I'm really good at."

"Okay. So, when are you going to show me?"

There was silence on the other end, as if he was thinking it over. "Soon. Real soon. You're not ready yet."

CHAPTER 23

I stepped off the school bus fired up and ready to take on the world. It was my first track meet. Of course, I wanted the team to do well, but I also wanted to do well, personally. To silence my inner-critic and prove to myself that the confidence the team placed in me was well deserved. I really wanted my mom to be proud of me, too.

Tamika called me first thing in the morning and told me she was pulling for me; and to be sure to call her as soon as it was over to give her all the details. She told me that there was a time when she wanted to run high school track herself. But she ended up getting pregnant and that was the end of that dream. To be fair, Tamika was always cutting gym class and hated to run, “I just thought the outfits were sexy,” she told me.

I also wanted Miss Angie to be proud. She invested so much money in my new passion. Three different types of running shoes, dozens of pairs of hi-tech socks, sports bras, tubes of sports cream, and a fancy runner’s watch—whatever I needed, Miss Angie bought it without even raising a fuss. She was just glad to see me involved in some other extracurricular activity besides talking on the phone.

Unfortunately, today’s meet was early on a Saturday morning, one of Sassy’s busiest days, so Miss Angie couldn’t be there. But before I left, she dragged Chelsea out of bed, and we said a prayer for my success. So, at least I knew I had God on my side today. Maybe Flo Jo would even be peeking down from heaven today to check in on one of her newest fans.

* * * * *

I had to admit it, even though I hated the uniformity rules of the track team, I did see the benefit of them now. I remembered how we spent almost a half an hour in a knock-down-drag-out fight, trying to figure out how we were going to wear our hair, what color nail polish, and if we were going to

put ribbons in our hair; and I kept thinking, *What does any of this have to do with running?*

Now, I got it. From the moment we stepped on the field, we were together. And everybody knew it. The girls from the other schools were all individualized. For some, it was hard to even tell what school they were from because they had their own personal warm-up suits on. Black, White, Asian, Latina, the Excelsior girls were one. We all had on the same black warm-up suits, with gold and purple stripes. We all wore our hair in a long French braid down the back, with purple ribbon weaved into the braid—even Kayla wove her locks into a French braid. We kept to ourselves and only talked to one another.

“Don’t be fooled,” Kamisha warned while we were still on the bus, “Some of these girls will come at you, all laughing and smiling in your face; but really they’re just trying to get in your head.”

I found that out firsthand, in my first race. The 100-meter qualifier. As I stretched and loosened up my muscles, a tall, skinny Black girl with big metal braces that looked like someone had built a railroad in her mouth, stretched alongside me.

“Your name’s Toya, right?” the metal mouth said.

“Yeah,” I said, reaching my right arm in the air to stretch my lats.

“I thought so. I am your biggest fan.” Her voice was so giddy, like she just met Beyoncé or something

I stopped stretching and was about to say, “What are you talking about?” when Metal Mouth turned to the rest of her teammates and yelled, “Hey y’all, we got a celebrity over here!” She looked back at me, grinning, blinding me with the silvery braces. “I saw your video on Instagram. Girl, you got talent!”

The other girls shook their heads and laughed hysterically, until I lunged for her with my fists balled, tightly. I got within six inches of Metal Mouth’s ugly face when Kamisha grabbed me and managed to drag me away with Kayla’s help.

“What ya getting all worked up about?” Metal Mouth yelled after me, “I was just paying you a compliment. Hey, when’s your next video coming out?”

I turned and started to tear after the girl again, but Kamisha’s grip was like steel. She said in a low voice that soothed and challenged me at the same time, “You wanna shut her up? Do it on the track.”

And I did just that. From the moment the starter pistol fired, I was Foxy. As fate would have it, I was assigned to the lane right next to Metal Mouth for the first race. The moment I realized that fact, I fought hard not to smile. I knew how this race would end. I was not only going to win, I was going to make Metal Mouth eat my dust and leave gravel stuck in her braces. It was just that simple. I outran the girl, easily, by twenty yards, barely even breaking a sweat. Because we were running right next to each other, my superior running skills were that much more obvious. As Metal Mouth staggered

across the finish line, breathless, I waited for her.

"You wanted to know when my next video's coming out." I said, with a cocky grin, "I just filmed it. I call it: 'Whooping Your Ass.'"

I turned on my heel, swinging my long braid in Metal Mouth's face, and joined my teammates for a mini-celebration. Through the hi-fives and the "*Go Foxy's*," I heard a faint chant in the distance, "Toya, Toya, Toya..." I followed the sound of the chant with my eyes into the stands. It wasn't a football game, so the crowd wasn't nearly as big. I wouldn't even consider it a crowd. More like a small gathering of parents and siblings, so it was easy to spot them: waving a big yellow sign with *Go Toya!* in purple letters and glitter. Miss Angie and Chelsea came to the meet after all. I couldn't believe it.

I jogged over to the edge of the track and yelled into the stands, "What are y'all doing here?"

"We can't stay long," Miss Angie yelled back. "We just had to see you before you become a big Olympic star!"

"I thought—"

"We wanted to surprise you, so..."

"Surprise!" Mother and daughter screamed together.

"You were amazing, Toya!" cheered Chelsea.

Just then, Kamisha hollered, "Yo, Toya!" I looked back. Kamisha was gesturing for me to hurry up.

"Ooops!" For a moment, I almost forgot why I was there. "I gotta go."

"Good luck!" Chelsea shouted.

But I didn't need any luck. I had God, Flo Jo, Miss Angie, Chelsea, and my track sisters there rooting me on. What more could I ask for? I encountered Metal Mouth in two more races and embarrassed her every time. By the end of the race, I placed first in the 100 meters, 100-meter hurdles, and 400 meters. Then I helped my team place first in the four-by-one-hundred-meter relay race. I rode home on the bus feeling stiff and sore, but sitting on top of the world. To add icing to my cake of a day, my cell phone rang:

"Foxy! I heard you wore them girls out!"

My eyes lit up. "How did you hear about it so fast?"

"My spies told me," Brandon said. "You know I had to check on my Foxy."

"Well, thanks for checking up on me."

"Don't thank me yet. This calls for a celebration." His voice was smooth and sexy, like a DJ on a cool R&B radio station.

"What kind of celebration?"

"I don't know yet. What are you doing on Saturday?"

My stomach did a back flip. Was I hearing what I thought I was hearing? "Uh...Saturday? Nothing" I cursed myself for sounding too eager. "I mean, I think I'm free."

"All right then, I'll pick you up at eight."

“Okay.” I was too far gone to remember to hang up my phone. I just stared out the bus window with a dreamy look on my face.

“Let me guess. That was Brandon,” Kayla said.

I nodded.

“You’re really into him, aren’t you?”

I nodded again.

“Careful.”

My head jerked in Kayla’s direction. “Careful about what?”

“Messing around with an older man.”

“It’s not like he’s some forty-year-old pervert, Kay. He’s nineteen.”

“Yeah, but older boys know things. Things we don’t know. Next thing you know, you’re in way over your head.”

I turned my body and looked Kayla into the eyes. “What is it that you’re not telling me, Kayla?” It wasn’t like Kayla to lecture. She usually lets people do their own thing. So, she definitely had my attention.

“I don’t know,” Kayla shifted uneasily in her seat, “There’s something about him that’s so...so...yuk!”

“Yuk? You just don’t like him because he didn’t throw that bottle of water in the recycle bin.”

That struck a nerve with Kayla. “The recycling bin was right next to the trash can! What kind of selfish loser throws a plastic bottle in the trash when he could throw it just six inches to the right and save the planet?”

“He only did it to see you get all worked up, Kayla.”

“That’s what he said, but seriously what makes you think a man who could have so little respect for Mother Earth, is going to treat you with respect?”

“He does treat me with respect.”

“If you say so. But when he’s dumping your heart in an emotional trash can, don’t say I didn’t try to warn ya.”

I politely thanked Kayla for the warning and shifted the conversation back to a play-by-play of every race we ran today. This was probably one of the best days I’d ever had in my life! Winning my races, getting asked out by Brandon. I was flying high, and I wasn’t about to let Kayla bring me down.

In fact, I was soaring for most of the week. My tests seemed easier. Food tasted better. And not once had I thought about Terry. I had a college boy on my mind now. At this moment, with three days to go, I laid in bed fantasizing about my date with Brandon. Where would we go? What would we do? What would I wear? I jumped out of bed and started rummaging through my closet. Skinny jeans, cargo pants, plaid mini skirt. I didn’t want to make a trip to the mall. That would mean violating another one of my New Year’s resolutions: avoid dipping into my savings. I was already in danger of violating the one about giving my heart away. On the other hand, I wanted to

look good. So far, Brandon had only seen me in sweats or tracksuits, I wanted to show him that I really did clean up well when I wanted to.

"Maybe, I'll wear the denim skirt," I wondered out loud, "then I'd only have to buy new tights...and a pair of shoes...and a new purse." That would eat up half my savings. I crouched down and dug around the bottom of my closet. Maybe I wouldn't have to buy new shoes. While I sat on the floor, debating between the black heels or the red flats, my phone rang. I sprang to my feet, raced over and answered it.

"Hey, beautiful."

It took a second for me to place the voice. "Brandon?"

"Brandon! Who's that, your new nigga?"

The twang in his voice sent a wave of nausea over me. "Oh my God!" I dropped the phone like it was on fire and took two steps back.

My phone lay on floor, channeling Mr. Rick's voice. "So, you're not gonna talk to me?" I could hear him say. "Toya...Toya! All right then." He must've gotten tired of sitting on the phone talking to himself. He hung up.

I stood there paralyzed, afraid that if I moved the phone would start talking to me again. When my heart stopped pounding, I willed my legs to inch closer to the phone. From where I stood, I could see the Flo Jo wallpaper on the phone's screen, so I knew Mr. Rick was no longer on the line. I took in a deep, calming breath and reached for the phone. As soon as my fingers touched it, the phone buzzed. I leapt backwards with a shriek. *Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!*

My body quaked with fear. "It's just a phone call. It's just a phone call." I tried to reassure myself. "He can't hurt you. He can't touch you." As my body began to settle down, I remembered that the buzzing sound on my phone meant I had a text message. "It couldn't be."

Working up a dose of courage, I swallowed hard, then snatched up the phone. I studied it and confirmed that, yes, it was a text message. I pushed the button to retrieve the message that simply read:

Come to the window.

I bolted.

Was he watching me? Had he known I was home alone? The question rang in my ears. I rattled down the stairs and launched myself to the keypad of the alarm system. The system was armed. If anyone so much as breathed on a door or window of this house, all kinds of beeps and lights would come on, and the police would be notified. That brought me a little comfort. Now, for the next step. I took a minute to steady my nerves. *One, two...three...* I counted in my head then eased over to the window and slowly lifted the edge of the curtain. If Mr. Rick's face had been there, I would have fell out right there and died. If he didn't kill me first.

But he wasn't there. Just an empty, tree-lined street. The streetlamp illuminated the whole block. No black Escalade. No creepy child molester

peering in my window through a set of binoculars. He wasn't there. Probably was never there. Just another attempt to mess with my head. He got off on scaring me. That's all this was. Just another sick attempt to keep me on edge.

Of all nights. The one night when Miss Angie and Chelsea were driving all over the town looking for stuff for Chelsea's science project. Miss Angie called and said they were going to try one more store before it closed. I prayed they'd get home soon. In the meantime, I headed to the kitchen where I picked through a drawer for the sharpest knife I could find. Could I really stab somebody? What if he took the knife from my hand and used it on me?

"Girl, get it together!" I scolded myself. "You're gonna make yourself crazy—"

The alarm went off.

My ears flooded with a high-pitched beep. I dropped the knife and clutched my chest. My breathing stopped all together. *He's in the house! He's gonna kill me! He's gonna kill me!*

CHAPTER 24

Footsteps. A rustling sound. Chatter?

The alarm went silent. I tipped over to the kitchen archway and nearly burst into tears. “Thank you, Lord!” I whispered.

Never in my life had I been so happy to see Chelsea walking through the door. I could’ve run over and kissed her. Speechless, I watched Chelsea close the door and Miss Angie re-arm the alarm system.

“Hey. We found it,” Chelsea announced, pulling an enormous battery from a shopping bag. She was doing some kind of experiment about electromagnetism for the science fair. Chelsea explained it to me before, but I wasn’t paying attention. Right now, I would’ve listened to Chelsea explain the Theory of Relativity. I was just so glad not to be home by myself anymore.

Chelsea was more than willing to explain the experiment all over again, as she unpacked more batteries, nails, electrical tape.

“Uh uh.” Miss Angie interrupted her. “Not on my dining room table. You can work on that thing in the basement.”

“Okay,” Chelsea sighed.

Then I did something I’d never thought I’d do. I helped Chelsea pack up her supplies and carry them to the basement, all the while hitting Chelsea with a wave of questions about magnets. We talked about magnets in the basement. We talked about magnets on the way back upstairs. We talked about magnets in the hallway. We talked about magnets all the way up to the point where Chelsea carried her pajamas into the bathroom for her shower.

I thought about following Chelsea into the shower and asking her more questions, but thought that would be too weird. Instead, I rambled over to Miss Angie’s room. I could hear her running her bath water, so I turned back around. For a moment, I felt alone again. I walked back to my bedroom. *Just go to bed and put this awful night behind you*, I thought. My phone was still on the floor. I picked it up. No new messages. I didn’t recognize the phone number

that sent the Mr. Rick text. I turned the phone all the way off, then took the battery out. I'd figure out what to do tomorrow.

That night, I slept with the light on, the TV on, and a chair propped against my bedroom door. Still, I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, my mind conjured up images of Mr. Rick crawling through my window. I could hear him breathing, smell his heavy cologne. Finally, I dragged my blanket and pillow downstairs and camped out on the couch. I flicked on the TV and searched for a movie, something boring that would help me fall asleep.

The Nature Channel had on a documentary about lions. I thought it would be boring, but found myself riveted by the story of the little lion cub that had been separated from his mother and was now trying to fend for himself in the wild. I could certainly relate to that. The rich baritone of the narrator eventually soothed me to sleep. Every once in a while, I would hear lions roaring in my sleep, but it didn't scare me. Instead, it made me feel safe, like the lions were protecting me.

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was daylight, then the light emanating from the big screen TV. For a minute, there, I didn't know where I was. I rolled over and saw Miss Angie standing at the base of the couch.

"You slept down here?"

I hadn't thought about this part. How would I explain this spontaneous camping trip on the sofa? It was too early in the morning to think. I let out a yawn and a long stretch, stalling for time for my brain to wake up. "Uh huh," I said, groggily. "I thought I saw a mouse in my room."

That set Miss Angie off. "A mouse!!!" she squealed, her eyes bulging out of her head. Who knew this woman of strength was scared of mice? "Why didn't you say something?" She scurried into the kitchen and looked up the number to the exterminator, which was posted on the side of the fridge. "We don't mess with mice around here. Oh no, no, no!"

I didn't mean to get Miss Angie so worked up, but it was the only thing my brain could come up with before breakfast. When Chelsea rumbled downstairs and learned there was a mouse in the house, she got all worked up too. But for different reasons.

"Oh goodie! Maybe we can catch it and keep it for a pet."

"Over my dead body!" Miss Angie hollered from the kitchen. "I'm calling the man right now. Have him come and blow Mickey Mouse up."

"Can we get a cat?" Chelsea said, bouncing into the kitchen.

"A cat? Little girl, how many times do I have to tell you, I've got a two-leg-maximum in this house. If you've got more than two legs, you ain't welcome in here!"

"Birds have two legs. Can we get one of them? A big one will probably

eat mice.”

Listening to Miss Angie and Chelsea bicker about the invisible mouse tickled me so much that I almost forgot all about the creepy phone call I got last night. I thought about making a phone call to my social worker. Then I thought about the last time such a call was made about Mr. Rick. The interviews with detectives, psychologists, doctors. Telling my side of the story over and over again. Seeing my mother give me the evil eye as I testified on the witness stand. A hung Jury. In other words: *“We don’t know if he did it or not, your Honor.”* Just like that, my whole world changed, after one phone call. Years. It took me years. I was finally building a new life—one that I actually liked. What would a phone call cost me this time?

I walked into the kitchen, right between mother and daughter, poured a glass of orange juice and lost myself in their debate. “Hey, if you get a cat, you should get two,” I chimed in. “That way they can keep each other company.”

“Two cats!” Miss Angie fell into the nearest chair, laughing. “I can barely take care of two kids. What makes you think I can handle two cats?”

After scouring the house for more than an hour, the exterminator found no evidence of a mouse. No evidence of rodents or pests of any kind—not even a two-legged pest, lurking in the bushes in cowboy boots. When Miss Angie was satisfied that there was no mouse, she finally relaxed. No more flinching and jumping at her shadow.

I was able to relax a little too. I hadn’t received any phone calls or text messages, except from the track team and Brandon, of course. There were just two days left until my big date. I was more than willing to throw myself into preparing for this date and quickly shoved Mr. Rick out of my mind.

I sat in my room ironing my date clothes for nearly an hour. I sprayed my skirt in a cloud of starch. Every pleat in that plaid skirt needed to be crisp as a brand-new dollar bill, as my Granny Jean would say. While I ironed, I pictured myself at the movies with Brandon. He hadn’t said he was taking me to the movies. He said he was going to cook dinner for me. But for some reason, I kept envisioning myself at the movies with him. Brandon’s arm draped over my shoulder, nibbling on some of my popcorn, nibbling on my ear. Me cozying up in the security of his brawny arms. I sighed. If Brandon became my boyfriend maybe that would scare Mr. Rick away.

Not a chance. I knew things couldn’t continue on like this with Mr. Rick, though. Sooner or later there would be a showdown. I prayed it would be much later.

CHAPTER 25

I wasn't the only one with a hot date. I came home from practice that Friday all ready to beg Miss Angie to give me a French manicure, only to find her in her bedroom, wearing just a bra and slip, staring in the closet waiting for the fashion fairies to bring her the perfect outfit. Chelsea was doing her best to help. She pulled out a red cocktail dress. Miss Angie shook her head, "Too trashy."

Chelsea pulled out a pinstriped jumper dress. "You could wear this one with your black tights."

"Nah. Too nerdy."

Chelsea rolled her eyes. "How about this?" She held up a burgundy sweater dress.

Miss Angie turned up her nose. "I can't believe I still have that thing. It went out of style ten years ago."

"Argh! My arms are getting tired, Mommy!" Chelsea said in a huff.

Watching them from the doorway, I couldn't help but laugh. "What's all this?"

"Mommy's got a date!" Chelsea announced.

My eyes lit up. "What? With Mr. Kevin?"

"No!" Miss Angie barked.

"She's going out with the Bug Man." Chelsea said, disappointedly.

I twisted my face. "The who?"

"The man who came here to kill the mouse." Chelsea moved on from selecting outfits to trying on her mother's shoes, though she was having a hard time cramming her feet into them. "Isn't that crazy? Mommy could be going out with a nice, cute, successful psychologist like Uncle Kevin. But she'd rather go out with the Bug Man. Where's he going to take you for your date? The Roach Motel?" Chelsea doubled over with laughter, so tickled by her little joke. I didn't want to laugh, but the joke was so corny, I had to.

"Ow!" Chelsea stopped laughing when her mother pinched her on the backside.

"First, take off my shoes! You're stretching them all out. Second, Lawrence is not a Bug Man. He's an exterminator. He's a very successful exterminator who owns his own business." She turned her eyes to me and gestured to her pin-curled hair, "Help me with this, please?"

I walked over and started removing the little metal clips from her hair. "But still, you just met the man," I said. "Isn't it a little too soon to go out on a date with him? I mean, aren't you the one always telling us to take it slow?"

"Yes, and I mean that! I didn't just meet Lawrence. I've known him for years. We met at a Small Business Association luncheon. He's asked me out a couple of times, but the timing was never right."

"Yeah. The timing was never right because of your *boyfriend*, Kevin," Chelsea said from under one of Angie's church hats.

"I'm going to wear the black dress, so I think I'll just do an upsweep." Miss Angie said to me, purposely ignoring Chelsea.

"Okay." I started gathering up bobby pins and a large vat of hair gel. "So, where's he taking you?"

"Oh, we're going into the city. Have a little dinner then check out this new comedy club. He has a friend that's doing stand-up tonight. After that, we might go to this reggae club, if we're not tired."

Chelsea turned up her nose. "Hmm. Sounds like a lot to get through in one night. What a showoff!"

"It's called a date. That's what you do on a date. I keep telling you girls, don't let some boy drag you over to his house to watch TV and eat pizza and call it a date. Make that boy take you out."

"We're not like you, Ma," Chelsea said. "We don't date boys that have their own businesses. They don't even have bank accounts."

"*You're* not dating anybody," Miss Angie said, glaring directly at Chelsea. She still hadn't gotten over the whole Chelsea pregnancy scare. "And it's not about money. I don't care if he takes you to McDonalds and the skating rink. The point is that you go out. Especially on the first date. It says a lot about how he sees you. Are you his treasure that he wants to take out and show off to the rest of the world? Or are you his buddy that he likes to bring over to the house and play with?"

"What if he brings you to his house, but it's because he wants to cook you a fancy five-course meal?" I asked, since that was the exact date Brandon planned for me.

And though it sounded like a dream to me, Miss Angie was not impressed. "That's what I call a booty call in disguise." She could see my shoulders slumping. "Listen, I'm only telling you what I know from experience. The first date is critical. It sets the tone for the entire relationship—if there is a relationship."

After listening to Miss Angie's dating philosophy, I couldn't wait to get Brandon on the phone. Maybe it wasn't too late to change his plans.

"Sorry, Foxy. I wish you'd said something sooner. I'm just a struggling college man. A movie's not in my budget this week. Unless you want to cancel it until I—"

"No, no, no! That's okay." I sounded like someone was about to take my birthday present away. "It was just a suggestion, but it really doesn't matter what we do."

"Exactly! As long as we spend some time together."

We? I liked the sound of that. "Exactly."

A few minutes later, Miss Angie yelled up to me that she was about to leave. I raced downstairs and let out a cat call. "Go on, Miss Angie!"

Miss Angie twirled around like a runway model. The cocktail dress was above the knee, but in a classy way. The upsweep of her hair made her neck look long and sexy. Her makeup was highlighted by flecks of gold and bronze. As she spun around, the air was filled with the scent of sweet jasmine. Miss Angie didn't look like a woman with a teenage daughter and a foster child. She looked young and free, not a care in the world. "Mr. Lawrence is gonna be drooling all over himself. Ain't that right, Chels?"

"Whatever." Chelsea was in the kitchen fixing a bowl of ice cream. She refused to come into the living room out of loyalty to her beloved Uncle Kevin. Seeing her mother come downstairs looking, so glamorous, made Chelsea realize it was possible this Lawrence dude could easily fall in love with her. And her mother could fall in love with him. Then it would be all over for poor old Uncle Kevin. Chelsea might have been suckered into picking out an outfit for this date, but she wouldn't be caught dead wishing her mother good luck with another man. She tried to hustle up the stairs without saying goodbye, but Miss Angie blocked her path, planting a big kiss on her cheek.

"I won't be out too late," she said, dabbing at the lipstick smudge with her finger.

"You shouldn't be out at all," Chelsea mumbled under her breath as she thudded up the stairs.

Miss Angie turned to me. "Do me a favor and make sure the drama queen doesn't jump out the window."

"She'll be all right," I said. "You just go have fun."

Miss Angie grabbed her keys and sauntered out the door. It was her policy never to bring a man around the house until she really got to know him. So, it could be months before I got to meet the Bug Man. When he came to search for the invisible mouse, I went out for a run. It dawned on me that if things worked between Miss Angie and the Bug Man, I would be the reason. It was my lie that finally brought them together. Maybe I could be the maid of

honor at their wedding. That is, if I lived long enough to see their wedding. Because Chelsea would surely kill me if she knew the truth.

I set the security alarm then headed back upstairs. I stopped by Chelsea's room to see if she was okay, but she was already on the phone with somebody, spilling all her mother's business.

"...I don't know what she even sees in him. I mean, he kills bugs for a living. He might as well have a job burning down trees..."

I started to go in there and chastise her for talking about her mom behind her back, but changed my mind. It was probably good for Chelsea to be venting her emotions. Even better, that she was venting her emotions to someone other than me.

I slipped back into my room, grabbed the polish remover, a handful of cotton balls, and a funky gold nail polish from my dresser. This time tomorrow, I would be on my own hot date. I told Miss Angie that I was going out to dinner with Brandon, skipping over the part where dinner would be "out" at his house. *That doesn't count as a lie. Does it, Lord?*

I understood what Miss Angie was saying about making sure the boy took me out for our date, but this was different. I had my own experiences with horny boys that were after only one thing—plenty of experiences. Brandon wasn't one of those boys. Brandon wasn't even a boy. He was a man. A college man, which meant he had goals, character, maturity. Tomorrow night would be my first real date, with a real man. I got tingles in my stomach just thinking about him, and accidentally painted my knuckles, I was so distracted.

"Aw man!" I dabbed polish remover over my knuckles until the gold streaks were gone. I looked over at the clock, which read just after ten o'clock. I thought about Miss Angie. What was she doing now? Was she having fun? Or did the Bug Man turn out to be a worm? That made me think about Brandon. Was he the one? Was he getting all geeked up about our date, too? Had he started ironing his clothes two days in advance like I did?

Then later that night, after I finished thinking—after my nails were dry and Miss Angie was safely home, and I climbed into bed—I dreamed about Terry.

* * * * *

I planned to sleep in on Saturday morning. I wanted to be fresh and perky for my date. I wasn't even going downstairs to work in the salon until after ten o'clock when things got busy. My sleep was deep and peaceful, as I was snuggly wrapped in my down comforter like a human burrito. Nothing could wake me but the thud, thud, thud of Chelsea's feet as she burst into my room.

"Toya...Toya!" she said, breathlessly. "Wake up! You've gotta see this!"

For a moment, I thought it was Christmas morning again and Chelsea was waking me to see what presents she got. "Go way, Chelsea!" I mumbled, my face partially mashed into the pillow. "I'm sleeping."

"No!...Uncle Kevin is here! He found out about Mommy's date. He's pissed!"

I sat straight up. "What?!!"

"Yeah, he's down in the salon, now. Come and see!"

Faster than I could say *love triangle*, I was out of the bed, in my bathrobe and slippers and standing right next to Chelsea at the top of the stairwell leading to Sassy's. Chelsea was right. I could hear Mr. Kevin's voice down there saying, "Why are you doing this, Angie? Why can't we just move past this?"

"I have moved past it." That was Miss Angie. "As a matter of fact, I'm moving on."

Mr. Kevin must have drifted away from the stairwell because his voice got really muffled.

"I can't hear what he's saying," Chelsea whispered. "Let's move closer."

While I kicked off my slippers and tipped down the stairs like a cat, Chelsea, wearing only socks, tipped down the stairs like a herd of buffalo. Everybody heard her.

"Chelsea, get in here!" Miss Angie ordered. Chelsea and I obeyed. As we slinked in, Miss Angie folded her arms and said to Mr. Kevin, "Well, I see your partner in crime is here." She marched up to Chelsea. "Did you do that, young lady? Did you call him and tell him I went on a date?"

Chelsea wanted to deny it, but her mother had such a fire blazing in her eyes that she was afraid they would strike her down with bolts of lightning if she told a lie. "Yes, Mommy."

I did a double take. "You did what? Is that who you were talking to last night?"

"Yes! I had too." Chelsea suddenly felt emboldened, justified in her actions. "Come on, Mommy! The Bug Man's all wrong for you. You and Uncle Kevin were meant to be."

Chelsea's words were met with a chorus of *Aww's* by the women in the salon. I looked around and saw three clients: Miss Gladys was under the dryer. Mother Pearl was by the shampoo basin. A new client was sitting in the waiting area. They weren't even bothering to hide their eyes in their magazines to eavesdrop. No, they put the magazines down and had their eyes glued right on Miss Angie and Mr. Kevin.

"Don't be mad at her, Ang. She's just looking out for you." As Mr. Kevin spoke, I studied him. He wasn't dressed in his normal GQ style. He must've woken up first thing in the morning and hurried over. He wore jeans and a wrinkled shirt; and there was shadow of stubble on his face, evidence of the fact that he hadn't taken the time to shave. But he still looked good—an older version of Terry.

Still glaring at Chelsea, Miss Angie let out a deep sigh, "I'm not mad at her. She's a child," then she turned on Mr. Kevin. "You! You're supposed to be

the adult. If she called you, the mature thing to do would've been to say 'thank you for calling, Chelsea. But you shouldn't be telling me your mother's private business. Goodbye.' That's what an adult would do. Not come running over here like a fool!"

"Well, I don't care. I'll be a fool. If it means, keeping the woman I love from walking out of my life."

"Love!" Me, Chelsea and the clients all echoed in unison, our mouths hanging wide open, looking shocked. But no one was more stunned than Miss Angie.

"Love?" She was clearly knocked off balance by one little word.

Mr. Kevin took advantage of this tiny window of opportunity. "Yes, love. I love you, Angie. You know I do. I don't want to lose you."

For some reason I could feel tears well up in my eyes. I had never cried at a movie in my life, but the air was so thick with love as Mr. Kevin poured out his heart to Miss Angie, I couldn't help but get caught up in it. However, in that brief span of time, Miss Angie managed to regroup. I watched the softness in her eyes quickly harden.

"Funny how this great love suddenly shows up when I find somebody else," she said, cynically. "Where's it been hiding the past couple of months?"

"It's been angry with you. It's been stupid. But it never went away," Mr. Kevin announced. He stepped in closer and took her hand. She did not pull away. "It's just...It's too hard sometimes with you, Angie. Too many rules. Too many walls. I need you to let me in, all the way. Please!"

She was melting. I could see it. Miss Angie was weakening under the intensity of Mr. Kevin's gaze. The whole salon could see it. There was just one thin strand of fear, or pride, or pain, that was keeping Miss Angie from falling into his arms and surrendering completely.

Miss Angie swallowed hard, trying to buy herself some time. "We can talk about this later. I've got clients waiting."

"Oh, we don't mind," said the clients.

"Well, I do," Miss Angie replied, finally tearing her eyes away from Mr. Kevin.

"I'm not leaving till we work this out," and the sound of his voice let Miss Angie know that he meant it.

"Okay. Fine. Let's discuss it outside." Before Mr. Kevin could answer, she marched to the door. As she slung on her sweater, Miss Angie barked out her orders: "Toya, give Pearl a deep conditioner. Chelsea, watch the phones and see if anybody wants any coffee or tea."

"Yes, Mommy."

Miss Angie walked out the door with Mr. Kevin trailing right behind her. As soon as the door shut, everyone bolted for the window. I had to wedge myself between Mother Pearl's meaty arm and the new lady's bony elbow just to get a glimpse. What I saw was a couple standing in the driveway. Mr.

Kevin was doing all the talking. Miss Angie's arms were folded tight to trap in some body heat against the cold, but she listened intently.

"Maybe he's asking her to marry him." Chelsea said, barely able to contain her giddiness.

But when Miss Angie finally did speak, she didn't say much. Yet I could clearly make out the words: "Leave me alone."

Mr. Kevin's head lowered.

Again, the salon let out a chorus of *Aww's*, pitiful ones, this time. Mr. Kevin walked back to his car. Miss Angie walked back to the salon. The clients scrambled back to their seats.

When Miss Angie entered the salon, it was blatantly quiet. All eyes avoided hers. All mouths were sealed shut. She pulled off her sweater and tried to sound upbeat, "Sorry about that. He won't be bothering us anymore."

A quivering voice broke the silence.

"How could you do that to him?" Tears spilled over Chelsea's eyes. "All he ever tried to do was love you!" she said, sobbing, as she stormed up the stairs.

"You want to go after her, Angie?" Miss Gladys asked, while Miss Angie checked her hair to see if it was dry.

"No. I think we've all had enough drama for one day."

* * * * *

It was seven o'clock. In one hour, Brandon would be picking me up. I was already dressed. I had on a black V-neck sweater over a red plaid, pleated mini skirt, black ribbed tights, and shiny, black baby-doll shoes. Instead of my usual bone straight look, I experimented with curls that danced around my shoulders. Everything was perfect, even down to the gold hoop earrings my mother bought for me. Now there was nothing left to do but sit in my room and wait.

Wait and think. Again and again, I replayed in my mind the events I watched transpire between Miss Angie and Mr. Kevin. I didn't know how I felt about it, but I was affected. Chelsea stayed in her room most of the day, but I did hear her and her mother talking a couple of hours ago. Now there was a knock on my door. Miss Angie peeked in.

"Look at you!" she cheered. "I told you those curls would look nice on you."

"Thanks. How's Chelsea doing?"

"Fine. We talked it out. She'll be okay," Miss Angie said. "We're gonna go check out that new Tyler Perry movie. That should cheer us both up. What time is Brandon coming?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Okay. Make sure you keep your cell phone on. And be home by midnight."

“Okay.”

“Really, you should get home earlier than that. Don’t forget you have a meet tomorrow morning. You’re gonna need your rest. So, let’s make it eleven, okay?”

“Okay.”

Miss Angie could tell by my curt answers that there was something on my mind, so she stood in the doorway a moment longer waiting for me to say something more. When I didn’t say anything else, Miss Angie sighed and said, “Well, have fun.”

She was about to close the door when I said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.” Miss Angie stepped all the way into the room and closed the door behind her.

“What does it feel like?” I asked hesitantly, still forming the thoughts in my mind.

Miss Angie looked puzzled. “What does what feel like?”

“To have someone tell you that they love you.”

Miss Angie smiled. “I don’t know, you tell me.” She walked over, looked me in the eyes, and said earnestly, “I love you, Toya.”

It made me feel a little uncomfortable. The words “*I love you*” weren’t tossed around too freely in the Young household. “I’m not talking about that kind of love. I mean, when a man says it, like Mr. Kevin said it to you.”

“Oh....” She sat down on the bed beside me. “I mean, it’s good to be loved by anybody. A man, family...friends.”

“But a man’s love is different. I’ve never had a boy say that to me before.”

“That’s because you’re so young, Honey. You’ve got your whole life to fall in love.” She patted me on the hand. “And trust me, there are gonna be plenty of men who are gonna say those words to you. Some will mean it. Some will just be telling you what they think you want to hear.”

“Mr. Kevin meant it. I could tell.”

“I know he meant it.”

“But you don’t feel the same way?” I watched Miss Angie’s eyes for a reaction.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I feel.” She paused, as if arranging the words in proper order. “You know why I’m always talking to you and Chelsea about boys? It’s because I don’t want you to make the same mistakes I’ve made. I don’t want you two spending your lives kissing frogs, expecting to find a prince, and all you end up with is warts—cuz, believe me those warts never truly go away.”

“So, you’re afraid that Mr. Kevin has warts too?”

Miss Angie raised an eyebrow. “I’m not afraid of anything,” she said in her typical sassy way. “I’ve just come to learn, it’s not worth the risk. There’s plenty of love out there for me, with no warts attached. Loving you and Chelsea. Loving my family. Loving God.”

“Yeah, but you should have somebody to love you back, Miss Angie. Somebody to take care of you.”

She smiled at me with such warmth, it let me know she was already well taken care of. “You are sweet for worrying about me. But I just want you and Chelsea to learn to take care of yourselves. And don’t go kissing frogs until you’re sure there’s a prince in there. Better yet, make sure there’s a king in there.”

“How do you know for sure that you’ve got a prince—I mean, a king?”

“Time,” Miss Angie said, wisely. “In time, the warts always show.”

CHAPTER 26

Mansions! At least they looked like mansions to my wide eyes. Houses bigger and more beautiful than I had ever seen. Set far back from the road, nestled behind big iron fences or manicured hedges or thickets of trees. The further Brandon drove along the winding way, the more magnificent the houses became.

I was unable to tear my eyes away from the window. “Man, I thought they only made houses this big in Hollywood.”

Brandon boasted, “Trust me, those Hollywood wanna-bees can’t afford a tree house in this neighborhood.”

“You grew up here?” I asked, still gawking and gazing like a kid on a ride at Disney World.

“Yup. I was born in my parent’s master bathroom suite.”

“What?”

“Uh huh. My mom always said, she knew I’d be a track star. I moved faster than the ambulance.”

The Mercedes pulled into the driveway of a grand, colonial home, with its lush landscaping and aura of snooty sophistication. I pictured myself coming here for Thanksgiving dinners, being welcomed by my in-laws. I could definitely get used to these surroundings. Motion-detector lights lit up the front lawn, and for the first time, I noticed there were no lights on in the house.

“Your mom and dad went out?”

“Yeah. It’s date night.” Brandon said with an eye roll. “I know, corny, right?”

“No. I think it’s nice that your parents still like each other enough to go out on dates.”

Brandon snorted, “That’s the problem. They don’t like each other. That’s why they’re going out on a date. The marriage counselor recommended it.”

“Oh.”

We rode around to the back of the house, where the private entrance to the basement was located. The back of the house was illuminated in turquoise because of the swimming pool. I never had a friend with a swimming pool before. There were definite perks to being Brandon’s girlfriend. Hosting fabulous pool parties, riding around in a Mercedes like one the Basketball Wives. Then I had to remind myself that this wasn’t Brandon’s place, it was his parents’ place. Brandon had a father and a mother. Most mothers of the boys I dated hated me. *“You’re still not a decent girl,”* I heard Terry’s mom reminding me. This time would be different. I would bake cookies, wear long dresses, say yes ma’am, no ma’am. Do everything in my power to make Brandon’s mom fall in love with me.

The basement was no ordinary hole at the base of the house. This was more like an apartment. Brandon’s bachelor pad. It had its own little kitchenette, living area, bedroom, and bathroom. Attached to the wall, was a 70-inch hi-def, flat screen. Next to that, was a wall full of X-box games and equipment. Beside that, was a weight bench, then a treadmill. Finally, a trail of sweatpants and sneakers led to an overstuffed closet. Each of Brandon’s older brothers lived in this space for a brief time before passing it down to the next brother. Now, it belonged to Brandon, and he didn’t appear ready to give it up anytime soon.

“I hope you like Chinese,” he yelled to me from the kitchenette. I finished taking my tour of the basement and joined him.

“I love Chinese.” I watched him take the white takeout cartons from a brown paper bag. Brandon’s grand plan of cooking a five-course meal had been derailed because he still wasn’t finished his research paper for his Art History class. It was either reschedule the date or eat takeout. I was happy with Plan B. But now that I was alone with Brandon, I was feeling a little awkward. I was struggling to find things to say, nervous that I would say the wrong thing, and he would suddenly start seeing me as an immature, high school girl instead of a woman. I found myself making silly small talk about music videos and my favorite kind of ice cream. When I ran out of things to say, I just stood in the kitchen feeling like I was in the way.

“Are you ready to eat?” Brandon said, with a big grin on his face.

“I’m starving.”

He gestured for me to follow him. I did. We turned the coffee table into a dinner table and sat on the floor. After Brandon set out the plates and the food, he returned to the kitchen. “What do you want to drink?” he yelled from the fridge.

“What do you have?” I yelled back.

“Heineken...Coronas. Oh, I’ve got a couple of wine coolers. I don’t drink them. I just keep them in case I’m entertaining the ladies.”

“Oh, no thanks. I’ve got a meet tomorrow. I can’t drink.” Actually, I

hadn't had anything to drink since I moved into Miss Angie's house. I hadn't necessarily planned to give up alcohol. It was just that the people I hung around with weren't really in the gin and juice kind of crowd. More like milk and cookies.

"Nonsense!" Brandon hollered back. "A little booze never hurt anybody. Just drink plenty of water afterwards. Ah! I know the perfect thing."

I could hear him pouring something. When he came back, he carried two glasses with a red concoction and handed one to me. I sniffed the contents, "What's in it?"

"Fruit punch. And a little something-something."

I stared at the glass, worried about the little something-something that might be inside.

"Relax, girl. I was kidding. It's just fruit punch. I swear."

I eyed him, then took a cautious sip. Just fruit punch. I took an even bigger gulp.

"Sorry," I felt so silly. "It's all Kayla's fault. All day yesterday, she kept saying: 'don't drink anything unless you pour it yourself. College boys are good for slipping stuff into your drink,'" I was imitating Kayla's motherly tone.

Brandon took the glass from my hand and drank from it. "There, now we can die together like Romeo and Juliet."

"Okay, okay. Let's eat before we die." I helped myself to the Kung Pao chicken, beef and broccoli, shrimp fried rice, and a spring roll. When I reached for my fork, Brandon snatched it away.

"Forks are for light-weights." He waved a pair of chopsticks in my face.

Feeling up for a challenge, I said, "Okay. Show me how."

Gently, Brandon took my hand and molded my fingers around the two wooden sticks. He guided my hands to pick up a piece of broccoli, then helped me raise the broccoli to my mouth.

He took away his hand. "Now you try it."

It took me three tries just to lift the piece of chicken from my plate. On the fourth attempt, I managed to raise it high enough to lower my face and cram the piece of chicken in my mouth.

I looked up with Kung Pao sauce dripping from my lips. Brandon was cracking up. He handed the fork back to me. "Here, girl. I don't want you to starve to death."

I gave him the evil eye and pushed the fork away, "I'm not a quitter." I stubbornly moved on to another piece of chicken. Finally, I gave up and resorted to spearing the chicken with a chopstick and eating it like a shish kabob.

Brandon shook his head. "You always been this stubborn, Foxy?"

"You know how you said, when you were born, you beat the ambulance?"

Brandon nodded.

“Well, I had my mom in labor for twenty-six hours when I was born. She said, it didn’t matter what the doctors tried, I refused to come out.” I speared another piece of chicken, but it squirted off my plate and onto the coffee table. I groaned, looking over at Brandon, who was working his chopsticks like he was born in China.

“Show off.” I flung a stray piece of rice in Brandon’s direction, playfully.

“Hey. Don’t hate me because I’m gifted.”

“Gifted? Wait, so is this what you wanted to show me? The thing you’re really good at?”

“You wanna know what I’m really good at?” His tone was like a little kid at show and tell.

I nodded.

Brandon set down his chopsticks and, before I could protest, he pressed his lips against mine. A surge of energy coursed through my entire body, knocking the chopsticks right out of my hand. I was prepared for this. I knew things would probably get physical between me and Brandon—though I thought we would have at least made it through dinner.

Regardless, I made up in my mind that I would not have sex with him. If the first date sets the tone for the relationship, I wanted to set a nice, positive tone. I wanted Brandon to take me seriously. Not as a sex buddy. During the car ride over, I mentally worked out my boundaries for this date. And now I reminded myself of them. “I’ll let him kiss me, but I won’t let him kiss on my neck,” I told myself.

Brandon slid his soft lips from my mouth and kissed a trail to my neck. Instantly, my insides turned to jelly. I heard a tiny groan escape from my lips. *He’s kissing my neck! He’s kissing my neck! Okay, but I won’t let him feel me up,* I said to myself, which was more like a wish than a command. I could feel my body slowly ease back until I lay on the carpet. Brandon’s hands slid under my sweater over my bra. When his hands made contact with my skin, I knew I was in real trouble. As much as I didn’t want Brandon to see me as a sex buddy, I *really* did not want him to stop touching me. It had been so long since I’d been kissed, since my skin had been stroked, it felt like my body was craving it.

Okay, but I draw the line at taking off any clothes. All clothing will remain on at all times! At that moment, I felt Brandon’s fingers tugging at my bra. Once he got my bra off and his tongue brushed against my breasts, I knew it would be over. He could have his way with me, and I would gladly go along for the ride. If, after that, he saw me only as a sex buddy, if he only dialed my number for a booty call—or worse, if he never called me again—it wouldn’t matter. All that mattered was here and now. I would deal with the consequences later. My body had taken over. My hormones had completely drowned out the voice of reason in my head.

But as Brandon began to kiss me more deeply, something strange

happened. The sweetness of his kisses suddenly turned bitter. An acid-like taste hit the back of my throat and made me almost gag. When I opened my eyes, it wasn't Brandon laying on top of me, running his hand up my thighs. It was Mr. Rick. In the dimness of the room, I could still see the glimmer of his gold tooth.

I pushed him back and gasped for air. I blinked hard. Brandon was back.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Huh? Nothing." I sat up and slowly collected myself. "It's just...too fast. I don't want to move too fast, Brandon."

Still panting hard, Brandon let out a deep breath. "Okay. So, we'll slow it down. We'll slow it down."

We sat there in silence staring at the TV, which had on an old episode of the Simpsons. Brandon's hand rested on my knee. We both chuckled, flatly, at something that Bart did to Homer on the TV. Back to silence. I could feel Brandon's fingers gently stroking my thigh, slowly inching his way up. But all that heat I felt two minutes earlier had been completely drained by the sight of Mr. Rick. I picked up Brandon's hand and plopped it back in his lap. "I mean it, Brandon."

"Okay, okay. Can't blame a brotha for trying." He picked up one of the spring rolls and started to munch on it. Still quiet. He was annoyed. I could tell by the deliberate way he chewed his food. I wanted desperately to be able to turn back time. Just five minutes. Back to when we were laughing and flirting. Liking each other.

When I could take it no longer, I said, "You mad?"

"Nope." Still munching. "I'm just trying to figure out where I went wrong with you."

"You didn't do anything wrong. It's just—"

"No, it's my fault," he said, coolly. "I should've known better than to push you. I mean, you're just a kid and I should've known you weren't ready for all that."

I rolled my eyes. "Are you serious?"

"What?"

"Please don't tell me you're gonna hit me with that old, 'you're just a kid' line. Then I'm supposed to get all worked up and have sex with you just to prove I'm not too young."

Brandon smiled, sheepishly. "Oh, you know about that one, huh?"

"Of course, I know that one. It's one of the oldest tricks in the book. And it won't work on me."

"Okay, but why?" Brandon said, pushing himself up from sitting on the floor to sitting on the couch. "I mean, what's the big deal? I'm attracted to you. You're attracted to me. You are attracted to me, aren't you?"

"Yes! More than you know." I joined Brandon on the couch, putting several throw pillows between my body and his. "And the old me would've

been all over you. But, I don't want to be that person anymore."

"Why not?" His voice was almost pleading with me. "Sex is one of the most natural things a man and a woman can do together. Why deny ourselves something that's so natural? I mean, it's as basic as drinking a glass of water. You wouldn't deny me a glass of water, would ya?"

I shook my head, "I have no idea what you're talking about, but if a glass of water will make you happy. I'll gladly get you one." I stood and acted like I was going to the kitchen.

Brandon held my wrist, "Come on, Foxy."

"Toya. The name's LaToya."

He let my wrist go, "You say that like it's supposed to mean something."

"It means, I'm not the girl you think I am, Brandon."

He snickered. "See, that's where you're wrong. I know exactly who you are. And I'm cool with it. Actually, I think it's kinda hot."

I decided I needed that glass of water now. I headed toward the kitchenette, shaking my head. "Are you sure it was just fruit punch in that glass of yours, cuz you're talking crazy."

"I'm talking about the video."

I froze in my tracks. The glass nearly fell out of my hands. Had I heard what I thought I'd heard?

"I saw the video you made, Toya."

"What? How did you...When?"

"I don't know. A couple of years ago, when it first came out."

My mouth dangled open. I suddenly felt so stupid. Like I had been masquerading as a decent girl, when all the while there was a big crack in my mask, and Brandon could see the real Toya all along. "How come you never said anything?"

"Because it didn't matter to me."

"Well, it matters to me. It matters what you think about me. It matters that you've seen me half naked—" Suddenly, it dawned on me. "Ugh! You mean to tell me all this time we've been talking, and you've already seen me in my bra and panties? How could you say nothing?"

"Why does it matter? As far as I'm concerned, you were just having a good time. I've videotaped my girlfriends before. We loved it."

Was he planning on taping me? "Sorry, but that Toya is long gone."

"That's a shame, cuz she seemed like a lot of fun."

"Fun!" That struck a nerve. I wound up my neck and went off, "I was fourteen, Brandon. Fourteen! And I was drunk. And the only reason I made that video was because my head was all screwed up from the stuff my mom's boyfriend did to me. Is that sexy to you? Watching a messed up little girl take off her clothes? Does that turn you on?"

Brandon jumped up, his arm flailing in the air, "Look, how was I supposed to know you had all that drama going on? I just thought you looked good. Is

that so bad?"

I shook my head in disbelief, "You know what? I can't even talk about this anymore. Take me home, please?"

Brandon screwed up his face. "What do I look like, your chauffeur?"

"Uh...You look like the person who drove me out here, so yes, I guess that does make you my chauffeur."

"Oh, I see, she's got jokes," though Brandon was not amused. "Well, let's see who's laughing when you're walking your ass home."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You wanna leave? Go! I ain't stopping you. There's the door!" He pointed to the stairwell leading to the back door.

I glared at him for a long moment. "Fine." I scooped up my coat and marched up the stairs, mumbling, "Let me get outta here before I stab you in the head with them damn chopsticks!"

* * * * *

I cussed Brandon out all the way to the edge of the driveway when I realized that I left my purse in his house. "Aw man!" I looked back at the house. I did not want to go back there. And if it had been summer and daylight and I had some money in my pockets, I would not have gone back. But that wasn't the case. My money and my cell phone were in that purse. So, I took a deep breath, calmed myself and marched back to the house.

I rang the doorbell and pounded on the door until my hand ached. Brandon refused to open the door. "Look, just throw out my purse and I'll leave." No answer. "Come on, Brandon. I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry for yelling at you..." I would have said just about anything to get him to open that door. "I'm really, really sorry." Still no answer. The kitchen lights went out. Followed by the back porch light. Suddenly, I was standing in the dark. I had my answer. Better start walking.

The beautiful, stately mansion-style houses now looked haunted as I made my way down the winding road. I was cold, my legs were tired, and I was pissed. I must have invented five new curse words to describe Brandon. He better not show his face at practice again, because he would not be able to outrun me next time. I thought about ringing the doorbell of one of these fancy houses, but the ghetto in me told me that a Black girl knocking on the door after 11 p.m. asking to use the phone, would not be well received. Besides, I remembered passing a Dunkin Donuts a ways back. Thank God I wore my flat shoes and not the boots with the three-inch heels I was going to wear. All my pretty curls were now flat, and my feet were starting to ache. But my eyes were as wide as a night owl on the alert for danger in the heart of the suburban darkness.

All this money and they can't afford a streetlight? I thought, as I checked over my shoulder. It was completely black outside. I found myself jumping at every

crackle and crunch I heard in the trees. The faint glow of headlights creeped up behind me. I was tempted to flag the car down. Never mind. The way my luck was going, I'd probably get picked up by a serial killer and never be heard from again. Inside, I was hoping it was Brandon coming to pick me up. But when the car drove by without even slowing down, I could see that it was a light-colored minivan.

I wouldn't have been surprised if it had been a black Escalade, driven by a Black man with a gold tooth. Mr. Rick seemed to be popping up all over the place, lately. Just like that stupid internet video. And I still couldn't believe Mr. Rick flashed in my mind right when I was in the heat of passion with Brandon. How long was this going to last? I was starting to wonder if I was ever going to have a normal relationship. Would I ever fall in love and be loved in return? Or would I keep kissing frogs until, like Miss Angie, I got sick and tired of all the warts.

I rounded the corner and saw signs of civilization about a quarter of a mile away. I spent the rest of the walk trying to figure out what I would tell Miss Angie. I had to call Miss Angie. Besides Brandon, I didn't have many friends with cars. There was Kamisha, but I didn't want to hear her lecture me about going out on a date the night before a meet. Terry was out of the question, of course. Dwayne had a car, but I didn't know his number by heart. It was in my cell phone. So was Kamisha's number. The only number I had memorized was Miss Angie's. I learned that lesson from the last time I got stranded. I never thought I'd find myself stranded again, but memorizing that number was about to come in handy.

"Hello, Miss Angie..."

CHAPTER 27

Thirty minutes later, I was in the front seat of the Infiniti listening to my foster mother fussing under her breath. "...Walking around in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere! You're lucky they didn't find you in a ditch! Ya know that, right? They could have found your cold, dead body lying in a ditch...."

I knew better than to say anything during one of these rants. Miss Angie wasn't really talking to me, anyway. If I did answer, she wouldn't have even heard me. She was too angry to hear. When I called the house, Miss Angie picked up on the first ring. I knew I was in trouble. It was forty minutes past curfew. Miss Angie had to have been blowing up my cell phone, which I was unable to answer. I told her that me and Brandon had been out, we got in an argument, and he put me out of the car. Before I knew it, Miss Angie was wheeling into the driveway of the Dunkin Donuts to pick me up.

"What kind of human being throws a girl out of the car in the middle of nowhere?" Miss Angie corrected herself. "Oh, excuse me, not a human. A selfish ass. Must not have had any home-training..."

I stared out the window, just glad to see familiar surroundings again. All I wanted was to climb in bed and forget all about Brandon. It was only April. Not too late to get back to my New Year's resolution. I hadn't really given my heart to Brandon yet. Right? Sure, I fantasized about our wedding day, but I did that with all the boys I liked. At least I hadn't had sex with him. Miss Angie was right: Brandon revealed his warts just in the nick of time—though I knew I was certainly in no position to judge. The only difference between me and Brandon was, Brandon knew about my warts all along. In fact, he liked my warts. He wanted to make his own video of my warts. Freak!

We pulled up to the house but, instead of shutting off the car, Miss Angie let it idle. She wanted to have a talk with me. A serious talk. I slumped down in my seat and braced myself.

"Listen, Toya, I want you to know that I'm not mad at you, but I am worried about you. Very worried"

"What could I do, Miss Angie? I didn't plan to get in a fight with him."

"I know you didn't, Honey. That's what's so scary. Anything could've happened to you tonight, and there would've been nothing I could do to stop it. And I don't know what to do about that." She looked at me. The pain in her eyes was evident. "What do I do to keep you safe? I can't lock you up and keep you from going out. I can't even keep you from running away if you want to."

I looked confused. "Why would I want to run a—"

"Save it, Toya. I already know. I know you tried to run away at Christmas."

I opened my mouth to say something, but didn't know what to say. The only words that came out were, "You...you knew about...but how did—"

"Pearl told me." Miss Angie shook her head, "Pearl's about as good at keeping secrets as you are at telling the truth."

I rested my head against the window, not sure how to feel: Betrayed? Embarrassed? Busted? "How long have you known?"

"A few weeks."

"How come you never said anything?"

"Pearl begged me not to," Miss Angie said, then she shrugged, "And I guess...I guess I was thinking, whatever it was that made you want to leave, you must've worked it out on your own. I mean, you did join the track team. I figured, if you did that, it must mean you're planning to stick around for a while."

There was a long pause. I knew this was the part where I was supposed to tell Miss Angie why I tried to run away back then, but I did not have the energy or the desire to open up that can of worms. I wasn't prepared for this conversation. I planned to take the story of my aborted attempt at running away to my grave—along with my other secrets.

I could feel Miss Angie's eyes on me, trying to will me into saying something. What was there to say? "I'm sorry. I should've told you." I exhaled. "It's just, after I talked to Mother Pearl, I realized I was making a mistake. I thought about telling you, but I figured it would just upset you."

"You're right. It would have upset me. But at least you would have let me in. I can't do this by myself, Toya."

"Do what?"

"Take care of you! I can't take care of you if you don't tell me what's going on. I can't take care of you if you're keeping secrets."

Now, I was getting annoyed. It felt like this conversation was never going to end. I couldn't figure out the magic words to get Miss Angie to leave me alone. I said, weakly, "I tell you stuff."

"No, you tell me just enough to make me *think* you're letting me in. But

there's this whole other Toya who lives in my house, smiles in my face every day, and I have no idea who she is."

I stared out the window, debating what would happen if I just jumped out the car and walked in the house without saying a word. But I was in enough trouble. I just had to ride it out. "I don't know what you want me to say."

"I know you don't," Miss Angie said, resignedly. "And I don't know what else to say, either. I just know this isn't working. I mean, if I don't know who you are, then I don't know what you're up to. Anything can happen, and all I can do is try and pick up the pieces."

"Okay, so ground me!"

"That's not the point, Toya. I'm your foster mom, not your warden. I want you to have fun. I want you to go out on dates and have a normal life. But then I see on the news all these girls, they go out and they never come back. How can I protect you from that? I'm just starting to realize that I really cannot protect you. And that scares the hell out of me."

What was she saying? Had she had enough? A sick feeling washed over me. My heart started hammering in my chest. Suddenly afraid. More afraid than when I walked all alone on a dark winding road just minutes ago. Tears slipped out of my eyes that I could not stop. I blurted out, "I'm sorry, Miss Angie. I'm sorry. I don't have to go out. I'll stay home. I'll keep out of trouble. Please don't send me away," I heard myself begging, near hysterical, "Please! I promise I'll—"

"What? Honey, no! That's not what I'm saying," Miss Angie brushed tears from my face. She had never seen me cry before. "That's not what I'm saying at all. I'm just trying to figure out what I can do to—"

"You're doing it! You're good for me, Miss Angie. I listen to you. I really do. Except when you—" I caught myself about to tell the truth and stopped.

"Except when I what?"

"Okay..." I sighed and considered my words carefully. I wanted to hold back, but I was feeling so desperate. For some reason, I had it in my head that I had to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, or God was going to take away everything good He had given me—starting with Miss Angie. My voice trembled as I said, "When I told you that Brandon was taking me out to dinner, it wasn't exactly true. Okay, it was a lie."

Miss Angie stopped drying my tears then waited for me to explain.

"He invited me to dinner...at his house. We had planned it already, but then when you started talking about how important it was to go out for the first date, it made sense. So, I called him and suggested a movie. He said he'd love to do a movie, but he was broke; so instead of canceling, I went ahead with it." I could tell Miss Angie was simmering inside, though she didn't interrupt me. "I knew I shouldn't have gone to his house without telling you, but I thought I knew Brandon. I thought he was one of the nice ones."

Looking deeply concerned, Miss Angie asked, "Did he touch you?"

"Huh? No! Not like that. I mean, we were kissing and stuff. Things started getting ...you know..." I didn't feel the need to get into all the details. No need to talk about who put who's hands where. And no need to drag Mr. Rick's name into this, either. Just the facts. "...Brandon did stop when I told him to stop. He didn't try to force anything," I continued, "And then we got into this big argument about it. He couldn't understand that I was trying to change, and I got tired of explaining, so I told him to take me home..."

I also didn't feel the need to mention the video, either—the video that just wouldn't go away. That would be the thing I really needed a time machine for. To go back two years and smash that damn video camera to pieces. I blabbered on, "...and I even had extra money in my purse, like you said, Miss Angie, just in case I needed to call a cab and..."

"And?"

"And it's right there in my purse, along with my cell phone, which I left at Brandon's house because I left so fast. I tried to go back and get it, but he just pretended he wasn't home. So, that's when I walked to the nearest phone and called you."

Miss Angie sat very still, her hands resting on the steering wheel. I figured she was probably wondering how soon she could call my social worker to come and pick me up. Without looking at me, she spoke, "Well, I appreciate you telling the truth." Her tone was flat. "I'm not happy about the truth, but I'm glad that you trusted me with it." Miss Angie's hand slid from the steering wheel to the key, which was still in the ignition. She started up the car again and backed out of the driveway.

"Where are we going?" I asked, slipping my seatbelt back on.

"To get your purse back."

Thirty more minutes later, Miss Angie and me were back at the Simmons' residence, the place where four hours earlier I fantasized about spending the holidays as Brandon's wife. This time, instead of driving around to the back of the house, Miss Angie pulled right up in the front. She stormed up to the front door, dragging me along. Apparently, Mama and Papa Simmons' date night had come to an end because when Miss Angie rang the doorbell, the lights came on. First upstairs, then downstairs. We saw a curtain move in a living room window. Someone had just taken a quick peek outside. A gruff male voice came through the door. "Who is it?"

"Hi. This is Angeline Hughes. I'm here about your son." There was no fear in Miss Angie's eyes. In contrast to me, who was ready to run. We heard locks turning and the door cracked open just wide enough to reveal a short, pudgy man with a receding hairline, wrapped in a black silk robe: Dr. Robert Simmons. Behind him, a tall, statuesque woman, with a short, overly processed hair that looked like it had been dipped in bleach. Also in a black

silk robe: Mrs. Elaine Simmons.

"May I help you?" Dr. Simmons said, not willing to open the door any further.

"Yes, you may." Miss Angie said, boldly. "This is my daughter, LaToya. Your son brought her here earlier this evening for a date."

"Brandon's been home studying all evening," Mrs. Simmons said, obviously accustomed to accounting for her son's whereabouts.

"Exactly! He's been here, studying my child," Miss Angie locked her arm around my arm.

Dr. Simmons glanced around side to side, apparently checking to see if the neighbors were awake. "Listen, it's late. What's this all about?"

"It's about your son not being a gentleman. It's about your son not being able to accept the fact that every girl is not dying to hop in the bed with him—"

"Now, hold on!" the doctor bellowed, his nostrils flaring. "I mean, just what are you trying to say, here?"

"Calm down. Nobody's saying that he broke the law." Miss Angie went on to retell my version of the story. Mrs. Simmons stood there with her hand over her mouth, as if she had never heard the word sex, or anything sex-related, before in her life. Yet Miss Angie ranted on. "...Now that may not seem like a big deal to you, but *me*...I was shocked to hear that your son would have so little regard for this young lady—this sixteen-year-old girl's safety—as to send her out alone in the dark where anything could happen to her. But then to refuse to return her purse, so she could call her family, and they could come and get her? That's just outrageous! I don't know how you raise your children, but I—"

"Wait just a damn minute!" It was clear that Elaine Simmons hadn't lived with the aristocrats all her life. Push the right buttons, and she would revert back to her West Philly roots. In this case, the button to push was questioning her parenting skills. She wagged her finger and shouted, "Who do you think you are? Coming down here trying to tell me how to raise my child!"

Before she could really get going, Dr. Simmons grabbed her hand to calm her. When Mrs. Simmons composed herself, Dr. Simmons turned his attention back to Miss Angie. "So, what is it? You want money? Is that what this little show is all about?"

"Uh...How about we just get her purse back. And an apology."

"Well, I'm afraid this was a wasted trip because my son doesn't have her purse," Mrs. Simmons said, folding her arms, defiantly.

"Oh, I was hoping you'd say that." A grin sprang to Miss Angie's lips. She pulled out her phone and started scrolling through her contact list. "So, we can really get down to the bottom of this. I've got two clients at my salon who work in the DA's office, one police detective. And Judge Tucker's wife has a standing appointment at ten o'clock every Wednesday. I wonder how

fast they could find my daughter's purse in your house. Better yet, I wonder how many police cars they can fit on your nice, pretty lawn to search for that purse. Bet your neighbors would love that—"

"Okay, okay, put the phone away," Dr. Simmons said in a huff. "Brandon!" he yelled back in the direction of the basement, so loud and with such authority that it made me jump.

I wasn't the only one to jump, Brandon was upstairs in a hot minute. As soon as he saw me, he froze.

Dr. Simmons said, "Brandon, do you have this young lady's handbag?"

Under the heat of his parents' and Miss Angie's glares, Brandon seemed to shrink in my eyes. Like he was a twelve-year-old boy, and not the man I had always made him out to be. "Um...I don't know."

"Well, could you go and check?" Dr. Simmons snapped. And Brandon was gone. Not knowing what to say to each other, we waited in silence, listening to the wind blow through the trees. I stared at the ground. Dr. Simmons stared at the ceiling. Elaine Simmons stared back toward the basement. Miss Angie stared at Elaine Simmons' hair. Another moment passed. Miss Angie dug into her pocketbook. She pulled out a business card and handed it to Mrs. Simmons.

"I could fix that dye job for you. Have you looking twenty years younger."

Mrs. Simmons looked offended at first, but upon further reflection, "Well, I have been looking for a good deep conditioner."

"Come down to the salon. We'll take good care of you."

As Mrs. Simmons tucked the business card into her robe, Brandon returned with my purse.

"Unbelievable!" his mother hissed and stormed off somewhere. Dr. Simmons snatched the purse from Brandon and handed it to Miss Angie.

She passed it to me. "Make sure everything's there."

Dr. Simmons scoffed, "Is that really necessary?"

I looked at Miss Angie, who nodded for me to go on, so I gave a quick inspection of the purse. I didn't really think Brandon stole anything, but I followed Miss Angie's instructions anyway. Cell phone, makeup, gum, wallet, house keys. "It's all there."

"Good." Dr. Simmons said, rolling his eyes, "Now, you have your bag. So, if you'll excuse us—"

He started to shut the door, but Miss Angie blocked it with her hand. "Hold it. He owes her an apology too."

Brandon looked to his dad ready to protest, but Dr. Simmons was one step ahead of him. "Absolutely not!"

"It's okay. He doesn't—" I started to say, but I was cut off by Miss Angie, whose voice jumped an octave.

"No, it is not okay. He can't just treat you like—"

Dr. Simmons' voice boomed over Miss Angie's. "Look, whatever

happened down in the basement, I'm sure this girl was more than willing."

Miss Angie's eyes lit up, "Oh, you're sure about that, are you?" She went back to pressing buttons on her cell phone until...

"Oh, for goodness sake! Apologize to the girl!" Mrs. Simmons yelled from the wet bar, where she poured herself a drink.

"She threatened to stab me with a chopstick!" Brandon pointed an accusing finger at me. Dr. Simmons looked appalled.

"Only because you told me to walk my ass home."

"Brandon!" It was Mrs. Simmons' turn to be appalled. "That is not how I raised you."

"But Mom, she—" Brandon looked back and saw his mother toss back a double shot of vodka in one gulp. He knew it was pointless to argue when the booze was out. Brandon hung his head and said, sheepishly, "Sorry, Toya."

I wasn't really sure what to say. "Okay."

"Well, thank you for helping us resolve this little matter," said Miss Angie, all prim and proper. "We'll just be on our way, now." She grabbed me by the hand and led me to the car. I couldn't bring myself to look back, but cringed when I heard the front door slam.

* * * * *

We rode back home without saying a word, listening to old-school love songs from the radio. I dug into my purse and pulled out my phone. True to form, Miss Angie had blown up my phone with seven calls, all during that span when I walked to the Dunkin Donuts. She really was worried about me. I thought about how Miss Angie stood up for me with Brandon's dad. He was a short, toad of a man, but he was scary. Still, Miss Angie looked him square in the eye and demanded my purse. And the words she used: *my child, my daughter, her family*. It was as if I really was a part of her family. Miss Angie and Chelsea were definitely family to me. I suddenly realized that it had been just an hour ago when I thought I had finally crossed the line with Miss Angie and was about to be put out for good. I didn't want to leave. Not because I was afraid of going to a residential facility. Their home had become my home, and Miss Angie and Chelsea, my family.

"Thanks for getting my purse back, Miss Angie," I said, my voice was a little raspy because I had been quiet for so long.

"You're welcome. Thank you for trusting me with the truth."

I still couldn't believe I told the truth—especially because Miss Angie seemed content with the first version of the story. There was just this strange force urging me to speak the truth. I couldn't explain it. If I had kept my mouth shut, what would have happened? Probably nothing. Brandon probably would've returned my purse and cell phone to me on Monday. Miss Angie probably would have never found out that I lied. But I couldn't shake the feeling in my gut that I was going to have to start trusting Miss Angie. Or

I wouldn't have Miss Angie around to trust.

"I just want you and Chelsea to see, I may not always like it, there may be consequences, but if you tell me the truth, I will always have your back," Miss Angie pulled into the driveway for the last time that night. She shut off the engine and unlatched her seatbelt, but I didn't move.

I was thinking about something. Toying with a notion that just popped into my mind and refused to leave. Finally, I opened my mouth: "Well, is it okay if I tell you one more truth?" I asked, timidly.

Miss Angie let out a weary sigh. "I think we've had enough truth for one night, don't you?" She looked over at me and saw that I really had something pressing down on my mind. "Just kidding. Go ahead, I'm listening. What truth do you want to tell me now?"

"Mr. Rick has been stalking me."

CHAPTER 28

Instead of spending the next morning running in a track meet in Harrisburg, I spent the morning at home, talking. Talking to the police. Talking to my social worker. Talking to my pastor. They even scheduled an emergency appointment with my therapist so I could do more talking. By three in the afternoon, I was sound asleep, completely drained from all the talking.

Miss Angie was also exhausted; but unlike me, she hadn't had any sleep. From the moment I dropped that last bit of truth on her the night before, Miss Angie's mind went into overdrive: worrying, thinking, praying, planning, and then praying some more. I heard her roaming the halls that night and felt bad that she couldn't sleep. At the same time, her footsteps comforted me. It let me know that Miss Angie was on the case, so it was safe for me to rest now.

On Monday, I stayed home from school. I had more talking to do. I had to go into the police station and give a formal statement. I met with Detective Neil Hartley, of the Sex Crimes Unit. He was a kind-faced man in his mid-thirties, who was all muscles, with a shiny bald head. I showed him the text message I received from Mr. Rick, just a week ago. He said they would try to track down the phone, but I had watched enough *Law & Order* episodes to know that Mr. Rick probably used a burner phone. I also brought my diary, where I wrote down every encounter I had with Mr. Rick for the past five months. I learned that from the last trial. The D.A. mentioned, back then, that it would have been helpful if I had kept a diary of my abuse. He wasn't blaming me, just a passing comment that I had stored away in my memory.

To protect my privacy, Detective Hartley told me to just put a post-it note on the pages where I mentioned I had contact with Mr. Rick. That way, they wouldn't have to be "all up in my business," Hartley said, trying to put me at

ease. Miss Angie was clearly not at ease when she saw the number of post-it notes that were in the diary. At least ten—though I didn't write just about each time I saw him face to face, but also the times I saw him parked outside and I ducked back into the school to avoid him. They would use the dates to go back through school surveillance videos to see if there was any sign of Mr. Rick or his black Escalade. They would also be talking to the kids at my school to see if anyone else had seen him. Detective Hartley said the school would take this very seriously since there was an alleged child molester lurking around the campus.

My heart sank at this news. Now everybody was going to know. When asked if anybody had been with me when Mr. Rick would show up at the school I said no, deciding not to tell them about the one time when Terry was there. I didn't want to drag him into this. I didn't want to drag any of my classmates into this. Thankfully, there were only a couple of months left in school. Maybe I could be home-schooled until this whole thing was over. It took over a year to bring Mr. Rick to trial the last time. Maybe I'll have graduated by the time this trial happens.

But Detective Hartley informed me that it wouldn't be like the last time. Things would move a lot faster this time. The last time, Mr. Rick was on trial for sexual assault and corrupting the morals of a minor. This time, he was not going to be on trial, *per se*. A complaint was being filed against him for violating a Protection from Abuse Order. He was in contempt of a court order, the original restraining order that required him not to come within 1000 feet of me. There would be no jury trial this time, but a hearing in front of a judge. He wasn't facing more than ten years in prison this time, just a fine and six months in jail. And probably a lifetime Stay Away Order. After taking my statement and gathering the little bit of evidence I brought with me, Detective Hartley shook my hand and assured me he would call me when Mr. Rick was arrested.

I spent the rest of the day lying in bed replaying my meeting with the detectives. When I went through this the first time, everything seemed so big to me. The detectives looked like giant linebackers, with big booming voices. Back then, I was sure those big strong men would shut my abuser down. But Mr. Rick had a fast-talking lawyer in an expensive blue suit. He wore a shiny platinum watch that I remembered watching dance around when he waved his hand in the air in front of the jury, demanding that they stop this injustice. This travesty of justice against his hard-working businessman client.

I wasn't eleven years old anymore, however. And even though Detective Hartley was as big as a linebacker, whose authoritative voice would inspire confidence in any little girl, I had little confidence that anyone would ever be able to stop Mr. Rick. Still, I didn't regret telling Miss Angie the truth. It made me feel like I still had some control in my life. Mr. Rick couldn't just come barging into my world, into my thoughts, without me putting up some kind of

a fight. I hadn't planned on putting up a fight just now, but now was just as good a time as any.

As Miss Angie met with the technician who came to upgrade the alarm system downstairs, I laid on the bed, flipping through TV channels, waiting for Chelsea to come home from school with my homework. That's how I knew I was losing my mind. I actually looked forward to getting some make-up work to do. Anything to keep my mind occupied.

My cell phone chirped. I dreaded looking at it. I wasn't afraid it would be Mr. Rick. I was afraid it would be one of the girls from track. During the track meet, they were texting me results from the races. Today, they were sending pictures and videos to cheer me up. They didn't know what was going on. Miss Angie explained to Coach Haney that I was having a family emergency and would be out for a few days. Of course, the girls were all calling to find out what the emergency was: Was I pregnant? Was I in jail? Did I get kicked out of the house? Finally, I got tired of dodging their questions, so I just stopped answering the phone altogether. This call was so unexpected, I had to answer it.

"Brandon?"

"Hey, Foxy." He tried to sound cool, but there was an undertone of uneasiness in his voice.

"Didn't think I'd ever hear from you again," I said.

A nervous chuckle. "I didn't think I'd ever be calling you again."

There was a large gap of silence between us until I filled it with, "So....why are you calling me, Brandon?"

"Uh...I just wanted to make sure you're all right. Coach said you didn't go to the meet on Sunday. And I didn't see you at practice."

"Yeah, something came up. A family emergency."

"That's what they said. But..." he sighed. It sounded as if he was having trouble finding the right words. "I just wanted to make sure it wasn't because of me."

"What wasn't because of you?"

"You know...the reason you stopped running track. It wasn't because of me, was it?"

I rolled my eyes up in my head. "Are you serious? Is that why you called me?"

"Yeah. I was worried about—"

"Well, you can stop worrying. First of all, I didn't stop running track. I just... I have to miss a couple of days of school, so I can't run. And second, get over yourself, Brandon," I pulled the phone away from my mouth to yell, "IT IS NOT ALWAYS ABOUT YOU!!!"

"I never said it was all about me."

"Oh, but you think I quit track because of one stupid date. You're not even on the track team! You're just there because you have nothing better to

do with your life than hang out with a bunch of high school kids.”

“You don’t have to get nasty, Foxy—”

“LaToya.”

“LaToya. I was just concerned about your silly ass. And why shouldn’t I think you quit track because of me? You joined track because of me, right?”

I wanted so badly to say, no, but I knew that would be a lie—and I was all about the truth now. Brandon was the one who talked me into trying out for the track team. I had to admit that, but not to him. Instead, I said, “Look, you have nothing to worry about. It really is a family emergency. I really didn’t quit track. And I really will be back as soon as I can. So, thanks for calling.” I started to hang up, until I heard him yelling:

“Wait, wait, wait, wait!”

“What!”

He said, cooly, “That’s not all I called you for.”

“What now?”

“I just wanted to say sorry again for what happened on Saturday. I’m not usually like that, I swear,” he said earnestly. “It’s just, I was looking forward to spending time with you and when things didn’t go as planned, I got an attitude.”

I didn’t respond.

“Well, anyway I’m sorry. Do you forgive me, Toya?” He said it so sweetly, that I could feel the walls around my heart bend a little.

“Yes! I told you that on Saturday.”

“No, you said ‘okay.’ I need to hear the words, ‘I forgive you, Brandon.’”

I groaned out the words, “I forgive you, Brandon.”

“Good. Cuz I like you, Toya. I really do. Maybe when this little family emergency of yours is over, we can try it again.”

I laughed out loud. “Try what again? Our date?”

“Yeah! Why not? We can even go to movies like you wanted.”

A week ago, I would have been drooling all over myself at these words. Now, I was unmoved. “I don’t think so.”

“What? Why?” He almost sounded shocked, “Is it because of the stupid video? I told you I don’t care about that. We don’t have to make a video. There’s plenty of other stuff we can do to have fun.”

Have fun. Is he serious? “Oh, you mean like playing video games or roller skating?”

“Uh...yeah,” he replied. I could picture the look on Brandon’s face as he said, “...among other things.”

“Other things. You mean like, naked roller skating?”

“Now you’re talking!”

“No, I’m not talking. Bye, Brandon.”

“Aw come on, Fox—”

I hung up. Then I stared at the phone, laughing. It was the first time I

laughed in a while. At least Brandon was good for something.

“Was that Brandon?”

I looked up and saw Chelsea in the doorway with a folder in her hand. “Yeah. Is that my homework?”

“Yup.” Chelsea skipped into the room and plopped the folder on my bed. “I got bored in study hall, so I did your geometry homework for you.”

“Aw man! I was looking forward to some geometry,” I teased.

Chelsea hopped on the bed, scooped up the remote control, and flipped the TV to the cooking channel. “You going back to school tomorrow?”

“Might as well. There’s nothing to do here.”

“Good. Cuz if one more person comes up to me asks me what’s wrong with you, I’m gonna rip out my hair.”

“Whatever. You know you like the attention.” I could tell by the grin on Chelsea’s face, she did like the attention a little.

“I like walking to school with you more,” she said.

It was still hard for me to have these warm, touching moments with Chelsea, or Miss Angie, but I was getting better at it. I nudged Chelsea on the shoulder and joked, “Well, if I’m going to school, then you can’t sleep in here tonight. I can’t sleep with all that snoring.”

“Hey! I don’t snore.”

Truthfully, Chelsea snored like an old rusty, chainsaw, but it didn’t really bother me. Ever since she found out about Mr. Rick, Chelsea started bringing her air mattress into my room and sleeping there.

“Somebody’s got to keep an eye on Toya,” she told her mother, as she inflated the mattress on the first night. “...unless you plan on getting us a guard dog.”

Miss Angie then slid her hand on her hip and said, “Oh, really! And of course, you’re going to take the dog for its walk and clean up his poop and give it a bath and—”

“Okay, okay.” Chelsea threw up her hands in surrender. “We can get a guard snake. They’re very low maintenance.”

A guard snake may be low maintenance, but Chelsea was not. Having never shared a room with her before, I never knew how many nighttime rituals the girl had. Skin cleansing routine, then she would kiss her mom goodnight, call Alonzo and say goodnight to him, say her prayers and then say goodnight to me. But that wasn’t the end of it. She needed the TV turned to the Discovery Channel, with the volume level set at five and the timer set for one hour. She needed a bottle of water beside her bed, because sometimes the heat made her throat dry in the middle of the night. She needed the stuffed pig, Chunky, that she got from her father, which she always slept with. She also needed me to keep her closet door shut, because she used to have nightmares that a hairy, green monster lived in her closet.

At this last request, I replied, “I’ve got an idea. How about I sleep in

your room and you, and your rules, can have my bed.”

By the third night, I got used to Chelsea’s quirky nighttime routine. And her snoring. It did make me feel a little safer having Chelsea in there—though all she could’ve done if Mr. Rick did break in was talk him to death about science. On this night, however, I didn’t hear Chelsea snoring. The TV timer had long since shut the TV off. The room was dark and Chelsea’s silence was unnerving, making me wonder if she was even breathing.

“You sleep, Chelsea?” I whispered. I was surprised to hear her answer so alertly.

“Uh uh. I’m just thinking.” There was a rustling sound, as Chelsea rolled over on her air mattress. “You think the police are really going arrest Mr. Rick?”

“Yeah. They said they’d call when he’s under arrest; but, knowing him, he’ll probably get out on bail. Why? You scared?”

“No!” Chelsea answered a little too quickly. “He oughta be scared of me. Did I tell you I have a brown belt in karate?”

“No,” I said, trying hard not to laugh.

“I only quit because I found out the mats at the rec center are unsanitary.” I laughed out loud.

“I’m serious. They gave me athlete’s foot, walking around barefoot. And I was good, Toya. Ask Mommy. I was dropping them boys like flies.”

Now I had heard enough. I stopped laughing long enough to say, “What are you talking about, Chelsea! You’re still afraid of monsters in your closet.”

“A karate chop can’t hurt no big hairy monster! But it’ll send Mr. Rick to the hospital.” Chelsea sat up and continued, “Man, I wish I was there when you were little and he was messing with you. I would’ve said: ‘Yo! Get off my sister!’ And then, pow...pow...bam!”

I could hear the air flutter as Chelsea acted out her devastating karate moves. “Wow. You gotta teach me some of them moves,” I said, sarcastically.

“Oh, I can teach you,” Chelsea said, with all seriousness. “I’d do anything to keep that man from hurting you again, Toya.”

And I knew that she meant it.

* * * * *

It turned out that I didn’t need Detective Hartley to call to inform me that Mr. Rick had been arrested. I knew five minutes after it happened. The morning of my first day back at school. I had just picked up my book bag and was about to walk out the door, when my cell phone rang. I saw the word “Mom” on my caller ID and my stomach sank. Tamika never called this early in the morning. She didn’t even get up before ten, so it was with dread that I held the phone to my ear and said, “Hello—”

“You lying ass, manipulative bitch!” Tamika growled. “You called the police on my man?”

“Ma, I—”

“I can’t believe you did it to me again. How could I be so stupid as to ever believe you’d changed?”

“It’s true, Ma! He’s been coming to the school and—”

“Well, how come you never told me, huh? Huh?” Tamika was boiling, her voice so loud the phone vibrated in my ear. “How come the first time I heard about it was from the police banging down my door first thing in the morning? Answer me, LaToya! Why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t think you’d believe me.” I said, timidly.

“Wrong! You didn’t tell me, because you know I always know when you’re lying. Oh, I’m so stupid!” she sighed, “Ricky tried to warn me this would happen, but no....I just had to try and save my family. I just had to give you another chance. And this is how you repay me? He never did nothing but try to be nice to you, and you got him arrested. I’m seven months pregnant, Toya. What am I supposed to do if my man’s in jail?”

I didn’t have an answer for that question.

“You can’t answer that, cuz you don’t care. You don’t care about me. You don’t care about this baby. All you care about is you.”

“Why would I lie?” I tried to interject. “Why would—”

“Because you’re selfish, that’s why. You can’t stand not being the center of attention. You see me getting ready to have another baby, and that I got a man that takes good care of me, and you’re jealous.”

“I’m not jealous!”

“Yeah, you are! You always have been jealous of me. You can’t have what I have, so you’d do everything in your power to take away what I got.”

“You think I’m jealous of you and Mr. Rick? Ma, that’s crazy. He’s a grown man!”

“And you’re a spiteful bitch!” My mother shouted. Then in a low, angry voice she hissed, “But let me tell you something. You may be able to manipulate these police with your sick little lies, but one day you’re gonna pay. All this hateful stuff you’ve been doing is gonna come right back on ya. And when it does, I won’t be there for you. I’m through with you, Toya. When this baby is born, he’s gonna be an only child because you are not my daughter anymore.”

“Don’t say that, Ma.” I sank into the sofa, tears starting to brim in my eyes. It’s not that I hadn’t heard these words before from my mother, but they stung just as badly the second time around.

“I mean it, LaToya. I’ve had enough of you and you’re trifling ways. I swear you’re just like your daddy. I guess he must’ve seen it too, that’s why he left as soon as he saw you were gonna be just like him: selfish, mean, vindictive, with a nasty ass attitude ...That’s why you’re gonna end up all alone cuz nobody’s gonna want to put with all your lies...” Time seemed to stand still as Tamika continued to spit venom into my ear. I just took it, no longer

able to speak up, no longer wanting to defend myself. "...and I'll tell you something else, don't call me again, don't text me and don't send me no letters. Or I'll take out a restraining order on your ass. See how you like it. And you better pray I never lay eyes on you again. If you see me, you'd better run! Pregnant or not, I will break your—"

Suddenly, my mother's voice was no longer rattling in my ears. I hadn't even noticed that Miss Angie took the phone away until I looked up and saw her standing there.

"You don't have to sit there and listen to that mess, Honey."

"Oh, I know. I just thought I'd let her get it off her chest." I said, trying to sound unaffected.

"You still coming to school, Toya?" Chelsea spoke up weakly, making her presence known. She brushed her index finger under her eye and wiped away a tear.

"Uh..." That quickly, I forgot what I was doing before the phone call. I was just about to walk out the door and pretend my world wasn't crumbling, when the phone rang. Now, I didn't know what to do with myself. I looked to Miss Angie for the answer.

"You don't have to go, if you're not feeling up to it."

"Okay." I said, in a daze. I stood up, as if Miss Angie's words had unlocked the chain that anchored me to the couch. I kept my eyes down, not wanting any tears to slip through with Miss Angie and Chelsea watching me. Quickly, I scooped up my book bag then ran back upstairs.

Before slamming my door shut, I heard Miss Angie say to Chelsea, "Get your things, Baby, I'll drop you off at school."

* * * * *

The rain clouds did all my crying for me. It was a gray miserable day, which matched the misery in my heart. I just wanted to sleep the day away, but whenever I closed my eyes, I could hear bits and pieces of my mother's tirade clanging in my ears. Miss Angie came in to check on me a few times. And every time, I pretended I was asleep. I wasn't in the mood for kind words, or a pep talk, or even the comfort of food. Eventually, sleep did stop by for a long visit. There was nothing restful about it. At least I could escape for a few hours.

When I woke up, I heard muffled voices downstairs. I knew whoever it was down there doing the talking, the conversation had to be about me. I didn't want to do any more talking, but I did have to pee. Really bad. I slipped out of my room, gently tiptoed to the bathroom, did my business, and started to tip back to my room. Something I heard from the chattering voices made me stop and listen closely.

"The doctors say she'll be okay." I recognized that little girl voice as my social worker's. "But they're going to keep her overnight, anyway."

I heard Miss Angie say, “What about the baby?”

“Something’s wrong with the baby!” Before I could think, the words slipped out of my mouth.

Miss Angie and Miss Meagan looked up in unison to the top of the stairs. Miss Angie said, “Toya, I didn’t know you were up. You want something to—”

I came barreling down the steps, asking, “Did something happen to my mom, Miss Meagan?”

“She’s okay, Toya,” Miss Meagan said, rising to her feet. “She uh...passed out today. You know, from being so stressed out about her boyfriend. So, they took her to the hospital to make sure everything’s all right, which it was. She’s fine.”

I let out a tiny breath of relief, but caught myself, “And the baby?”

“The baby’s fine too.”

Now, I exhaled completely and collapsed into the nearest chair. “Can I go see her?”

Miss Meagan didn’t answer right away. She looked to Miss Angie, who was at a loss for words too.

“She doesn’t want to see me, does she?” I said, dejected.

Miss Meagan paused before saying, “No. But it’s probably for the best. It’s a stressful situation, Toya. Your mom just needs to take it easy for herself and the baby. Maybe she’ll—”

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” I was saying to myself, though I said it out loud. “If anything happens to that baby—”

Miss Angie rushed to my defense. “Don’t say that. You did the right thing. You shouldn’t have to live one more minute of your life with that monster following you around.”

But I had already lived through many minutes with that monster following me around. There really had been no urgent need to speak up when I did. I had been handling Mr. Rick. I didn’t have to stir up the trouble for myself or my mother. I was having a hard time remembering why I’d even told Miss Angie in the first place. Then I remembered how Miss Angie wanted me to let her in. But that wasn’t it either. It was seeing Mr. Rick’s face while I was kissing Brandon. It freaked me out more than I knew. I was afraid that Mr. Rick would become a constant presence in the most intimate places of my life. I was afraid that I would never be able to have a normal healthy relationship, because Mr. Rick would always come between me and whoever I tried to love. He had already taken so much from me, I didn’t want him to take my future happiness too. That was the real reason I spoke up. Fear and frustration caused me to speak up, but it hardly seemed worth it now. Not at the expense of my mother’s health. Or my unborn baby brother’s life.

“Will I get in trouble if I tell the police that I lied?” I asked. “I mean, will they put me in jail?”

Miss Angie shook her head. “Don’t give up, Toya. It’ll be okay. Your mom, the baby, they’re gonna be okay. The only one who won’t be okay is you, if you stop now.”

A tear ran down my cheek. “It doesn’t matter if I’m okay. I just want this to stop.”

“Then stop it once and for all!” Miss Angie pleaded. “Let Rick know that he has no power over you, that he can’t—”

“Look, I don’t give a damn about him, okay? I care about my mom. I mean, I know she’s not perfect. I know she hates me right now, but I still love her,” I cried. “I still love her...”

Miss Angie slid her arms around me, and I did not push her away. I cried big, painful tears as my foster mother gently stroked my back. “Shhhh! It’s okay. It’s okay,” Miss Angie said softly. “I’ve got your back, Toya. Whatever you decide to do, I’ve got your back. If you can’t go through with it, that’s fine. We’ll figure out some other way to keep you safe. We’ll figure it out.”

* * * * *

The first signal to me that my mother was feeling better was the letter. It was delivered via Miss Meagan and demanded that I return the iPhone and gold earrings Tamika had given me for Christmas. “They were gifts, Toya. You don’t have to give them back.” Miss Meagan informed me.

I did return them and chose not to demand the hooker boots back—though it was tempting. Deciding to give back my gifts was an easy decision; but I was still struggling with the decision to actually go through with my complaint against Mr. Rick. Some days, I got so angry at his cockiness, how he blatantly violated the law and my mother’s blindness to it all, I couldn’t wait for my day in court. A few minutes later, I’d think about my mother lying in a hospital bed, or my baby brother walking right by me, not even knowing who I was. Or being cut off from my family again, and I doubted that I could go through with it again.

It was Thursday. I missed another day of school. Instead, I spent the bulk of the day lying in bed, depressed, debating if I was truly prepared to go through life mother-less. I figured tomorrow would be more of the same, which made me feel even more depressed. Then Miss Angie came in and changed my plans.

“I think you should go to school tomorrow,” she said, taking a seat on my bed.

I sat up part way. “Why? I mean, tomorrow’s Friday.”

“Exactly. That way, you can go for a day to see how it goes. And you’ll have the weekend to recover.”

I shrugged, “Okay.” I wasn’t looking forward to going back to school, but I didn’t have the strength to debate with Miss Angie. When she left to start dinner, I started mentally planning what I would wear to school tomorrow.

There was a knock on my door.

Chelsea poked her head in, grinning from ear to ear. “Hey, Toya. Guess what? You have company.”

Just from the goofy grin on Chelsea’s face, I knew I did not want to see whoever it was standing on the other side of that door. I rolled over on my bed and whined, “Not now, Chelsea. I’m tired.”

It was too late. The door opened. Chelsea dragged the visitor inside and I nearly fell out of the bed.

CHAPTER 29

“Emily?”

She didn’t look like the same Emily that I once called friend. Physically, she looked the same—except she wasn’t wearing her glasses. There was something different about the way this Emily carried herself: self-assured, head held high, no longer a geeky little caterpillar, but a butterfly in full bloom. She had fluttered back into my life and perched herself in the doorway of my bedroom.

I didn’t know if I should hug her or slap her in the face, so I folded my arms and said, coolly, “I see you’re not wearing your glasses. You must be on your way to steal somebody’s man.”

Ignoring those words, Emily moved closer to me, but still out of arms reach, just in case. “Hello, Toya. How are you?”

“Why are you here, Emily?”

“Chelsea told me about your mom’s boyfriend.”

My head immediately snapped in Chelsea’s direction.

“I had to!” Chelsea squeaked. “The rumors were out of control in school. I had to set people straight.” The way I glowered at Chelsea, she had no choice but to run for her life. “Um...I’ll just give you two some privacy,” she said hastily, as she scampered out of the room.

I turned my laser beam eyes back on Emily. “You can go with her.”

“Not till I say what I have to say.”

“I don’t care what you have to say!”

Emily was still defiant after all these months. “Well, I’m not here to apologize about me and Terry, if that’s what you think.”

I sat up on the edge of bed ready to pounce. All of this pent-up emotion I had brewing inside me, I wanted Emily to give me a reason to swing. I wanted an excuse to wail on somebody, but something held me back.

“The only reason I went out with Terry was because you didn’t believe that

I could. I wanted you to see that I wasn't just your dorky little sidekick. That a boy like Terry could be into a girl like me." Emily's voice saddened, "I guess that's why we only lasted a month."

I didn't want to look interested, but my eyes couldn't hide it. "A month?"

"Don't pretend you didn't know."

"I didn't know. I told you Emily, I couldn't care less about you and Terry's relationship," I lied. How did I not know? Had I been so caught up in track that I was out of the Terry loop? I always assumed I would know. That I would wake up one morning and the sun would seem brighter, the birds singing more sweetly, and I would just know: Terry and Em finally broke up. "Why'd you break up?"

"I just told you why. We were together for the wrong reasons, and we both knew it." She walked over to my dresser and eyed a picture of me and Detox at the dance. "Remember when you caught me crying in the bathroom at the Christmas Dance?"

I nodded. "You broke up at the dance?"

"No! I was crying, because I was having such a good time with Terry. Then I saw you there. It made me so sad because I realized, no matter how much fun the dance was with Terry, it would've been that much more fun with you. If we could've all been there together as friends, like we used to be."

I couldn't say that I felt the same way. Emily had committed the ultimate sin: *Thou shalt not steal your best friend's man*—even if he technically wasn't my man. Emily was the one who sacrificed our friendship over a boy. If she was miserable at the dance, she brought it on herself. I wasn't about to shed any tears. "Okay. But that was months ago. Why are you—"

"Even after we broke up, I swore I would never be your friend again. But then when Chelsea told me what happened, I couldn't get here fast enough." There was a hint of desperation in Emily's voice. "She told me that you probably wouldn't want to see me, but I didn't care. I just had to see you. I needed to know you're okay," she sighed, "So, I guess you could say, the friend in me lives on."

"Well, I've got plenty of friends, thank you," I said in my best, I-don't-need-you tone.

"Great, then you won't mind one more." Emily slipped her satchel off of her shoulder. She pulled out a red thermos and handed it to me. "Here."

Not even bothering to reach for it, I asked, "What is it?"

"Papaya pomegranate smoothie. My mom sent it over for you. She said to just put it in the blender with some ice."

"Well, tell your mom thanks, but I don't—" Just then, I caught a glimpse of something on Emily's arm that blew my mind. "Is that a tattoo?" I yanked Emily's arm over for a closer look: a rose vine that traveled down her forearm and twisted itself into the word "Emily," just above her wrist.

Emily took her arm back. "I know. It's stupid. I was going through a

rebellious phase.”

“What in the world made you do that?”

“Francesca Dillon from Chorus. Her folks were out of town for their anniversary, so she invited us all over. We started doing shots of Tequila—which tastes disgusting, by the way. The next thing I knew, somebody said something about getting tattoos and...” Emily ran her hand across her tattooed arm as if she just performed a magic trick. “Voila!”

“What did your mom say?”

“She grounded me!” Emily whined, still put off by the fact that she had been punished.

I laughed, “Man, Em! Drinking, tattoos, getting grounded. What’s next? Video of you stripping on the internet?”

“No! I just...Oh, it doesn’t matter. I’m not here to talk about me, anyway. I’m here for you.” Emily looked down at the thermos she was still clutching in her hand. “So do you want this or not?”

I looked at the thermos and thought about the Pepto Bismal-like taste of Emily’s mother’s infamous smoothies. I cringed. “If I say I’ll be your friend again, will you still make me drink it?”

A devious look sprang up into Emily’s eyes, “I say we pour it down the toilet.”

Emily stayed for dinner and helped me pick my clothes out for my first day back at school. We watched music videos and caught up on the past few months. A few times, I found myself wanting to ask Emily what it was like to kiss Terry. Then I would get angry all over again, but I never let it show. Having Emily around actually made me a little excited about going back to school. But when she went home, fear crept back in.

I had no idea what to expect when I got to school the next day. I knew there were rumors: some people were saying I was off having an abortion. Some said I met a boy online and tried to run away with him, but got stopped by the police. Then there was a small group who believed I had been arrested in Atlantic City as part of a prostitution ring. That rumor, of course, had been supplied by Jenelle. There was definitely going to be a lot of staring, a lot of whispering and a whole lot of moments when I would want to crawl under her desk and hide.

The alarm clock went off at 6 am, but I was already up and dressed. Like ripping off the Band-Aid from a painful sore, I just wanted to get this day over with. I brushed my hair into a ponytail. Then, on second thought, decided to release the ponytail and let my hair fall loose around my shoulders. I slipped on a pink paisley headband and some cotton candy lip gloss. I wanted to look extra good today. Not at all like a girl who had just had an abortion or been released on bail for a prostitution bust. As I headed out of

my bedroom, I nearly tripped over Chelsea's air mattress. It made me remember something. I returned to the side of my bed, knelt down and said a prayer: "Lord, please help me make it through this day in one piece. Amen."

* * * * *

Just as I expected, my day was filled with gawks and whispers, as well as noisy classrooms that suddenly turned silent when I walked in. Unexpected, was the number of students who greeted me warmly and gave me words of support. Even Devon offered to walk me home from school—though he made sure Jenelle was nowhere in sight when he made that offer. I thanked him, but Kamisha already told me that she was going to drive me home every day. Actually, it was more like an order Kamisha barked at me. "Practice is over at 5:30. Be at my car at 5:45!"

Emily stuck with me most of the morning, but we separated at lunch. She ate lunch with Terry every day and that did not change now that we had made up. I spotted them sitting together while I stood in line. Admittedly, I was a little bothered seeing them together, laughing and huddled up close, having an intense conversation. Were they still together? I didn't know what was true. Why would Emily lie? Why come all the way over to my house to make up if nothing had changed?

I forced myself to let it go. As far as I was concerned, Emily was on probation. Lunch with Terry wasn't a violation—yet. I thought I must have been PMS-ing or something, because I had been so emotional lately, so sentimental. It was nice having Emily around again, and I wasn't ready to let go of her again so quickly. Besides, I had my own standing lunch date with Kayla in the Guidance Counselor's office.

I set down my tray, loaded with spaghetti and meat sauce with a side of fries, getting ready to dig into the steamy details of Miss Wallace's love life. But this time, instead of talking about Miss Wallace's man troubles, the guidance counselor wanted to give me some guidance and some counseling.

"Aw, Miss Wallace," I whined, "I don't wanna talk about me, I wanna hear about your date." Miss Wallace was a transplant from New York, who had been chatting with a nice mechanic she met online, and went on her first live date with him last Friday. She was supposed to give me the scoop when I came back to school that Monday, but that was before all the truth came out. "Was he cute? Did he look like his picture?"

"No way, LaToya," she said in her thick Bronx accent. "You've been holding out on me, young lady. How could you come in here every day and listen to my problems, and it didn't dawn on you to tell me about yours?"

"But your problems are juicier than mine, Miss Wallace," I said, hoping I could joke away the tension.

"She's doing it again," Kayla interjected. "Avoidance. She's trying to avoid her problems by making stupid jokes."

I shot Kayla a look. “Whose side are you on?”

“I’m on your side. But I’m also a little pissed at you too. I mean, do you know how horrible I would’ve felt, as your peer counselor, if that man had hurt you, and I didn’t even know what was going on?”

“Well, you’re not my peer counselor, Kay—”

“But *I am* your guidance counselor,” added Miss Wallace, “and I’m here to listen to you. That’s why they pay me the big bucks, girlfriend.”

“Thanks, Miss Wallace, but honestly, they’ve got me meeting with my therapist twice a week now. I come here to get away from all that.”

Miss Wallace studied my face a moment longer, then let out a heavy sigh. “Well, if you start to feel overwhelmed and need to talk, just know, my door is always open to you.” With that, she handed me a pamphlet about all the services that were offered at the Guidance Office, then shifted gears, “Now let me tell you about my date. Honey, I think I hear wedding bells!”

I had one more class to get through, and I would have survived my first day back. It hadn’t been so bad. Not nearly as bad as I feared. Most of the staring had died down by the sixth period. A fight broke out between two senior boys in the hallway. That generated its own gossip. So, people had pretty much moved on from talking about me. And since I was standing there when the two boys were wrestling on the ground right near my feet, I had a whole lot to say.

“Seriously, Kay, what’s the matter with boys today? None of them know how to fight anymore,” I said, as we headed down the hall. “They were just rolling all over the floor like a couple of pigs in slop. Neither one of them knew how to throw a punch.”

“I heard they were fighting over Rosie Hernandez. She told both of them she’d go to the prom with them.”

“No. I was standing right there. They were fighting over money. The one dude owed the other five bucks and had been dodging him all week.”

Kayla shook her head. “You mean to tell me, all that fuss was over five dollars? Boys can be so petty!”

“I know, right?! And they call us girls, petty. Boys are petty and they try to—” I had been so wrapped up in my conversation that I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going. I crashed right into a wall. Actually, it felt like a wall. In reality, it was someone’s back. Terry’s back. Instinctively, my hands latched onto him to keep from falling.

When I realized who it was that I was holding on to, my tongue seemed to go numb. “Oh...uh, sorry...I-I didn’t see you. I was talking to uh...” I looked back to point to Kayla. The girl vanished into thin air. “Where did she go?”

“Where did who go?” Terry said.

“Kayla. She was just...” My mind went blank. I had not stood this close to Terry in months. Not looked into his eyes nor inhaled his scent in so long that my body was having a physical reaction to his presence. *Snap out of it, girl*, I commanded. My brain responded. “Um...never mind. Sorry for crashing into you like that.”

“It’s okay.” He bent down and picked up my books, which had fallen to the floor.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, I can—” Before I could finish my sentence, Terry handed me the books. “Uh...Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He stood there a second longer and examined my face. Finally, he said, “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Uh huh.”

But when Terry said it again, “No. Are you okay?” I knew he was asking me something else. He was asking me if, based on all the drama, and the rumors, and the scary things that had been happening to me recently, was I really okay.

My voice became more sober. “Yeah, I’m fine, Terry. I’m okay.”

His warm hazel eyes probed mine as if he was inspecting me for himself, just to be sure that I was, in fact, “okay.” When he saw no hint of distress in my eyes, he looked away. “Good. Take care of yourself, Toya.” Then he shut his locker and walked away.

I wanted to yell after him. My mind scrambled to think of something to say that would make him come back and stand in my presence again. Nothing came to mind. I watched him round the corner, disappearing from sight. I felt cold. Like someone had suddenly taken the sun away. I should have been happy. Despite all the ugliness that transpired between us, Terry still cared. Instead, I was heartsick. The bridge that once connected me to him had been demolished, remained demolished, and I had no idea how to reach him anymore.

The bell had long since rang. The halls were empty. I was officially late for class. Instead of making a mad dash for the classroom and coming up with an excuse for why I was late, I turned on my heels and marched back the way I came. Right to the door of Miss Wallace’s office. Which was, as promised, always open.

CHAPTER 30

It didn't take long for me to find my rhythm again. After not running for nearly a week, it felt like another week until I was Foxy again. The rumors and whispers faded as the buzz of Spring Break grew louder. It was almost May. New life was springing up all over the place. The grass had been restored to its vibrant green. And kids were peeling off their thick winter hats and coats to bask in the sun for the first taste of seventy-degree weather.

Energized by the warmth of the sun, I found myself running faster and sailing over the hurdles like a gazelle. Every morning when I woke to the sweet singing birds outside my window, I felt like a princess in a Disney movie. My African violet was in full bloom and blushed at me in its brilliant purpleness. My world was beautiful again. If only I could get rid of that dark storm cloud that was looming on the horizon.

Mr. Rick's contempt hearing was quickly approaching. The date was circled on my calendar. It was the week after my Granny Jean's big birthday bash. Of course, the recent turn of events meant I was uninvited to the party by my mother.

Miss Meagan offered to contact my grandmom and see if I could come anyway, but I told her not to. I knew my mother would be there, and I didn't want to cause any more stress for her and the baby. Besides, Granny Jean never made any effort to contact me since I'd been in foster care, so I wasn't sure how she felt about me. Did she believe Tamika's version of things? Did she think I was a lying slut too? Is that why she never asked to visit me? On the other hand, Granny Jean had never been that big of a fan of Tamika's boyfriends.

"Tamika's the only girl I know that can be standing in a room full of diamonds and pick out a turd," Granny Jean once said of her daughter.

Maybe I would be welcome at her party, but my heart wasn't willing to take that chance. So, instead of spending that Saturday at Granny Jean's eating mac

and cheese, playing cards with my cousins, and fighting over the biggest piece of birthday cake, I spent the day in court. Miss Meagan arranged a meeting with the prosecutor to help prep me for the case. They did the same thing at the other trial. Whenever they had a child as a witness, the D.A. liked to bring them to the courtroom, so they could get used to it and wouldn't get freaked out when it came time for them to testify.

The contempt hearing was going to be held in a much smaller courtroom than Mr. Rick's criminal trial five years ago. There were only two rows of chairs in the gallery, with stark white walls, chipped plaster and fluorescent lights, that did nothing to make those walking in feel welcome. Yet, I was greeted warmly by the prosecuting attorney, Grady Childress. He was cute—I had to admit that. Curly blonde hair with bright blue eyes, he looked like he should have been on a beach in Malibu. Since we were there on a Saturday, he left his suit at home and wore jeans and a Georgetown Law T-shirt. And the way Miss Meagan was acting around him! Staring, grinning, giggling at every little joke he made. I thought people were supposed to outgrow that silly stuff when they got into their twenties. At least, I hoped I would.

I quickly got over the fact that the prosecutor looked like a model. Bottom line: it didn't matter how cute he was, on the day of the hearing, I needed a pit-bull representing me. Grady—he insisted that I call him that, not Mr. Grady—anyway, Grady sounded like he knew his stuff. He explained that the school surveillance video proved nothing. Apparently, expensive, black SUV's were a little too common at Excelsior. Especially, when the surveillance video at this expensive school wasn't fancy enough to pick up license plate numbers. Basically, they weren't able to prove that Mr. Rick was there from the videos. They couldn't trace the text message either. So that meant the hearing was going to come down to my word versus his. *So, what else is new?*

"But, no worries!" Grady said, "We're gonna get you ready, so you can nail that sick bastard," then realized he went too far. "Excuse my language." He looked back at Miss Meagan, who did not think his choice of words was cute.

She turned her attention to me, "Toya, do you have any questions for Mr. Childress?"

"No. I'm cool."

"All right then," Grady clapped his hands and pointed to the witness stand, "Let's get moving."

I took my seat in the witness stand, then adjusted the microphone in front of me even though it wasn't on. I was already feeling jittery. Memories of the last trial flickered around my mind. It was a completely different courtroom, but I could still see my mother sitting right behind Mr. Rick. Her eyes damning me for putting our family business out in the street. I could see the jury, some weeping when I wept during my testimony; the same jurors avoiding my eyes when they came back deadlocked.

"Just relax, Toya." Grady was standing right in front of me, using a very

calming voice. "You're gonna be just fine."

I took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, a suggestion from my therapist for what to do if I started feeling anxious.

Grady laced his fingers together and began. "Now, I need you to know that things are gonna be different this time around."

I thought he was saying things would be different because he was on the case and there was no way in hell he was going to drop the ball. That wasn't what he was saying at all.

"I'm sorry to say, but it'll probably be tougher on you this time around."

Immediately, Miss Meagan jumped to my defense, "Uh, I don't think you should be telling her—"

Grady raised a hand, cutting her off. "Look, I'm not here to blow smoke up your ass—excuse me—I...I don't want to lie to ya, Toya. I want you to be ready. I don't want to set you up for the slaughter. The truth is, you're not eleven anymore. His lawyer's not gonna take it easy on you like he did before."

Easy? I could think of a thousand words to describe testifying at the first trial. "Easy" would not be one of them. Horrifying. Traumatic. Torture. But definitely not easy. I held my tongue, though, and listened to the cute lawyer, who obviously had no idea what he was talking about.

"Last time, you were just a little kid. No lawyer in his right mind would have torn into you on the witness stand! He would have looked like a complete bully. The jury would've hated him and, therefore, hated his client too."

I nodded and so did Miss Meagan, as this point made some sense.

"But now...You're gonna be seventeen soon, right?"

"At the end of June," I said.

"Exactly. So now the strategy changes. The gloves come off. Instead of sweet sixteen, you are a lying, manipulative brat, who made this whole story up, because you hate your mom's boyfriend. Because he's taken her attention away from you."

"But I'm not jealous of Mr. Rick." Already, my neck was feeling hot, and I was feeling defensive.

Grady calmed me down again. "I know. I know. And believe me, opposing counsel knows it, too. But it's the only play they've got. I mean, I'd do it too, if I were representing the other side."

"So, what should she do?" Miss Meagan interjected, possibly noticing that my shoulders were beginning to droop.

"The most important thing is that you remain calm. You cannot lose your temper, no matter how much they try to provoke you. If you yell and cuss and get all defiant, then the judge may start thinking: Yeah, this girl's got a bad attitude. Maybe the defendant is telling the truth. You, see?"

I nodded. Miss Meagan nodded.

"I'll do my best to protect you. I'll be objecting like crazy. And if he asks you a question and I object, you don't say anything. Just wait for the judge to rule on my objection. Then he'll tell you if you can answer or not.

I nodded.

"Now, the good news is, since this isn't a regular trial, you won't be up there too long. Some of these contempt hearings are over in like five minutes."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure we won't get that lucky. It may take a couple of hours, but then the judge will rule. Either Mr. Garnett will go home a free man, or he'll be in jail for six months. I don't think there's gonna be any slap on the wrists in this one."

Mr. Garnett? It took a second for me to remember who that was. Rick Garnett. No one ever called him Mr. Garnett. "Will he have to testify, too?" I asked.

"He doesn't have to. He may have his lawyer do all the talking, so he doesn't risk saying something that may incriminate him. Any more questions?"

I shook my head.

"Okay, well, I figured I'd take you through your story, once. I don't want you to sound too rehearsed when you take the stand. Then I'm gonna switch over to the defense side—ya know, pretend I'm defense counsel. I want you to get used to handling a little intense cross-examination."

Miss Meagan looked worried, "But you don't have to do that part if you don't want to." She could feel Grady's eyes on her. "She's been through enough. I don't want her stressing over this."

Grady sighed then said reluctantly, "She's right. You don't have to do this. I'm sure you'll be fine," though there was nothing in his voice that indicated he actually believed what he just said.

"It's okay, Miss Meagan," I said confidently. "I want to do it. I want to know what I'm getting myself into."

* * * * *

What had I gotten myself into! I held it in all during the car ride home and through my five-minute polite chit-chat with Miss Angie, but when I made it upstairs, I buried my face in my pillow and screamed. Gary Childress said he wanted me to get a taste of what the cross-examination would be like. It tasted like poison. *Mr. Childress seemed like such a nice man*, I said to myself. *Who knew he could be so evil!*

He didn't yell. He didn't get all in my face, like they did on TV; but he was relentless! Cutting off my words, twisting them around and throwing them back in my face. At first, I tried to play it cool, answering with a lot of sweet: "yes sir, no sirs." Until Grady told me not to answer that way: "It sounds

phony. Just be yourself, kiddo.”

“But my self wants jump out of this chair and bust you in the mouth.” I shot back.

Grady laughed, reminding me that he was human after all, then he went right back to being evil. “So, you want to bust me in the mouth, huh? You don’t like me right now, do you?”

“No.” I said, still restrained.

“Is that what you do to people you don’t like? Bust them in the mouth?”

I started to answer, but he cut me off. “What about your mom’s boyfriend? You wanna bust him in the mouth too?”

“No.”

“You don’t? This man you claim has been stalking you for months. You wouldn’t want to bust him in the mouth?”

I hesitated, not quite sure how I was supposed to answer. “Yes, but—”

“Of course you would. Cuz you don’t like him, do you?”

“No.”

“You hate him!”

“Yes!”

“You hate him because your mom loves him more than she loves you, am I right?”

I didn’t answer. The question cut too close to the wounds I was still trying to heal.

“Answer the question LaToya!” Grady barked at me. “You hate him because she picked him over—”

“Yes! Yes!” Tears brimmed over my eyes and my hands trembled as I struggled to hold back the wall of emotion that was trying to burst forth. “I hate him!”

“Okay...um,” Miss Meagan’s mousy voice, piped up. “I think she’s had enough—”

Grady continued, as if the mouse had not made a peep. “You don’t want to just bust him in the mouth, you want to destroy him! You want to ruin his life, don’t you?”

I kept my mouth shut. I could feel my rage rising. I was afraid of what might come out of my mouth next.

By now, Grady’s voice was booming. “You want to take everything he has because he took away everything you had, am I right?”

Miss Meagan was now on her feet, by Grady’s side, yelling, “That’s enough!”

But I had already taken in my deep breath and exhaled. “No, you’re not right.” I said, calmly. “Because Mr. Rick did not take away everything I have. He doesn’t have that power.”

Silence from Grady. He was caught off guard. He cocked his head and smiled at me. “I-I...I don’t know what to say to that. I’m impressed.”

“Good. Does that mean we’re finished with this circus?” Miss Meagan said, while marching up to the witness stand and dragging me out of there.

“Yes, of course. You did a great job, Toya.” He walked over and held out his hand. I stood, staring dully at his hand.

“You don’t like me very much, do you?”

I shot him a look as if to say, “*What do you think?*” –a look that seemed to mirror the one on my social worker’s face.

“You think I was too rough?” Grady said, unfazed, apparently not at all uncomfortable in the role of the bad guy. “Listen, I gave you my best shot, and you’re still standing. You’re a tough little lady.”

I felt my lips smile, though I didn’t want to smile. “You really think Mr. Rick’s lawyer is gonna come at me like that?”

“If he does, he’s gonna be in for a rude awakening.”

Right now, I was the one who felt like she just had a rude awakening. Maybe they did take it easy on me at the first trial. I remembered that the scariest parts of the trial were facing my mom and Mr. Rick, as well as a courtroom full of strangers. Talking about the sex that had been forced upon me. Describing Mr. Rick’s penis. Watching my mother cry as I spoke of the most traumatic moments in my life, knowing her tears were not for me.

Being questioned by Mr. Rick’s lawyer had been the least of my worries back then. The tall man in the fancy suits and the flashy watch, raised his voice to the jury, but not to me. He was courteous; and even smiled at me, as he politely called me a liar. His cross-examination was not at all like Grady Childress’ rendition. I lay in bed still picturing the wild look in his eyes. *At least he was on my side.* I thought. For a moment, I wondered whose side Grady was really on. Like maybe the whole thing was a setup, and he was actually Mr. Rick’s lawyer, only pretending to be a prosecutor, so he could mess with my head. I knew it was a silly thought, but my head was still spinning, so I wasn’t thinking straight.

In reality, the thing that really worried me was the rage I felt. It was like a lion, growling in my chest, trying to claw its way out. I feared it because I knew if it ever got out, I would not be able to control it. What if it escaped during the hearing and I turned into this wild, profanity-spewing, maniac? I would be the one in contempt and Mr. Rick would be the poor innocent victim of this unruly child. But the purpose of my meeting with the prosecutor today was to prepare me, so I wouldn’t lose control. It was to help me control my temper, but what about my rage? My little meeting did not control my rage. If anything, it stirred it up. It poked at it and poked at it until the lion in me woke up. And it was pissed.

Even now, three hours after my meeting, all I had to do was think about it, and the rage would return. Shaking and all. I looked at my quivering hands and willed them to be still. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. It wasn’t working. I sat up and swung my legs over the edge of my bed. I

knew what I needed to do to calm that rage.

* * * * *

Out in the sun, on this unseasonably warm and muggy April afternoon, I ran. My rage was my fuel, so I would run until I ran out of fuel. Feet pounding against concrete, legs churning, arms slicing through the air, propelling me forward at a rate of speed I had never traveled before. I was going after that high. That runner's high, which would soothe the ache in my heart, the ache in my mind, the ache in my legs. It was working. Once again, my gift had served me well. Running was taking me to another level, elevating me above the storm.

Yet as I floated above my emotional storm, I felt a drop of water on my face. At first, I thought it was a drop of sweat; but when I felt another, then another, then another. I knew it was rain. I looked up at the sky and saw that a large pack of dark clouds quietly snuck up behind me.

"Aw man! Not now, Lord." I didn't want to stop running, not while there was still a little fuel left in my tank. But the drops quickly turned into a shower. I knew I would have to turn back and head home. I didn't like running in the rain. I didn't like for my hair to be soaked, my clothes to stick to my body, my sneakers to feel like I was running in mush. I needed to turn around now.

Still, this wasn't a rain that chilled me to the core. It was warm and refreshing. Why did I have to turn around? I realized that this rain was serving a purpose, too. It hadn't come to chase me away; but to urge me on. It nourished me. I could feel it. As if God himself had sent this shower to cleanse me. To free me from the dirt and scum I accumulated over the years. The water wasn't weighing me down, it was lifting me up.

I could feel my spirit lifting, soaring up and over the storm clouds. As the rain saturated my hair and trickled off my chin, I felt as though I'd just been baptized. My spirit was being renewed right before my eyes. I was born again. As people everywhere cowered under umbrellas and scurried for shelter, cursing the rain, I tipped my head back and thanked God.

CHAPTER 31

I had just drifted off to sleep when Miss Angie knocked on my door to wake me. I must've slept for two hours the whole night. When I did sleep, I had the most bizarre dream. I dreamed I was at the contempt hearing. Mr. Rick won, and I was the one dragged off to jail. I sat in a dank, dark, dungeon of a jail cell, playing the harmonica, when someone kicked the cell door open.

"Don't worry, big sis. I'll save you!" Chelsea announced and yanked me to my feet with almost super-human strength. *Ka-pow! Ka-bam!* Chelsea fought her way through the prison guards, clearing a path for my escape. We made it to the main gate. Dwayne was behind the wheel of his Taurus, the apparent getaway driver, as Kamisha held the door open, barking: "Come on! Move it! Move it!"

Chelsea's big feet kicked in a burst of speed that propelled her to the car, with me right on her heels. Just as I was about to high-hurdle the front gate, some strange force yanked me back. I hit the ground with a thud. There was something cold around my neck. A shackle attached to a long link chain. I followed the links of the chain until my eyes led me to a pair of snakeskin cowboy boots.

"Help. Chelsea, help me!" I whimpered.

But by the time Chelsea looked back, I was being dragged back by my hair, caveman style, by Mr. Rick. "I know you didn't think you was gonna get away that easy," he growled, as he hoisted me over his shoulder. I pounded on his back, desperate to break free, but that only made his laugh more sinister.

My pounding on the back of my abuser morphed into my pounding on my mattress. I could hear Chelsea snoring. That brought me back to reality. I forced my eyes open, relieved that it was a dream. Breathe in. Breathe out. My heart slowly relaxed to a normal rhythm. The alarm clock told me it was 3:42 in the morning. In six hours, I would be at the courthouse. I didn't want to just lay there for the next few hours conjuring up all kinds of wild scenarios

of what could possibly happen at court today. I needed sleep, to give my mind some rest.

I knew I would have no problem getting rest when this hearing was over. Either Mr. Rick would be in jail, or the world would have called me a liar once again. If called a liar, so be it. I had been called a liar before—I'd been called a whole lot worse than a liar. All I had to do was hold out one more year. One more year, and I would graduate. Maybe even get a scholarship. I'd pick the school the furthest away that offered me a scholarship. It was just that simple: a year from now I'd either be preparing to go to school on the other side of the county; or Mr. Rick will have killed me.

But for all the fear and anxiety I felt the night before, I was surprisingly calm by the time we arrived at the courthouse. I wondered if this was what God's grace felt like. Pastor Ewing preached on Sunday about "peace that surpasseth all understanding." A sense of calm when it seemed like all hell was breaking loose around you. That's how I felt. Like sitting in the middle of a burning building, and there I was, sitting there toasting marshmallows, singing *Kumbaya*.

I knew I was coasting on the blanket of prayers that were sent to cover me. They prayed for me at church, the track team prayed for me after yesterday's practice, Miss Angie and Chelsea prayed for me this morning; and, of course, I had been praying for myself. Maybe Flo Jo even knocked on Jesus' door and mentioned my name to him too. With all that prayer, I was confident that God was well aware of the situation. He had to be watching. And if He was watching, I had to trust that He would be looking out for me.

On the other hand, Miss Angie was a nervous wreck. Sitting beside me, the woman was guzzling down ginger ale like it was liquid crack. She brought along a copy of *Essence* magazine, but could barely read it for asking me so many questions.

"I got some peppermints in my bag, you want one?"

I shook my head. Too busy reading my history textbook and making little notes in my composition book.

Miss Angie persisted. "You sure? You barely touched your breakfast."

"I'm not hungry," I said, politely.

Miss Angie nodded and went back to flipping through the magazine. Thirty seconds passed. She paused again. "You nervous?"

I shook my head. It was the fourth time she asked me that question this morning, and my answer was the same every time. "I'm okay."

"Well, I'm not! I haven't been in a courthouse since I divorced Chelsea's father."

"Was it really bad?" I asked, finally looking up from my book.

"Honey, no divorce is ever good." Then Miss Angie nudged me with her shoulder, "Unless you're divorcing some celebrity and he has to give you half of his millions."

I laughed and she laughed with me, relaxing a little. Chelsea begged Miss Angie to let her come along, but Miss Angie told her this was no place for a child—though the room we were sitting in contradicted that. It was a special waiting area for child witnesses, and since I was technically still a child, this was where me and Miss Angie waited. In a room with adult chairs and teeny tiny little kid chairs, a toy box full of trucks and blocks and plastic Barbie dolls, which had all seen better days.

We arrived at nine o'clock on the dot, as ordered, and checked in with the clerk. Now there was nothing left to do but wait. Once all the parties to the case had checked in, we would be put on the list as ready to go. Miss Meagan showed up around 10:30. She was at a hearing for another client. I forgot that Miss Meagan had other clients, and felt a little twinge of jealousy that some other kid was occupying my social worker's time.

"Everybody's here," Miss Meagan announced, plopping down in the seat across from me. "We're just waiting our turn now. Are you nervous, Toya?"

That question again! I wanted to scream. Miss Angie patted my hand and spoke for me. "She's fine. I'm the one who's about to fall to pieces." She lowered her voice and said, discreetly, "And I have to use the ladies room."

"That's cuz you've been drinking all the ginger ale," I said with a smirk.

Miss Angie was about to protest, but saw her bottle of ginger ale was nearly empty. She polished off the rest in one gulp, just to spite me.

"It's okay, Angie," Miss Meagan said, "You go to the bathroom. We'll come and get you if they call the case."

Miss Angie looked back at me, as if needing my permission to leave my side. I nodded, and Miss Angie jumped to her feet. "Okay. I'll be right back. I can pee really fast when I have to." I laughed. That made her smile. She looked back at me one last time, as if she might never see me again, then scurried out of the room. We could hear the clip-clop of her heels against the marbled floors fade away.

Miss Meagan pulled out some file folders and started reading through them. I started to go back to my textbook but stopped to ask, "Is Mr. Childress here?"

"Yes," she said, slightly taken aback. "He hasn't been back here yet?"

I shook my head. Miss Meagan rolled her eyes. "Typical. He probably couldn't squeeze his ego into this little room."

"Miss Meagan!"

"What? It's true. I've never met someone so arrogant, so full of himself, so..."

"He's single."

"I'm not surprised! What woman would want to put up with that...that pompous—how'd you know he's single?"

"He wasn't wearing a ring."

Miss Meagan cocked her head. "Why were you—"

“For you. I thought he might be a good match for you.”

By the gleam in Miss Meagan’s eye, I could tell she was considering it for a second. Maybe even picturing herself in a wedding gown and Grady in a black tux. But with a shake of her head, Miss Meagan cancelled the wedding. “I wouldn’t go out with that man if he was the last man on earth and all the snakes were already married.”

The door opened abruptly, and the last man on earth walked in. Grady Childress, looking dapper in a sharp navy-blue suit, pale blue tie, and an attitude that said: ready for business. “Good morning, ladies. You’re up.”

My stomach dropped. “Huh?” I looked at Miss Meagan to say something.

She did. “Um, okay. We’re on our way. The foster mom just had to go to the ladies’ room.”

Grady shot Miss Meagan a look as if to say: *what does that have to do with anything?*

She clarified, “Toya needs her for emotional support—”

“I get it. But look, if you’re not there when they call you, they’re gonna move you down to the bottom of the list. You won’t get in until after lunch.”

Me and Miss Meagan looked at each other, not sure what to do. So, Grady told us what to do. “Look, come with me now, and I’ll come back and get the foster mom in a few minutes.”

We didn’t move. Neither one of us seemed to believe him.

Grady sighed. “I promise.”

“Okay.” Miss Meagan said, reluctantly. We stood up and gathered our things, both purposely dragging our feet in hopes that it would give Miss Angie enough time to get back.

But by the time we scooped up our jackets, books, file folders, magazines, and threw the ginger ale bottle away, Miss Angie still wasn’t back. Grady huffed and puffed as he waited, then held the door open and hustled us through the bustling hallways. Before stepping onto the elevator, I looked back one more time, hoping to spot my foster mother. As the elevator doors began to shut, someone stuck a hand in and kept the doors from closing. My heart leapt then quickly fell, when I saw it wasn’t Miss Angie, but some policeman hoping to hitch a ride on the elevator.

* * * * *

“Do you solemnly swear or affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

“I do.” My voice was barely audible. I cleared my throat and took a seat on the witness stand. Breathe in. Breathe out. I looked out into the gallery. Immediately, my eyes fell on my mother. Tamika was parked in the seat right behind her man, who was seated at the defense table. She was wearing a yellow sundress and a white sweater. With her arms folded over her swollen belly, she stared at me—stared at me like a junkyard dog, ready to pounce at

the slightest provocation. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

I tore my eyes away from my mother and found Miss Angie, who came racing into the courtroom five minutes ago, breathless and apologizing profusely. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I couldn't find the bathroom and ended up way on the other side of the building. Then, when I got back and saw you were gone, I didn't even bother with the elevator. Girl, I ran upstairs!"

Now, Miss Angie had caught her breath and was looking at me with reassuring eyes. If I could read minds, I'd hear Miss Angie saying: *"I've got your back, Toya. We're gonna get through this thing together."*

"Counselor, are you ready?" the judge said to Grady Childress. Judge Walter Brennan reminded me of Mr. Parkhurst, my ninth-grade biology teacher. He had the same slicked-back, salt and pepper hair, the same double chin, the same short, stubby fingers. I got an F in that class. I hoped I'd have better luck with Judge Brennan, but it wasn't looking good. I noticed that, like Mr. Parkhurst, the judge also had the same way of looking down over his glasses when he was annoyed. Right now, Judge Brennan was annoyed with Grady, who, instead of sitting at the prosecution table ready to question me, was standing at the door having an intense conversation with a short, round woman in a gray tweed suit. "Counselor?"

"Yes, your Honor," Grady said, making his way back to the table. "My apologies, we had a slight problem with a witness. But it's all straightened out now."

"I'm happy for you, but your witness doesn't look very happy."

At that moment, Grady looked at me. I looked at him with, *What are you doing? My life is at stake here*, eyes. He smiled and nodded graciously in my direction. "My apologies, LaToya."

I smiled back, and there was a spattering of chuckles in the gallery.

With all the formalities out of the way, the questioning began. Grady hit me with some softball questions about my background: my age, what school I went to, what grade I was in. I handled those rather easily. Grady even squeezed in a mention that I was currently on the track team, which made Judge Brennan's eyes light up.

"I was a track man in high school and college. What's your race?"

The question caught me momentarily off guard. "Uh...hundred meters."

"A speedster, huh? What's your best time?"

"11.23"

"Impressive." Just when I was about relax and feel a little more confident, the judge added, "Ya know, Excelsior used to be one of our biggest rivals. They beat us every time," he said, with a hint of forty-year-old bitterness in his voice. "Carry on, counsel."

We moved on from the appetizer and turned to the main course, the reason we were there in the first place: Mr. Rick Garnett's violation of the Protection from Abuse Order. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Grady introduced into evidence photocopies of my diary entries, then slowly, methodically, went through each encounter. Starting with the first encounter, when I first felt Mr. Rick's SUV creeping up behind me as I walked home from school. Grady had me go into the most, minute detail. *What was he wearing? What did he say? And then what did you say? How far away was he from you? What did you do next? Did you tell anyone? Why not?* On and on we went, through every conversation and every sighting during the five-month span. Occasionally, I would stop and take a sip of water. My throat felt like sandpaper. It seemed like I'd been up there for hours, but the clock said only forty-five minutes. I could feel Mr. Rick's eyes on me the whole time. I couldn't tell if he was trying to intimidate me or if he was getting off on reliving these moments through my eyes. When it was over, Grady said, "That's all I have for now, LaToya. Ms. McBride is going to ask you some questions."

Ms. McBride was Mr. Rick's lawyer. He ditched the slick, male lawyer with the fancy watch, for a woman—believing that a male lawyer might seem to be a bully against this teenage girl. Ms. Vanessa McBride, Esquire, was no delicate flower, however. She wore a black pantsuit, like a suit of armor. Her hair was red with a streak of gray, which was pulled back into a bun that must've been painfully tight, because she had a sour look on her face. Breathe in. Breathe out.

No softball questions from Ms. McBride, she went right for the jugular. "Have you ever told a lie, Ms. Young?"

Ms. Young? I had been prepared for that. Grady told me they'd probably call me Miss Young, to make me sound like a woman instead of a girl. I was even prepared for the lie question. It sounds bad to say I lied before, but if I said I'd never lied before, then everyone would think I was a liar so, "Yes, I've lied before."

"Under what circumstances? For what reasons have you lied in the past?"

"Um...To keep from getting into trouble, to keep from hurting someone's feelings. Fear."

"Fear?"

"Well, when I was younger, I had this one teacher who asked me if I was being abused, and I lied because Mr. Rick said he'd choke me to death if I—"

"Objection!" Ms. McBride scrambled to say when she realized what was about to come out of my mouth. "Nonresponsive." Nonresponsive meant the witness wasn't really answering the question asked, I learned.

"Objection overruled," Judge Brennan said, flatly. "You asked it, you deal with it."

I didn't know what just happened, but based on the little smirk on Grady's lips, it must've been good. The judge turned to me. "You may finish your answer."

"Oh, uh...I lied because Mr. Rick told me he'd choke me to death if I ever

told anybody about him molesting me.”

“So, you say,” Ms. McBride fired back, casting a tone of skepticism on my words. “But given the fact you are an admitted liar, why should we believe anything you say, Ms. Young?”

“I don’t have any reason to lie.”

“Oh, you don’t? One lie and you could get rid of this man, the man who’s been keeping you away from your mother.” She pointed in Mr. Rick’s direction and, as if on cue, he tried to look wounded. “You can get him out of your life once and for all.”

I sighed, “Honestly, Miss. I don’t think anything can keep my mom and Mr. Rick apart.”

“Because you’ve tried to split them up in the past and it didn’t work, right?”

“No. I’ve never tried to split them up.”

“Oh, you haven’t?” Miss McBride jumped right on that one. “So, you’ve never told your mother she’d be better off without my client? You’ve never told her that he’s no good for her and she should leave him?”

“Yes, but—”

“So, you *have* tried to break them up before. Another lie.”

I could feel my face getting warm.

“Your mom is in love with my client, and that pisses you off, doesn’t it?”

“No, that’s—”

“No? She’d rather have him than live with you, and that doesn’t make you angry?”

“No, because it’s not true.” I leaned forward, and felt my voice elevating a little. “We’ve been having visits. She asked my social worker to set up visits with me. She wants a relationship with me.”

Ms. McBride nodded in agreement, “And you’ve been enjoying these visits, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Tell us. What’s it been like, visiting with your mother?”

Grady sprang to his feet. “Objection. Irrelevant.”

“Overruled.”

Grady sat back down. He looked concerned about being overruled, but I couldn’t see the harm in the question.

“You may answer the question, young lady,” said Judge Brennan.

“Oh.” I had been so worried about what was worrying Grady that I almost forgot what the original question was. “How have I...”

“How have the visits with your mother been going?” Ms. McBride reminded me.

“Yes. They’ve been going well.”

“Very well?”

“Yes, very well.”

"In fact, they've been going so well, that the court approved unsupervised visits. You and your mother don't have to meet at the agency anymore, right? You can meet up at the mall, go to the movies without a social worker present. You must've really liked that. Am I right?"

"Uh huh. I-I mean, yes."

Ms. McBride's tone was real breezy now, like I was her best friend. "But as fabulous as those visits are, you know there's no way the court will ever allow you to live with your mother as long as my client is living with her. That has to bother you."

I shrugged. "I'm used to it by now."

"You're under oath, Ms. Young. You have to tell the truth, remember?"

"Objection!" Grady snapped.

"Sustained." Then Judge Brennan added, "Careful, counselor."

Ms. McBride toned it down some. "Sorry, your Honor." Back to me. "Truthfully, Ms. Young, you may be used to living apart from your mother, but that doesn't mean you have to like it. Am I right?"

"I never said I liked it, I just—"

"Of course, you don't like it. And you know the only way to get my client out of your mother's life—out of the house, so that you can move in—is to get him arrested, right?"

"I'm not lying," I said more forcefully.

Ms. McBride spoke more forcefully. "That wasn't my question. My question was: you know the only way to get back to your mother is to get my client arrested, right?"

"I don't know."

"Well, how else were you going to get him out of there?"

"I have no idea."

"Of course you do. You make up this wild story about my client, an established businessman and father-to-be, being so obsessed with you, that he would drive to your school in broad daylight, knowing that if he's caught he'd be thrown in jail."

Grady sprang to his feet. "Objection! Your Honor, counsel is testifying."

"Put a question mark on it, counselor," the judge said to Ms. McBride.

"Ms. Young, isn't the purpose of this entire charade is to get my client out of your life so you can get back with—"

"Asked and answered," Grady said.

"Sustained."

For a second, it seemed like everyone was talking but me; and I was getting lost in a hail of rapid-fire questions and objections.

Ms. McBride was quiet, flipping through a yellow notepad, seeming to pull her thoughts back together. When she set the notepad down, I knew she was ready for Round Two. "You love your mother, don't you?"

"Yes."

“Back when it was just the two of you, you all used to describe yourselves as Thelma and Louise. Is that correct?”

A few people in the gallery chuckled. I wanted to smile, but I looked at my mother and saw her sitting there so rigidly, I just sighed. “Yes.”

“You don’t like the fact that my client has come between you two, right?”

“Yes.”

“You hate the fact that you’re going to have a little brother soon, and you won’t be in the house with him to watch him grow up?”

“Yes.”

“How badly do you want to move back in with your mother, Ms. Young?”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to answer that question.

“Ms. Young?” Ms. McBride looked to the judge to give me a little nudge.

“Answer the question, Ms. Young.”

I looked at Grady for help, and he nodded, indicating it was okay for me to answer—but that wasn’t the kind of help I was looking for. “I-I...I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You don’t know how badly you want to live with your mother?”

I didn’t answer. Couldn’t answer.

In that moment, Ms. McBride’s stony face brightened, as if she just stumbled onto something. “You *do* want to live with your mother, don’t you, Miss Young?”

My heart was now racing. Why was I hesitating? Why couldn’t I just spit out the word, yes. That’s what they were all expecting me to say. A low murmur grew out of the gallery. *What kind of girl doesn’t want to live with own mother? She must be as evil as they say she is*, I imagined them whispering.

Ms. McBride tried one more time. “Ms. Young do you want to live with your mother?” She was practically commanding me to answer, but Tamika answered for me.

“She don’t have to answer, cuz I don’t want her!” Tamika shouted. “I don’t want nothing to do with her trifling ass!”

The low murmur swelled into an uproar.

The *bam, bam, bam* of Judge Brennan’s gavel silenced the room. He narrowed his eyes on Tamika. “I will not tolerate that kind of behavior in my courtroom. You get one warning and that’s it.”

Mr. Rick turned around and said something that got Tamika’s attention because she obediently calmed herself. During the commotion, I took the opportunity to breathe. I was ready to answer the question now. I turned to the judge. “Your Honor, it’s not that I don’t love my mother. I just think we get along better as friends.”

And suddenly, I found myself having a conversation with Judge Brennan. “So, when you went on these visits with your mother, you weren’t doing so with the hopes of being reunited with her?” he asked.

"No. I just liked spending time with her. I already accepted the fact that she and Mr. Rick are gonna be together. I just wanted us to find a way to be friends, or something."

The judge turned back to Ms. McBride, "You may continue, counselor."

Ms. McBride smoothed the sides of her hair, straightened her suit, and shifted her approach. "Did you tell your mother that you didn't want to live with her?"

"Uh...no."

"So, all this time she's been coming out to see you, jumping through hoops to regain custody of you, and you never even wanted to live with her?"

I hadn't thought about it that way. "I didn't know until now."

"You didn't know, or you didn't want to risk the chance of losing all of the attention your mother's been showering on you," Ms. McBride's tone turned all huffy. "I mean, she's bought you gifts, right?"

"Yes."

"Cell phone, jewelry, clothes?"

"Yes."

"All that would be gone if she found out the truth?"

"Objection!" Grady was back on his feet. "I fail to see the relevance of this line of questioning, Your Honor."

"The relevance is," Ms. McBride interjected, indignantly, "the witness has a thirst for attention. And this stunt is just one in a long line of efforts to draw attention to herself."

Judge Brennan rocked back in his chair, quietly debating his decision in his mind. "I'll allow it."

Grady wanted to debate the matter some more. "Your Honor, I—"

"I've made my decision, counselor. Continue Ms. McBride."

Ms. McBride looked at Grady like she was about to stick out her tongue and yell "nah, nah, nah, nah, boo, boo." Instead, she asked me, "What about it, Ms. Young? Did you like all the attention your mother showered on you?"

"I never asked her to buy me anything. I just liked spending time with her."

"And of course, that'll come to an end when she has this baby. That means less attention for you, right?"

"I don't care," I said.

"Oh, you don't? Come on, an attention lover like you?"

"Objection, badgering the witness," Grady said, sounding really annoyed.

"Sustained."

"You love attention don't you, Ms. Young? You'd do anything to have all eyes on you, am I right?"

"No."

That was when Ms. McBride dramatically announced, "Oh! So, you didn't allow yourself to be videotaped stripping—"

Oh no! Did she just say what I thought she said? She must have. The way Grady jumped to his feet spilling papers to the ground, she must have said that one word that I had grown to despise: video.

“Objection! Objection!” Grady slammed his palm on the table, his beautiful blonde hair fell out of place. “Your Honor, counsel is trying to introduce evidence that is wholly irrelevant and inflammatory.”

“It is absolutely relevant! And obviously, Ms. Young didn’t think it was inflammatory when she did it. Or maybe she did it because she wanted to be inflammatory.” Ms. McBride was dangling a DVD in her French manicured fingers like the golden ticket. Not only was that video still swimming around on the internet, but Ms. McBride was able to catch it and burn it onto a DVD. She knew she had me right where she wanted me. She would show the video and everybody, including Mr. Rick, would see me for who I really was. Judge Brennan would scowl at me from the top of his glasses and throw the case out immediately, offering Mr. Rick a huge apology.

But Grady wasn’t going down without a fight. “Your Honor, she was fourteen years old! This video would serve no other purpose than to further humiliate this, already traumatized, child.”

“Now, who’s being inflammatory?” Miss McBride said, rolling her eyes. “This video is further evidence that the witness craves attention and will do anything to get it.”

“You have a point, there, Miss McBride.” Judge Brennan said, in deep contemplation. I could feel my stomach clenching. I forgot all about breathing. The judge continued, “On the other hand, the video could be seen as evidence of childhood abuse.” The glasses slid down. “You would agree that this kind of sexual acting out is often associated with children who have been sexually abused.”

“Your Honor, with all due respect, I am not an expert in child sexual abuse,” Ms. McBride said, defiantly.

“I see.” The judge’s glasses seemed to slide even further down to the tip of his nose. “Are you saying that you would like a continuance so you can bring in an expert to help us decide if a fourteen-year-old girl on a sexually provocative video may have been doing so as a result of a past history of abuse?”

Ms. McBride’s shoulders slumped. She absolutely was not saying that. The last thing she wanted was to further delay this hearing to find an expert to answer a question everyone knew the answer to anyway, which would only serve to annoy the Court and guarantee her client a jail sentence. “No, Your Honor, I’m willing to concede that point,” she said reluctantly.

“Thank you, counselor. And as such, I’m going to find the video is inadmissible.”

“Your Honor, I don’t think—”

“Forget it, Ms. McBride. The video is not relevant.”

When I heard those words, I wanted to cheer. *The video is not relevant!* Finally, someone agreed with me. Not just anybody: The Honorable Judge Walter J. Brennan had put it on the record: the video was irrelevant. I felt like leaning over and asking the court reporter to print a copy of the judge's words for me. That way, if anybody else tried to throw that damn video in my face, I could throw the judge's words in their face.

Ms. McBride must have been holding onto the video as her ace in the hole, because when the judge told her she couldn't use it, she pouted. She packed up her yellow notepads and pens, then flopped back in her seat. "I'm done with this witness."

When Grady informed the judge that he no more questions for me either, Judge Brennan simply nodded to me and said, "The witness may step down."

The witness was stunned. I needed a moment to collect myself. I survived. Vanessa McBride, Esquire, had put me through the blender, and I was still breathing. When I stood up, my legs felt numb, my mouth was dry, but I was still standing. I could feel all eyes on me as I made my way back to my seat, but I was especially aware of my mother's eyes following me. They were cursing me with every step. I refused to look at her. I took my seat between my foster mother and my social worker. They both squeezed my hands and whispered, "You were great."

Grady asked the judge for a five-minute recess and slipped out of the courtroom with the woman in the gray tweed suit. He had been a pit bull when I needed him to be. I was grateful for that. But I still wasn't sure how the trial was going to go. I told the truth, and the truth was backed up by my diary, but Mr. Rick's lawyer was good. If I had been listening out in the gallery to my own testimony, I would've thought I made up the story for attention too. In a minute, it would be the defense's turn. I could picture my mother waddling up to the witness stand to tell Judge Brennan about all the crazy things I'd done to get attention. She would cry a bucket of tears and use them to paint me as a manipulative brat and Mr. Rick as the man who rescued her from a life of misery.

No sense in worrying about it now. I'd done all I could do. I told the truth. Controlled my temper—for the most part. Now, it was in God's hands.

The door opened. Grady sauntered back in. He returned to the prosecution table and withdrew another file from his briefcase.

"Counselor, are you ready to rest your case?"

"Actually, no. I have one more witness."

CHAPTER 32

As Grady Childress shuffled papers around at the prosecution table, the woman in the tight, grey tweed suit strutted in. I later learned that she was also a prosecutor, Reba Zukowski, who just happened to be standing in the hallway when Grady Childress came in this morning all stressed out and amped up on Starbuck's coffee. Out of pity for Grady, Reba volunteered to do some of his legwork for him while he handled three other hearings this morning. The legwork had to do with this mysterious witness that kept Grady racing back and forth throughout the hearing. Now, I understood why.

Trailing in right behind Miss Zukowski was the face that always made my heart soar. Terry. Even in the middle of a courtroom with my future on the line, the sight of Terry erased all other thoughts from my mind. It took me a moment to remember where I was and why I was there. And when I did remember, I also knew why Terry was there.

"Did you know he was gonna be here?" I whispered to Miss Angie.

She shook her head, looking just as puzzled as I was.

"Your Honor, the prosecution calls Terrence Miller to the stand," Grady announced, and Terry made his way to the front of the courtroom. He wore khaki pants, a crisp white buttoned-down shirt, and I could tell that he had just gotten a haircut. Mr. Kevin walked in right behind Terry. He patted his son on the shoulder and took a seat behind Miss Angie, who turned and was about to explode on Mr. Kevin with a barrage of questions.

But he raised his hand and cut her off, "I'll explain later." He gestured toward the witness stand, indicating to Miss Angie that his sole purpose for being there was to watch over his son. And he wasn't about to let anything get in the way of that. Terry took his seat in the spotlight with a room full of hungry eyes waiting to digest everything he had to say.

I noticed that, from the moment Terry walked into the room, my mother was leaning forward whispering in the ear of Mr. Rick's attorney. I knew what

she was doing—spilling all of my secrets. All the things I shared with Tamika about my feelings for Terry. Private things we discussed on the phone, over hot chocolate at Dunkin Donuts, and at the nail salon when we got our pedicures. Secret things that would absolutely mortify me if they were ever uttered in front of Terry—especially in front of Terry and a bunch of strangers. It would all be out there soon. Ms. McBride whipped out her yellow notepad and was writing just as fast as Tamika could dish it out.

Grady began his questions. That made me tear my eyes away from my mom and back to Terry.

“Can you state your name for the record, please?”

“Terrence C. Miller.” There was no fear in Terry’s voice. No hesitation. No sign of nerves.

“And how old are you, Terrence?” Grady asked.

“Seventeen.”

Seventeen? I forgot Terry had a birthday not too long ago. Here he was testifying on my behalf, and I hadn’t even bought him a birthday card.

“Do you know the complainant in this case? LaToya Young?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know her?”

“We go to the same school. Excelsior.”

Judge Brennan interrupted. “You’re not on the track team too, are you?”

The room filled with giggles and Terry looked as if he had no idea why that was so funny. But he smiled and said politely, “No, sir.”

“Good,” said the judge, “Carry on, counselor.”

Grady carried on. “Are you friends with LaToya?”

Terry thought it over for a second. “...No.”

My heart sank. It was the truth, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt. The fact that it was true made it hurt even worse.

Grady asked, “Were you ever friends with LaToya?”

“Uh...yes. We used to be friends, but we stopped getting along; so we kinda just stay away from each other now.”

Tamika lunged forward and grabbed Ms. McBride as if she thought of something else juicy to tell her. The scraping of Ms. McBride’s pen against the yellow pad could be heard all over the courtroom.

Grady shot her a look, then turned his attention back to Terry. “I see. So how long would you say it’s been since you and LaToya have been friends?”

Terry sat up straight in his chair, as if he were trying to get it down to the very day, hour, minute, and second. “I’d say a couple of weeks before Christmas.”

“Ok, so it’s been nearly six months since—”

“Objection!” Ms. McBride barked, not even bothering to stand up. “I fail to see the relevance of this line of questions.”

“Goes to bias, Your Honor,” said Grady. “Just trying to establish that the

witness is not here out of some loyalty or friendship with the complainant.”

“Objection overruled.”

Grady moved on. “So, it’s been a little under six months since you’ve been on friendly terms with LaToya. Does that sound right?”

Terry nodded. “That sounds about right.”

Six months, huh? I repeated to myself. Me and Terry had actually been enemies longer than we had been friends.

“Okay, but despite the fact that you are no longer friends with LaToya, you recently contacted my office because you believed you had information that was crucial to this case.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay. Tell the court what you know.”

Terry shifted in his chair and said in his most confident voice, “I saw that man at our school trying to talk to Toya.”

Another swell of grumbling from the gallery, when it died down Grady said, “What man? Is he in this courtroom now?”

Terry pointed in Mr. Rick’s direction. “Right there. The defendant.”

“Let the record reflect that the witness has identified the defendant, Richard Garnett, as the one he observed at school trying to talk to the complainant,” Grady announced, seemingly to the entire courtroom, then turned his attention back to Terry. “Now, Terrence, do you remember when this incident took place that you’re referring to?”

“December 23rd of last year.”

“You sound so sure,” Grady said. “Are you sure of that date?”

“It was two days before Christmas. The last day of school before winter break. I’m positive.”

Grady nodded. “I see. And can you tell us where you were when you first observed the defendant at your school? Where you were and where he was.”

“I was in the parking lot, and he was in the parking lot.”

“And what time of day was it?”

Terry thought hard, trying to be precise again. “Um...around three. School had just let out, and it was winter break, so there weren’t a lot of kids hanging around.”

“Okay. And what were you doing in the parking lot at that time of the day?”

“I, uh...” Terry suddenly grew a sheepish look on his face. “I was looking at a tree.”

Grady did a double-take. “I’m sorry; did you just say you were looking at a tree?”

Snickers from the gallery.

“Yeah. See, I’m in the drama club at school and we—well, over the break, we had to prepare this monologue for when we came back to school...” Terry explained that the monologue had to do with each of them portraying

an inanimate object and telling a story through the eyes of that object. Terry had the idea of using the big oak tree in the parking lot, because he imagined that tree had seen a lot over the years and could tell some wild stories. "...Anyway, I was out there looking at the tree and trying to come up with ideas for my monologue when I saw Toya out there in the parking lot with the defendant."

Grady's tone was now deliberate. He wanted to make sure everything Terry was about to say had its full impact. "When you say, you saw LaToya and the defendant in the parking lot, what were they doing?"

"Talking. Actually, he was doing all the talking."

"What was LaToya doing?"

"She was just standing there." Terry shifted in his seat and, for the first time, looked uncomfortable.

"Okay and from where you were standing could you see her face?"

"No. I could see his face."

"Had you ever seen him before?"

"No, but I've heard LaToya talk about—"

"Objection! Objection!" Ms. McBride chirped. This time she sprang to her feet. "Hearsay."

"Sustained."

"You can't tell us what anyone said, Terrence," Grady explained. "But uh, continue with your testimony. You said you saw the defendant and LaToya talking. How long did you observe them talking?"

"I don't know how long they were standing there before I saw them, but I'd say I was watching them for like, 30 seconds, while I walked over to my motorcycle."

"And then what happened?"

"I...uh...I walked to my motorcycle, got on, and was about to pull off when I heard Toya raise her voice. I looked up and saw the defendant had grabbed her by the arm."

At those last words, I could feel Miss Angie stiffen. She must have been picturing this scene as Terry described it.

"How did he grab her?" Grady asked, then turned to Judge Brennan. "If I may, Your Honor, can the witness come down and demonstrate?"

With the judge's permission, Terry stepped down from the witness stand and demonstrated the death lock grip with which Mr. Rick held my arm, using Grady as a model. He returned to the witness stand.

"And what was LaToya doing when the defendant grabbed her arm?" Grady asked.

"She just stood there. She didn't move. She didn't say anything. She was like a statue. Finally, I just called her name to see if she was okay, but she still didn't move. I said her name like three times before she looked at me."

Suddenly, I felt a chill, like it was December 23rd again and I was standing

outside in the school parking lot, fearful that Mr. Rick was about to drag me to his truck and drive me to my death. Terry's recall was perfect. He had every little detail committed to memory. He remembered all the foul words Mr. Rick had spoken and I had blocked out of my mind. *"Your ass is still mine! I'm still the man, ya hear! And if I want it, I can come and take it anytime I want, you got that?"* Even though I was standing there when Mr. Rick said these words, it was as if I was hearing them for the first time. I didn't recall hearing anything but the sound of my own heart thumping in my chest and Terry's voice when he called me back to consciousness.

"What did you do after the defendant drove away?" asked Grady.

"I asked Toya if she needed a ride home, and she nodded her head yes."

"She nodded, yes?"

"Yeah, she didn't talk, and she wouldn't look at me. She was like a zombie," Terry said, speaking more slowly, more purposefully now. "I had to put the helmet on her. And I darn near had to pick her up and put on my bike. And then I took her home."

Grady nodded, gesturing for Terry to continue. "And what happened when you got her home?"

Terry let out a long, deep sigh and shifted in his chair some more. "I uh... well, when I stopped the bike, I waited for her hop off, but she didn't. She just kept holding on to me. I could hear her sniffing and stuff, so I sat there and let her, you know, get it all out. We must've been sitting there for a good five minutes. Then I realized she wasn't wearing any gloves. It was like twenty degrees outside. Her hands were like ice. I started rubbing them to warm them up." He stopped and looked at Grady, not sure how much he wanted him to say.

"Did you call the police?"

"No."

"Why not, Terrence?"

Terry hung his head. "When she finished crying, I told her that we should call the police. She refused. I told her then, at least, tell her foster mom. But, she kept saying no. I mean, she was so, so...desperate. I didn't know what to do."

"What do you mean by desperate, Terry?"

He shrugged, still trying to sort it out in his mind. "I don't know. Her eyes. I never seen her look like that before. She looked more scared than when that man had grabbed her. And then she pushed me and told me to go away."

"She pushed you?"

"Yeah, she pushed me." There was still a twinge of pain in Terry's voice. I had to look away from him. "I didn't know what else to say, so I left. Look, I know it was wrong. I shouldn't have listened to her. I should've told someone a whole lot sooner, but I didn't know what was really going on. I

didn't know who that man was. I knew she was in foster care, so I just figured maybe he was a family member, or something, and she didn't want to get him in trouble."

Grady waited an extra second, until he was sure Terry was finished with his answer. "So, what made you change your mind and eventually come forward?"

"A few weeks ago, it was all over the school how Toya had been stalked by—"

"Objection!"

"Sustained."

Grady asked his question another way. "Is it safe to say, that you learned about this hearing and the facts leading up to this hearing, and that changed your mind?"

"Yes. When I heard what had happened to Toya, I knew that the dude I saw with her at Christmas had to be the same guy. But I wasn't sure if I should say anything. I mean, I'd waited so long, I wasn't sure if I'd be helping Toya or hurting her by speaking up now. So finally, I talked to my dad about it, and we decided it was best if I came in and told what I knew."

"And there is absolutely no doubt in your mind that the man sitting at that table over there is the same man you saw standing outside your school, two days before Christmas," Grady said, dramatically.

"I'm positive that's him."

"Positive? I mean, you already said you had never seen the man before that day, how can you be so sure?" Grady asked, as if he didn't already know the answer.

Suddenly, a confident gleam flickered in Terry's eyes, as he announced, "I got it on video."

And the courtroom erupted in gasps and loud chatter.

I sat straight up and turned to Miss Meagan. "What did he say?"

"I think he said he had a video," she whispered back, stunned.

At the defense table, Mr. Rick was glaring at his lawyer, demanding answers. It was the most animated he had been throughout the entire hearing. Tamika rubbed his back in a vain attempt to calm him down. The judge banged his gavel. That quieted the buzz in the room.

"Quiet. Quiet." He slid his glasses down on his nose and looked at Terry. "Son, you say you have a video of the defendant?"

"Yes sir." Terry was smiling, feeling so proud of himself. "May I explain?"

"Please do."

"Okay, well, when I was studying the tree for my monologue, I figured I should take a picture of it to help me get into my character. Anyway, I had my phone with me, so I decided to make a video of the tree, the way the branches moved when the wind blew through it. I was still holding the phone in my hand when I saw the commotion going on between Toya and the defendant.

And something told me to video that, too. But then when he grabbed her, I stopped taping it cuz I thought I should help her.”

Grady held up a cell phone that bore a striking resemblance to Terry’s fancy phone. “Is this the phone you used to tape the incident?”

“Yes. That’s my phone.”

“If you knew you had the incident on your phone, why didn’t you come forward sooner?”

“I didn’t know I still had it on my phone,” Terry said. “After Toya told me not to say anything, I deleted it—I thought I deleted it, but I really hadn’t.” Terry looked somewhat embarrassed as he admitted, “Look, I’m terrible with this phone. I mean, it has all this stuff on it, and half of it I still don’t know how to use.” There were a few nods and grins in the gallery from people who could apparently, relate to being technologically challenged like Terry. “Toya was the one who showed me how to use the stupid phone—uh back when we were still friends. I thought I had deleted it, but really I had saved it without a title, along with a whole bunch of other videos with no titles. And after I learned about the hearing, I went back through my phone on the chance that it still might be there. And it was.”

“Your Honor, we have had a copy of the video from this phone transferred to this DVD and, at this point, we would seek permission to show the video—”

“Objection! Objection! Objection!” Ms. McBride bellowed, and that signaled the beginning of a knock-down-drag-out fight between defense and prosecution. Back and forth they went, and I found herself, once again lost in a sea of legal jargon. I was still blown away by the fact that a video even existed. A video that would actually help me, not drag me down. Thank God for Terry and his brilliant mind that was just too darn smart to understand the simple things like how to delete a video from his cell phone.

Past experience had taught me to become an expert in cell phone videos; but I hadn’t had a chance to pass this little skill on to Terry. And for the first time, I had a reason to feel grateful for the fight that ended my friendship with Terry, as well as my cell phone tutoring sessions.

Now, I just prayed that the rest of the world would see this video—or at least the judge. Right now, it wasn’t looking so good for me. Ms. McBride was pacing back and forth, railing against this great travesty of justice, the bun on the top of her head bobbing up and down, stamping exclamation points at the end of her sentences. Grady was trying to plead his case, but the ferocious lady lawyer wouldn’t let him get a word in edgewise. As if the sheer volume of words would tip the scales of justice in her favor.

After a few grueling minutes of debate, Judge Brennan called for a time-out. “Here’s what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna go back to my chambers and watch the video. Any further arguments can be made then.”

With that, Judge Brennan, Grady Childress, Vanessa McBride, Rick

Garnett, a guard, and the court reporter all filed out of a door behind the bench and disappeared into the judge's chambers. Terry was still on the witness stand. I tried to catch his eye, but the bailiff was leaning in front of Terry, showing off his cell phone.

I felt a chill coming from my right side. I realized Miss Angie had been unusually quiet. She was obviously still processing the stunning testimony Terry just revealed. I could tell that Miss Angie had been wounded by it. All of that drama going on outside her door, and she had no clue. So many secrets.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Miss Angie," I said quietly. "That was back before I started letting you in. If it happened now, I would've told you. I swear I would."

She smiled weakly and patted my hand, "I know you would, Honey." We sat in silence while people all around us chatted as if at a cocktail party and not the trial of my life. It was killing me that Miss Angie was being so quiet. I didn't know what was going through the woman's mind. Just to make a little small talk, I started to ask Miss Angie what she thought of Ms. McBride's hair, but the door to the judge's chambers flew open. The court reporter, the guard, Mr. Rick, Vanessa McBride and Grady Childress, all filed back into the courtroom.

Mr. Rick looked pissed. He stomped back to his seat, sat down, and pounded his fist onto the table. Tamika looked very concerned. She reached out and touched his shoulder, but he wrenched it away. I saw Grady pull some papers out of his briefcase and start writing. A moment later, Judge Brennan walked out of his chambers and slid back into his plush leather chair. He turned to Terry and said, "Thank you for your patience, son. You may step down."

Terry looked unsure of what he was supposed to do next. He hesitated, but he did stand up and step down from the witness stand. He took a seat beside his father. He didn't look up, but fidgeted with the cuffs on his crisp, white shirt. I took that as a cue that he was not to be bothered, not to be spoken to, even if it was just to say thank you. I respected his wishes and resisted the urge to turn around and hug him.

Judge Brennan spoke, "Will the defendant please rise?"

Mr. Rick sighed, then reluctantly rose to his feet. Ms. McBride stood by his side, head held high.

The judge continued, "Richard Garnett. It is my understanding that you now wish to withdraw your plea of not guilty and plead guilty to the charge. Is that correct?"

"Yes," he mumbled.

"Speak up, Mr. Garnett."

"I said, yeah."

"No!" A loud wail came from just behind Mr. Rick. Tamika just burst

into tears, while the rest of the courtroom erupted with cheers.

When the ruckus settled, Judge Brennan sentenced Mr. Rick to six months in jail, then proceeded to inform him of his rights. He ordered that the defendant be taken away in handcuffs.

Miss Meagan jumped to her feet like a high school cheerleader shouting, "You did it, Toya. You did it!"

Everyone was on their feet, embracing and celebrating. Not me. I was still in shock. The words really hadn't sunk in. Had he really said he was guilty? Had the judge really ordered Mr. Rick to be put in jail for six months?

Miss Angie leaned over and looked into my face, there were tears brimming in her eyes. "Toya? You okay?"

"Uh huh," I replied, "I just...I can't believe it."

"Believe it, Honey. That monster is going to jail."

She pulled me to my feet and embraced me tightly. I peered over Miss Angie's shoulder and could see my mother. She was weeping and fawning all over Mr. Rick, saying, "It'll be okay, baby. I'll be okay. I'm so sorry."

The guard allowed her to give him a kiss goodbye, and her arms had to be pried from around his neck. "No! Please, don't take him," she begged. "He didn't do it! He didn't do it! He—"

I never thought I'd see the day when Mr. Rick would be wearing handcuffs. He was led out through a side door and off to a blue school bus that would take him to his new home for the next six months. Tamika's loud sobs shook the walls of the courtroom. It pained me to see my mother in pain. Even more painful was the way her eyes switched from pain to pure hatred when they finally locked in on me.

"You bitch!" Tamika said, seething. "You lying bitch! I oughta choke the shit outta your conniving ass!" She lunged for me, dragging two guards with her. Arms flailing, eyes wild with rage, Tamika knocked over chairs and shoved people out of the way just to get her hands on me. She was prepared to fight me, her own daughter, like I was the other woman who had just stolen her man. She was ready to throw punches. Kick and scratch. And the fullness of her belly with child was not going to stop her. When Tamika was within five feet of me, Miss Angie blocked her path and hid me behind her.

"Oh, you wanna piece of me, foster bitch? Come on!"

Miss Angie just stared at her with a look of deep pity in her eyes. Then to my amazement, Miss Angie turned her back on Tamika. "Let's go, Toya," she said, coolly, "You don't have to listen to this."

I looked at Miss Angie, then looked at my mother, who was now being restrained by three guards. I picked up my jacket and walked out the door, flanked by my foster mother and my social worker. I could hear Tamika, shrieking hysterically, "You want her, foster bitch? You can have her. What courtroom do I go to? I'll sign over custody right now." None of us responded to her. We kept walking as she ranted. "See if you feel the same

way when she's trying to sleep with your man! Then you'll be begging me to take her back."

The door to the courtroom shut behind us. We were halfway down the hall, but could still hear Tamika's shrill voice, shrieking, "She's a liar! She's a trifling, slut liar! I hate you, LaToya! I swear to God, I hate you!"

Walking towards the elevator, I spotted Grady Childress. He had his phone out again, but when he looked up and caught a glimpse of me, he smiled.

"There she is. There's my hero."

I didn't know what to say to that. I certainly wasn't anybody's hero. Finally, I just said, "Thank you, Grady."

"See? I'm not such a bad guy, am I?"

"Nah, you're all right." I gave him a big hug.

Grady turned to Miss Angie. "You should be proud of this one, ma'am. She's a real fighter."

Miss Angie rested her hand on my shoulder. "I'm very proud of her."

"Yeah, I did my best to prep her for that cross-examination. Some people thought I was a little too rough on her," and he winked at Miss Meagan, who quickly looked away, annoyed. Grady continued, "But I knew she could handle it. You saw how she had opposing counsel so frazzled? The way she was flipping through those papers, I thought she was gonna start making paper airplanes."

He let out a loud, goofy laugh that I would've never expected to come out of such a beautiful face. Me and Miss Angie both gave polite smiles, while Miss Meagan had no patience for the man.

"Okay, well. If you'll excuse us, we really must be going now," Miss Meagan said, huffily. She pushed past Grady. Me and Miss Angie followed her, leaving Mr. Childress with his jaw hanging open.

"Thanks again," I said, giving him a tiny wave goodbye.

Outside, Miss Meagan and me said our goodbyes. She had a school meeting for another client, and she was already running late. Me and Miss Angie walked on in silence, both separately reliving each moment of the hearing, every insult hurled by my mother. When we reached the parking lot, I spotted a food truck on the corner. My stomach let out a little purr, as if to say: *hey, remember me.*"

"Is it okay if I go get a pretzel?"

"Sure. You must be starving by now," Miss Angie said.

She started to pull out some money, but I shook my head. "That's okay. I've got money. You want one?"

"Um...Yeah. With mustard, please?"

This truck must have been the only food within five miles around the

courthouse, because as I approached it, I saw six other people jump in line. I started to turn around, but my stomach would not allow it. Luckily, the truck only seemed to sell pretzels, hot dogs, chips, and sodas, so the line moved quickly. Before I knew it, I was devouring a soft pretzel that tasted like the greatest pretzel that had ever been made. "Mmm! This must be what soft pretzels taste like in heaven," I mumbled to myself. I finished off my pretzel standing right there at the truck, then squirted some brown spicy mustard on the one that would belong to Miss Angie.

I was about to head back to the car when something caught my eye. At the corner, a familiar car. Mr. Kevin's car. I knew it by the bumper sticker that said: *My Son is an Honor Student at Excelsior Academy*. A bumper sticker that always irked me. What was the point? Were the police supposed to see it and not write him a ticket if he was speeding? "Sorry sir, we were gonna write you a ticket cuz you were going 100 and the speed limit was 55, but we didn't see the bumper sticker. Didn't mean to bother you and your super-smart son. Have a nice day." I used to love teasing Terry about it, then watch him cover his face with embarrassment.

As I got closer to the car, I could see Terry sitting in the passenger seat. I would recognize the back of his head anywhere. I didn't see Mr. Kevin, though. Then I looked toward the parking lot and spotted him leaning up against Miss Angie's car, running his mouth. I took a deep breath. This was my moment. I was going to make things right with Terry now. I had envisioned this moment for so long, but hadn't expected it to come today. Whatever, I knew I needed to jump through this window of opportunity before it shut in my face.

My heart was racing, but I forced my legs to keep walking. Then I was standing beside the car. Terry was playing a game on his cell phone, one of the first lessons I taught him. He must have been engrossed in the game, because he didn't seem to notice me standing in the reflection of his side-view mirror. Breathe in. Breathe out. I raised my hand and tapped lightly on the window.

Slowly, the window glided down. Terry looked up at me. I couldn't read his face. Was he happy to see me? The fact that he didn't immediately hop into the driver's seat, start the car, and drive off, encouraged me to speak up.

"Hey," I said, trying to sound cool.

"Hey." His voice deflated, like he had just been drained of all energy.

"Um...I just wanted to say thank you for coming down here and testifying for me like that. I really appreciate it."

Terry shrugged. "It was the right thing to do."

"I know. Just like it's the right thing for me to say thank you, so thank you." Calm down, girl. Don't try to be too cute. He might take it the wrong way. "And I want to say that...I'm, I'm sorry for pushing you and cursing at you that night. I was just trying to get rid of you. I-I mean, I was

just...uh...scared that Mr. Rick would drive by and do something to you. I didn't want anything to happen to you."

Terry nodded. "I kinda figured that out, eventually."

I let out a nervous laugh. I didn't know why I was laughing. Terry wasn't laughing. He sat there very quietly, waiting for me to say what I had to say, then go away. I was quiet too. Was it the pretzel that made my throat so dry? The game on his phone beeped, letting him know that it was about to shut down. And since I wasn't saying anything, he was about to go back to playing when I spoke some more.

"And, and...I wanted to say I'm sorry for the other thing to. For yelling at you about Emily and stuff. I shouldn't have said what I said."

"Apology accepted."

I expected him to say more. I waited for him to say more. He didn't. To my amazement, his fingers slipped back to the video game. I couldn't believe it. Here I was pouring my heart out to him and all he could think about was some stupid game? I slapped my hand over the phone, blocking his view. "That's it? Is that all you have to say to me?"

Terry looked at me through his weary eyes. "What?"

"I just apologized to you."

"I know. And I accepted your apology."

"And you said some hurtful things to me, too. Don't you think you should apologize too?" I demanded.

"Apologize for what? For telling the truth?"

"Come on, Terry! Why are you acting like this? Why can't we get past this and be friends again?"

"We are past this. I am over it. And if you need me to apologize so you can get over it too, then fine, I apologize."

"Good."

Then he added, almost defiantly, "But I don't want to be friends."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" His defiance turned to pure exasperation. "It's too much, Toy! Too much drama. Too much stress. Just...too much! And I don't need it in my life."

"Why, cuz your life is so exciting without it?" I fired back.

Terry thought for a second. "Actually, it is."

"Oh, it is?" I wound up my neck and prepared to really let Terry have it. "Okay, you want me outta your life. That's cool. I'll stay out. I'm glad to be out, baby! The only reason I said anything was cuz I felt sorry for you and your old cornball life. You think I've got nothing better to do than..."

But I wouldn't get to finish that sentence. Terry pushed a button and the window slowly glided back up.

"Don't close the—you can't just shut the..." I slapped my palm against the window out of frustration. "Terry! Terry! Ugh! You are such a pain in

the—" I fired a few more cuss words in his direction, none of which he heard, because Terry cranked up the stereo.

Fuming. I was fuming! Terry had me so worked up, I wanted to explode. And he was just sitting there, playing his video game, not a care in the world, while I stayed heated. If there had been a brick nearby, I would have smashed that window. Man, that would've felt good! But I didn't have a brick, or a baseball bat. All I had in my hand was Miss Angie's soft pretzel.

A second later, the pretzel wasn't in my hand. It was sliding down the window, smearing a trail of brown, spicy mustard down the window and then down the door. Before that pretzel hit the ground, I was marching back to the parking lot. What just happened? I started out wanting to make peace and found myself in the middle of World War III. I didn't get it. Who was that boy? Whatever happened to the sweet boy who used to walk me home from school, text me about Animal Planet specials on TV, and give me little pep talks when I got frustrated with geometry? Where did he go, and who decided to replace him with that mean, insensitive jackass behind the mustard-stained window?

Well, at least now I had the truth. Actually, the truth had been there all along, I just refused to see it. Terrence C. Miller was a loser, and it was about time I accepted it. It's like Miss Angie said: a frog will eventually show its warts.

By the time I reached the car, Miss Angie and Mr. Kevin had wrapped up their conversation. He congratulated me on my victory at court, gave Miss Angie a hug, then headed back to his car. Miss Angie climbed into the car. So did I, showing no signs of my blowout with Terry. I slipped on my seatbelt and waited for the engine to start. The car remained silent. I looked up and saw Miss Angie staring at me.

"What?" I said.

"Where's my pretzel?"

"Oh, that." I looked down at the dab of mustard splattered on my jacket. "I dropped it."

CHAPTER 33

Nineteen minutes after the hearing ended in Philadelphia, cell phones vibrated 30 miles away at Excelsior Academy. I sent a text message that simply read “I won,” which I wrote in shorthand as, “*i 1.*” That set off a chain reaction of cheers from some of my track sisters, who were in Study Hall at the time. On the other side of the building, in French class, Kayla read the message and shrieked, “Formidable!” which is French for “terrific.” Emily, who had been lying down in the Nurse’s office because she was so anxious that she developed a headache, read the message and leapt up from the couch and did a little happy dance. Meanwhile, in the stillness of the library, Chelsea screamed, “Yeah! They threw the bastard in jail!”—for which, the library promptly wrote her up for detention.

Emily and Kayla already arranged with their mothers to get out of school early to celebrate with me if I won. So, at 1:05 in the afternoon, when Miss Angie pulled up to the school to pick up Chelsea, she scooped up the other two girls as well.

We set up camp at the Down Home Buffet. For not having eaten all day, I thought I would eat the place empty. But once I loaded my plate with fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, pizza, tacos, and a piece of cornbread, I found that I really didn’t have much of an appetite. Chelsea took up the slack, though. Going back for three helpings before me and Miss Angie could finish giving the play-by-play of everything that happened in the hearing.

And by the time we finished with the story, we had to tell it all over again because by then Kamisha and a couple of other girls from the track team had arrived. A few minutes later, Miss Wallace, the guidance counselor, trickled in, followed by Miss Meagan. It turned out to be a real party. They pulled a couple of tables together, filled up their plates, and listened as I relived the hearing once again.

“That’s all he gets is six months?” Kamisha said, when I finished the story.

"Aren't you worried he'll be pissed when he gets out?"

I shrugged. "That's the most they could give him."

"He might be pissed, but he won't be coming around Toya no more," Miss Angie added. All eyes turned to her. "He's a bully. Bullies do everything in secret, because that's their power. Now that his secret's out, he doesn't have power over Toya anymore."

Miss Meagan nodded. "Besides, there's still a chance the DA in this county could prosecute him out here for stalking Toya."

Now all eyes shifted to Miss Meagan.

"Really?" a couple of girls gasped.

"Yes. That's why he agreed to plead guilty. He was afraid that if the hearing kept going, something else damaging might come up that could be used against him if the DA here decided to charge him. And Mr. Childress said he was going to personally put Terry's video in the County Prosecutor's hand."

The others looked pleased, but all that was running through my mind was: *when did Miss Meagan have this conversation with Mr. Childress?* As far as I knew, Miss Meagan barely said two words to the man after the hearing –and those words were "goodbye."

Miss Angie chimed in. "So, it is possible this loser could serve his time for violating the Protection from Abuse Order, walk out of jail in Philadelphia, and be charged with stalking Toya out here in Montgomery County?"

"It's very possible," said Miss Meagan. "Though, I wouldn't get my hopes up just yet, Toya. It would be a full-fledged trial. The DA would probably want more evidence before going after him."

"Honestly, I just want to enjoy the next few months," I said. "I'll worry about that other stuff later."

"I'm with Toya," Chelsea said, with a mouth full of food. "We've had enough drama to last us a lifetime. Let's have fun. Anybody want more shrimp?"

Just as Chelsea stood up for another go at the buffet, Mr. Kevin walked in.

"Hey. The party's not over, is it?"

Chelsea cheered, "Uncle. Kevin! You made it!" She ran up, gave him a big hug, before hurrying off to get her shrimp. My eyes followed Chelsea to the buffet and then shifted to the entrance. I knew it was foolish to hope that Terry would come through the door after his father, but that hadn't stopped me from hoping. Mr. Kevin slipped off his jacket and pulled up a chair next to Miss Angie.

"Sorry I'm late. I had to stop at the car wash. Someone smeared mustard all over my car."

I nearly choked on my soda. As I gasped for air and tried to think of an excuse to tell Mr. Kevin, Miss Meagan said, "Are you serious? Who would do such a thing?"

I braced myself for Mr. Kevin to point an accusing finger at me and chastise me at my own celebration dinner. But to my surprise, he said, “Terry said it was some crazy homeless woman. She knocked on the window and begged him for money. And when he said no, she got mad and smashed a pretzel with mustard against the window.”

Miss Angie was the first to laugh, which set off a round of laughter around the table. Even Mr. Kevin had to laugh when he visualized the whole scene: some crazy lady in a ratty old coat and a bird’s nest for hair, assaulting his car with a deadly pretzel—no one even realized that the crazy lady was me. Terry covered for me again. Why did he always find a way to make it hard for me to hate him?

The laughter died down, and everyone went back to eating. I fought the urge to ask Mr. Kevin the one question that was buzzing in my ear like a pesky mosquito. Thankfully, my foster mother had my back again.

“Terry couldn’t come?” Miss Angie asked.

Mr. Kevin started to answer. “No, he needed to—

“He needed get back to school.” Emily said in unison with Mr. Kevin. I stared at her, wondering how she knew what Terry needed to do.

Mr. Kevin agreed, “Yeah, he’s got that play coming up next month, and if he’s not in school, he can’t rehearse.”

“Man, he must love really theater,” Kamisha added, crunching on her fruit salad. “He’d rather be doing Shakespeare than over here eating all this good food.”

This time, Mr. Kevin couldn’t even get his mouth open before Emily could add her two cents. “It’s not Shakespeare, Kamisha. It’s Hairspray. And he’s completely freaked out because he has to sing in this one. He has to meet with the music teacher today and work on his solo.”

I wanted to yell, *how the hell do you know*, but instead I put on a fake smile and said, “Hey Em, you wanna get some ice cream?”

As Emily and I made our way to the ice cream station, we passed Chelsea on her way back to the table, her plate piled with shrimp. “Oooh! Ice cream. Save me some,” she teased. I wondered where Chelsea was storing all that food. *Probably in her feet*, I laughed to myself.

Emily grabbed a dessert dish and was now pondering what kind of ice cream to get. “Which one are you getting, Toya? Vanilla or chocolate, or both?”

“Huh? I don’t want any ice cream.”

“You don’t? But you asked me if—”

“I only said that so I could get you away from the table.” I took a step closer to Emily and lowered my voice. “Look, we need to talk.”

Emily lowered her voice too. “Okay. Talk about what?”

"You and Terry. What's going on with you two?"

Emily's eyes widened, taken aback. "What's going on? Nothing. I told you that before. We broke up."

"Then what's up with you knowing all his business? How do you know he was meeting with the music teacher today?"

"He's my friend, Toya. We talk about things."

"Did you know he was coming to court today?" I didn't know why it mattered, but for some reason, I really needed to know if Emily would keep such a big secret from me.

"Of course, I didn't know," her voice squeaked. "I mean, I admit he's been keeping to himself lately, but I just figured he would eventually tell me if anything bad was going on."

I stood there for a moment, trying to think of what else I could ask Emily.

"What's this all about, Toya? I thought you were over Terry."

"I am over him!" I lied. "But, I don't know, the whole thing just stirs up bad feelings in me. I mean, things got so ugly between the three of us before. I don't want to go back through that again. So, if you two decided to get back together, I'd just want—"

"But we haven't gotten back together," Emily raised her voice, slightly. Until she realized the old couple nearby was staring. "How many times do I have to say it?"

"I know. I know. It's just too weird. And, and I don't—"

"Well, you know what? Get over it!" she snapped, reminding me that this was the new Emily I was talking to. "You're my friend and Terry's my friend and I like it that way." As she spoke, Emily snatched up a dessert dish and began piecing together a sundae. "I mean, I would like it if we could all be friends together, like we used to be, but I've accepted the fact that that is no longer my issue. You and Terry have to work that part out. And until you do, keep me out of it!" She took a breath then added, "Now, do you want rainbow sprinkles on your sundae or chocolate?"

The question caught me off guard. "Huh? Uh...chocolate."

Emily proceeded to spoon on a mound of chocolate sprinkles, then shoved the dish into my hand. I looked down at the sundae and saw that it was perfect: vanilla-chocolate swirl, with caramel sauce, whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles.

I laughed, "Hey! You made it just how I like it."

"I know," Emily said, proudly. "Because I'm your friend. And that's what friends do."

"Well, hold on, friend. You forgot something?"

Emily sighed, wearily. "What now?"

I plopped a cherry on top of Emily's sundae and then my own. "There. Now it's perfect."

That tickled Emily. "You always have to have the last word, don't you?"

* * * * *

The dinner began to wind down around 4:30. Miss Angie stood outside talking to Mr. Kevin, while me, Chelsea, Emily and Kayla sat in the car, rubbing our bellies.

"That was so good," Emily said.

Chelsea nodded, "I know. I haven't eaten like that since—"

"Yesterday." I teased, and the other girls snickered.

"I do not eat too much!" Chelsea whined. "I just wanted Mommy to get her money's worth."

"Well, it worked," Kayla said. "I bet they run out of food tonight. They'll probably have to close early because of you."

But Chelsea didn't hear her. Her mind drifted off to deeper thoughts, "Hey, wouldn't it be decent if we had a Down Home Buffet in our cafeteria? And then everything would be all-you-can-eat."

"Yeah, and we could all be three hundred pounds," Emily said. "Well, everybody but Kayla."

I jumped in. "I know! You're the only person I know who can go to the buffet and eat only nasty stuff."

That made Kayla laugh. "And by nasty stuff, do you mean fruits and vegetables?"

"Yeah!" Me and Chelsea said together.

Kayla hopped right on her soapbox. "There is nothing nasty about eating the goodness of the earth. If you ask me, the nasty stuff is all those preservatives, refined sugar and—"

A shrill shriek made me jump and nearly cracked the windows on the car. Me, Kayla and Emily all turned our heads to the source of the noise. Chelsea. She couldn't speak. She could only raise a finger and point out the window. The rest of us followed her quivering finger, out the window to the parking lot, to Miss Angie being held tightly in Mr. Kevin's arms, their lips pressed even more tightly together.

"Th-they're, they're kissing!" Chelsea said, shakily. "They're kissing, on the lips, in public, in broad daylight. Oh, I knew it! It's happening. It's finally happening. Thank you, Jesus!"

We all looked at Chelsea like she was an alien—an overly dramatic alien. Then we turned back to the drama going on outside the window. Miss Angie and Mr. Kevin finally let go of each other and headed in our direction. They were holding hands. They were laughing. And when they finally reached the car, Mr. Kevin gave Miss Angie one last kiss and waved goodbye to us. When Miss Angie climbed into the car, she was met with strained silence. Each of us girls wearing goofy grins on our faces.

"What?" Miss Angie said, finally. "You never saw a woman kiss her boyfriend before?"

And the car erupted with the high-pitched squeals that only teenage girls can make.

* * * * *

That night, after all the giddiness settled down and the food had been digested, I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned and counted sheep, but after lying there for two hours, I was still wide awake. A horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach gnawed at me, not allowing me to rest. It was as if, that blanket of grace that covered me all morning at the hearing, throughout dinner, and into the night, had suddenly been yanked off me, and a profound feeling of emptiness settled in.

I was alone. It was at this moment that I finally realized it. I didn't have any family left—on my mother's side or my father's side—that would claim me. My mother had been the only one in the past five years who expressed any interest in seeing me. That was all over now. Yes, my mom had cussed me out and threatened to disown me before, but this time was different. I had never seen that look in her eyes before. Hatred.

Tamika didn't look at me like I was her daughter. I was her enemy. The one who took away what she treasured most. Our mother-child bond had officially been broken, destroyed forever. Especially now that Tamika already had another child on the way—my replacement. She always wanted a son. How many times had she told me that? Maybe she'd have better luck with a boy. *Girls are evil*, Tamika used to say to me. At which point, I would remind my mother that she had once been a girl herself.

I sat up in bed. The room was still. Chelsea had long since moved back to her own room. Actually, Miss Angie made her go back to her room, because she could tell the air mattress was bothering Chelsea's back. I would give anything to hear her snoring right now. I could drift off to sleep to that sound like a lullaby. Then I remembered that I wrapped up two brownies in a napkin and snuck them out of the buffet. Two brownies and a glass of cold milk would definitely put me to sleep—or at least make me feel good while I lie awake.

When I pulled the gallon of milk from the fridge, I noticed for the first time that Miss Angie's refrigerator was always full. There was never a time when I went in there for a snack and didn't find something to satisfy me. It wasn't like that at my old house. Before Mr. Rick came into the picture, I could remember plenty of times when I opened the fridge and found nothing but a pizza box with two shriveled up slices of pepperoni inside. I remembered times when my mother sent me to the apartment next door to borrow a jar of peanut butter and a few slices of bread. What would Tamika do now that Mr. Rick was gone?

Suddenly, I felt guilty for having worried about myself. It was Tamika I should've been worrying about. She was the one that was eight months

pregnant without a job. She was the one who would have to deliver that baby alone—my baby brother, who would enter the world with an evil big sister and a father in jail because he couldn't stay away from her. What a jacked-up family this poor boy had inherited.

I took a seat at the table and lifted the brownie to my mouth. I couldn't eat. How could I eat when I could still hear my mother screaming: "*She's a liar! She's a trifling, slut liar! I hate you, LaToya! I swear to God, I hate you!*" I wasn't angry with my mom. I just felt sorry, so sorry for the whole thing. Sorry for being such a problem. Sorry to have caused Tamika so much pain. What was my mother thinking tonight when she walked into that big house all alone, without her support, her provider, her one true love?

"Hey." Miss Angie stepped into the kitchen in her bathrobe and pink socks. "You couldn't sleep either, huh?"

"Nope."

"Yeah, it's been one crazy day." She cracked open her trusty can of ginger ale and plopped in the chair next to me. "I could feel my hair turning gray the moment the hearing started. But praise God, everything worked out in the end."

"Yeah," I said, but my mind was miles away in Philly, still watching over my mother.

Miss Angie continued, "And when Terry took the stand? My goodness! I thought I was going to pass out."

"I know. I should have told you about it when it happened. I was—"

She patted my hand. "Please, Honey, don't beat yourself up over anything you've done. There is no right or wrong here. Who's to say how I would've reacted in the same situation?"

"You wouldn't have kept quiet."

"Yeah, and you wouldn't either, now. Back then, you didn't know that you could trust me. I hope now you do."

I nodded. "I do. I know I can trust you, Miss Angie." My mind drifted back to the confrontation after the hearing. The only thing standing between me and my mother's wild, flailing arms was Miss Angie. And in that moment, I had no fear. I knew I would not be touched as long as Miss Angie was there. Who would have thought this stylish, sophisticated lady would be so fearless? "So, you weren't scared when my mom was coming at you like that? Weren't you afraid you'd have to fight her?"

Miss Angie waved me off. "I'm a grown woman. I'm not about to be out there in public tussling around with some woman over some foolishness. Now, if she had touched my girls, then she would've been rolling outta there in an ambulance and I'd be the one leaving in handcuffs."

I smiled. "Yeah, but Chelsea would've karate-chopped her before she ever put her hands on her."

Miss Angie thought that over for a second. "True. But I was talking about

you. You're my girl, too, Toya." Her face suddenly turned serious. "You know that, don't you? You're my girl, too."

I looked away, fearing that if I looked in Miss Angie's eyes too long, I'd start crying.

She said, "Ya know, it's funny, the whole time your mom was standing there talking about she didn't want you and I could have you, I was just laughing to myself, cuz I kept thinking: She's already mine." With her finger, Miss Angie guided my chin up until my eyes met hers. "I claimed you a long time ago. I just never told you. But you belong to me just as much as if I birthed you. Hell, after today, I feel like I was in labor with you. And you know Chelsea claimed you the moment you walked in the door."

I smiled because I knew that was true.

"We see you as part of this family, Toya. Some family you're born with, others you pick up along the way, but it's still family just the same." Miss Angie wiped away a tear that slipped from my eyes, fully aware of the tears in her own eyes. "So don't go thinking that you're gonna graduate next year and be done with us, because you'll never get rid of us now. You just go on and get that track scholarship and let it take you anywhere your heart desires. But you'd better call me every day. And on your school breaks, this is the home you come back to, okay?"

I nodded. I wanted Miss Angie to stop. Stop pouring all this love on me. It was more than my poor eyes could handle, because they kept leaking and leaking.

Even though Miss Angie cried along with me, she didn't stop loving on me. "This is your home, Toya. We are your family, no matter what. Even if we get mad at each other. You can yell and scream and stomp right out the door, just make sure when you cool off, you come on back home to the people who love you, okay? Because we love you, LaToya. I love you, LaToya."

She said those words with such force that I felt them. I felt love being force-fed to me like the medicine my ailing heart had been calling for.

The words got caught up in my throat, but I did manage to squeeze out the words, "I, I love you too, Miss Angie," and buried my face in my foster mom's shoulder, sobbing hard. Sniffling and soaking Miss Angie's robe with my tears. I clung to her like a life raft, afraid that if I let go I would get sucked under by the undertow of life. I did not want to get sucked under. I wanted to live this new life that was now opening up for me. It wasn't a perfect world, but it was a world I helped to create. A new world full of possibilities, which made me want to try something new. When I collected myself, I looked at Miss Angie and said, "Well, if I'm part of the family now, maybe I should call you something other than Miss Angie."

She thought about it. "Ya know? I think you're right. What should you call me?"

"I don't know. How about, Aunt Angie?"

Miss Angie crinkled her nose. "That sounds like that pretzel place."

"You mean, Auntie Anne's? Yeah, I guess it does sound a little like that."

"How about Lady Angie?" she said, in a proper British accent. "That sounds very elegant."

I laughed. "I don't think so." Then I studied Miss Angie's face and felt a rush of warmth in my heart for her. "How about...Mom-Angie?"

"Mom-Angie." She sat back, repeating the name to herself, letting it sit on her awhile. "I like it. I really like it. From now on, I'll be your Mom-Angie."

"To Mom-Angie." I raised my glass of milk in a toast and clinked it against Mom-Angie's soda can.

After polishing off the rest of my brownie, Mom-Angie announced that she was now ready to go to sleep. I stood up too and we headed upstairs. "Hey, Mom-Angie? Since I'm part of the family and all, you think you can teach me how to drive?"

She stopped in her tracks and squinted up her face.

I instantly regretted it. I had pushed it too far again. I could never be satisfied with what I had. Why did I always have to push the envelope? "That's okay. You don't have to. I can wait till I'm—"

"No, no, no, it's not that. I don't mind teaching you how to drive." She flashed a sly grin at me and teased, "I'm just...trying to figure out how many cases of ginger ale I'm gonna need to get through it."

CHAPTER 34

Sassy's was buzzing on Friday night. Prom Night. In addition to the regular clientele, the chairs were filled with girls who needed last-minute touch-ups, weaves tightened, or false eyelashes glued on. Instead of being one of the girls getting all dolled up for a night to remember, I was working side by side with my Mom-Angie. I didn't mind helping out. We had been busy every night this week. And yes, my feet were tired, but I was racking up on tips.

By around five o'clock, all the hopeful prom queens were gone. Prom started at eight, so they were off squeezing into their gowns and praying no one would show up in a gown more glamorous than theirs. All that remained now were the regulars. Mother Pearl, Miss Coretta, Miss Gladys, even Elaine Simmons, Brandon's mom, whose hair had been responding quite nicely to Mom-Angie's deep conditioning treatments.

Miss Elaine even put aside the negative feelings she had toward me for "fooling around" in her basement with her precious son, and allowed me to shampoo her hair. We never spoke about Brandon. We never spoke about anything, which was all right with me because Miss Elaine was just about the best tipper in the world. That was all that mattered.

But this time, while I silently applied the peppermint-scented deep conditioner to Miss Elaine's hair, I found myself in the spotlight.

"So, Toya, how come you're not going to the prom?" asked Mother Pearl.

"Uh, I didn't have a date," I replied, simply trying to keep my answers short and to the point, hoping Mother Pearl would lose interest and move on to some other juicy gossip. No chance.

"Oh! Well, why didn't you say so?" she said, sweetly. "I could've got my grandbaby, Wendell, to take you."

I had no idea who this Wendell was, but by the way the other ladies rolled their eyes and Mom-Angie coughed so violently, I knew he was not someone I

wanted to get an expensive gown and fancy hairdo for.

"You probably saw him. He came to church on Easter." Mother Pearl continued.

I stopped massaging Miss Elaine's scalp, just long enough to look like I was trying to remember who he was. Then Mom-Angie added, smirking, "You remember, Toya. He gave you a *big* hug after service."

My eyes lit up. "Oh, him!" It was all coming back to me. A plump boy, about my height, with a full beard that made him look forty. Yet when he spoke, he sounded fourteen. But that wasn't why he stood out to me. He stood out because, when the service ended and it was time to meet and greet the rest of the congregation, Wendell crashed through the crowd like a running back, just to get to me. He rushed up to me, out of breath and panting hard. Because I knew God was watching, I was willing to shake his sweaty hand, just to be polite. But when I stuck out my hand, he yanked me close to him and hugged me, like this was his one and only shot at hugging a girl. Thank goodness, Mom-Angie had been watching and was able to peel him off me. The thought of his softy, doughy body wrapped around mine, gave me chills—and not in a good way. "That was Wendell? He was...nice."

"Uh huh. And now that he got those braces off, he hardly ever drools anymore," Mother Pearl boasted. The other ladies buried their faces in magazines to cover up their grins. "I bet if I called him, he'd be glad to take you out some time."

Sure, he would take me out, but would he ever bring me back? I joked to myself, then said, "Oh thanks, Mother Pearl, but I'm taking a break from boys right now."

"Nonsense. You just haven't met the right one."

She was just about to pull out her phone, when Mom-Angie came to my rescue. "Pearl, no. Toya's got enough on her plate right now. I mean, with track and school and driving lessons, she needs to stay focused. She doesn't need a boy in her life distracting her right now."

Mother Pearl shoved her clunky, old fashioned flip phone back into her bag in a huff, "See that's the problem with your generation, Angie. You don't teach these girls how to appreciate the value of true love."

Mom-Angie, who had been curling Miss Coretta's hair in neat rows, stopped and put her hand on her hip. "Now that's...just not true!" sounding unsure if she believed it herself. "We believe in true love. We just believe in keeping it real."

Mother Pearl fidgeted in her seat, her blood really starting to simmer now. "Uh huh. Keep it up, and you'll be teaching them to be *real* lonely. I mean, school, track, work, chores, you've got these girls putting everything ahead of love. That's why when they get married—that is, if they find someone willing to marry them—the man leaves because she don't know how to take care of him. She puts everything ahead of him. By then, instead of school and

chores, it'll be work and the kids."

"Well, if they have kids, she must have been taking care of him sometimes, right?" Mom-Angie shot back, and the other women cackled, while Mother Pearl folded her arms, unamused.

"Actually, I think Pearl has a point." Miss Elaine spoke up. I almost forgot she was in the room. "I mean, whatever happened to love? Whatever happened to holding hands? Love letters." It seemed the marriage counseling and the regular date nights weren't working for Miss Elaine, because there was a deep yearning in her voice as she spoke. "Whatever happened to a first kiss that actually made you weak in the knees?"

Miss Gladys threw her head back and shouted, "Girl, you ain't been kissed til you've been kissed by a man who truly loves you."

And it must have been true because, at those words, every woman in the room got a dreamy look on her face and sighed. I had no idea what they were talking about. I had kissed plenty of boys in my life, but none of them had ever put such a look in my eyes. Or made me sigh like they did. Then again, I had never been in love before, either. I was always clear about that fact. Of all the boys I flirted with, made out with, and even sex with, I always knew it was anything but love. The closest I had come to love was Terry, and I never even kissed him.

While the women gushed about their first kisses and memories of their best and worst prom dates, I couldn't help but wonder who Terry was taking to the prom. Rumor had it he was taking one of the foreign exchange students from Italy that invaded our school last month. I knew he wasn't going with Emily. Last week, Emily introduced me to Chip, a boy she met on her very first day at her first job at the movie theater. His arms were covered in tattoos, and he had a spike coming out of his chin; so I knew the new Emily was still in the depths of her rebellious phase.

When the last head of hair was permed, styled and out the door, Mom-Angie closed up shop early for the night. After sweeping up all the hair from the floor, I lugged two big bags of trash to the curb. The air was warm and sweet with the scent of honeysuckles. Summer was just around the corner. Mom-Angie stretched out her back and groaned, "Oh, I am so glad prom season only comes once a year."

"Yeah. Me, too."

She turned and looked at me with concern, "You're really not missing anything, Toya. Trust me, Senior Prom is the best prom."

"You don't have to worry about me. I'm fine. Really. I have absolutely no desire to go to the prom."

Mom-Angie looked at me, skeptically. "So, you don't mind not going this year?"

I scoffed, “Honestly, I’d rather go skinny dipping with Wendell, than go to the prom tonight.”

We both shared a laugh at the thought of that sight. But the longing look in my eyes when a white, stretch limo destined for the prom passed by, told Mom-Angie all she needed to know.

The next morning, I wasn’t awakened by the smell of pancakes or cinnamon raisin bagels. I smelled cookies. Chocolate chip cookies. I hoped Mom-Angie was doing the baking. That woman made a double chunk chocolate chip cookie that brought tears to my eyes. I took in a deep whiff of that chocolate deliciousness, causing my stomach to do a double backflip. I hopped out of bed.

How my heart danced when I saw Mom-Angie standing in the kitchen, sliding those big, chunky cookies off the cookie sheet. Chelsea was at the table eating a spoonful of cookie dough.

“I thought I smelled cookies,” I said, helping myself to a cookie.

Mom-Angie swatted my hand. “Good morning to you, too.”

“Good morning, Mom-Angie,” I sang. “And how are you this fine morning?”

“I’m just fine and dandy. And no, you may not have a cookie.”

I clutched my heart, wounded. “Why not?”

“These are for Kevin. He’s not feeling well, so I made these to cheer him up.”

“But that’s a lot of cookies. He can’t—”

“Forget it, Toya,” said Chelsea, still smacking her lips. “I tried. She won’t give up the cookies.”

“You got that right. Now, Toya, go on and grab some breakfast. We’ve got to drop Chelsea off at dance class, then I want to drop these off at Kevin’s, before my first appointment. And you’re driving, so come on.” She clapped her hands together and chanted, “Multi-task! Multi-task! Multi-task!”

The Infiniti moved down the road at a snail’s pace. For as much as I used to tease Terry about driving too slow, I was even worse than he was—though I didn’t consider myself slow, just careful. Driving lessons had been going well. I had my turns down, as well as changing lanes. I still hadn’t gotten the hang of parallel parking. And I was heavy on the brakes when it came to stopping. But I was improving. As much as she tried to hide it, Mom-Angie had zero patience. Sure, she smiled and said encouraging words, but every once in a while, I would catch her holding on to the door handle. I wasn’t sure if the woman was holding on for dear life or about to bail out of the car.

“Pull over right there,” Mom-Angie said, pointing to a parking space in

front of Mr. Kevin's house.

"You want me to parallel park?"

Mom-Angie blurted out, "No, no, no! I'll do it."

I let the car roll up beside the parking space and mashed on the brakes so hard, me and Mom-Angie jerked forward.

"Take it easy, Toya. This ain't the Flintstones. You don't have to put the foot through the floorboards to make the car stop."

"I'm trying. It just feels like we're not stopping," I whined. "I'm getting better though, right?"

"Uh huh. I think you only ran through two stop signs this time," Mom-Angie teased.

"I couldn't help it. Those cookies were distracting me." I eyed the fancy red tin container that radiated with the mouth-watering aroma of chocolate.

"Well, I'd better get these outta here, so they won't cause you any more problems," Mom-Angie teased. She looked up at Mr. Kevin's house, as if considering something. "As a matter of fact, why don't you take these and go ring the doorbell, while I put this car in the space."

"Okay." I unhooked my seatbelt and hopped out of the car. I passed Mom-Angie at the trunk of the car, and she handed the cookie tin to me.

Mom-Angie studied the car. It was in the perfect position for her to slide it easily into the parking space. She was impressed. "You lined it up, nicely, young lady. You'll have that license in no time."

"Thanks." I beamed, then floated up the steps to Mr. Kevin's split-level home. I rang the doorbell twice and was suddenly struck by a momentary wave of panic. It dawned on me that it was the weekend. Mr. Kevin doesn't live by himself on the weekends. He lives with Terry. *Lord, please let Terry be at his mother's house!* But before I could finish my prayer, I got my answer.

Terry opened the door.

Now, I was face-to-face with him. He had on cargo shorts, a white T-shirt, and the same blank expression he seemed to always wear on his face, lately, whenever I was around. I smiled and did my best to be sunny. I was sure that with Mom-Angie and Mr. Kevin there, Terry—a.k.a. Jekyll and Hyde—would be on his best behavior. "Hey," I said, breezily. "Is your dad home?"

Terry looked at me strangely. "No. He just left to go see Miss Angie."

Then it was my turn to look at him strangely. "He did? But she said—"

Just then, I heard the tires squeal. I looked back to see Mom-Angie peeling away, leaving me behind in a cloud of dust. My jaw dropped. "No, she didn't!" I shoved the cookies into Terry's gut, and he caught them just before they hit the ground, as I whipped out my phone and speed dialed my foster mother's phone. Straight to voicemail. "I don't believe her!"

I redialed the number again and again. Each time, the phone went right to voicemail. Finally, I looked up at Terry, who was staring at me with a look on his face that said: *What have you gotten yourself into now, girl?* I said, "You gotta

believe me, Terry. I had nothing to do with this. My foster mother just went and lost her mind.”

He didn’t say anything. He just sighed and held the screen door open, an invitation for me to come in. As soon as I stepped inside, my phone buzzed. I was ready to pick up the phone and blast Mom-Angie, but saw it was text message:

I’ll b bak 2 get u later. U can thank me then :-)

Thank her? For what? For leaving me stranded with a human statue? I looked away from my phone and watched the human statue move to the TV and turn it on.

“She sent me a text,” I said. “She said she’d be back later to get me. I guess the cookies are for you.”

Terry flipped through the channels for a moment then said, “Okay, well here’s the remote. You know where the kitchen is. I’ll be in my room if you need something.” He handed me the remote control and headed for the stairs.

“You’re gonna leave me down here by myself?”

He shrugged. “I trust you. I know you won’t steal anything.”

“Terry!”

“What?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I heard my voice go shrill and dialed it back a little. “Your dad and my foster mom went through a lot of trouble to get us to talk. Don’t you think we should at least try to talk?”

“Talk about what?”

“Talk about...us. Talk about why we’re not talking to each other.”

Terry paused for a second, as if actually thinking about it. “Nah. I’m cool. I don’t need to talk about that.”

“But, I do.”

“Fine. Talk all you want. Just keep it down; I’m trying to clean my ceiling fan,” he said and kept marching up the stairs.

I didn’t know what to do. How could I make him stop? How could I make him listen? I was so clueless when it came to this relationship stuff. It wasn’t like I had tons of role models of good relationships to guide me. My mother would probably cry, then throw a temper tantrum until she got her way. What would Mom-Angie do? She’d probably just leave. She’d say, “Forget him. I don’t need this,” and waltz right out the door. Neither option appealed to me. I didn’t want to walk away, and I didn’t want to stay and make a fool of myself either. But I knew I had to do something because Terry was already at the top of the stairs.

All I could think to do was yell at the top of my lungs, “Terry! If you don’t come back and talk to me, I swear...I’ll, I’ll, go to that play of yours next week and, and boo you every time you’re on stage.”

That got his attention.

"You know I'll do it." I said, practically daring him to take another step.

Terry must have had a flashback of the mustard covered pretzel flying in his direction, with only the car windshield to protect him, and remembered that I was capable of anything. He turned around and took two steps down. "All right. Talk."

I knew I had crossed the line with him. I knew Terry would never see me as anything other than some loud, crazy, ghetto girl, who he was sorry he'd ever met. This wasn't about changing his mind anymore. This was about my peace of mind.

"No, I'm always doing the talking," I said. "You talk."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to tell me why you're so mad at me. Why you can't stand to be in the same room with me."

Terry groaned. "We've been through all that. I'm tired of talking about that."

I tried again. "Okay, then what's it gonna take for us to be friends again?"

He shot me down again. "We've been through this part, too. I don't want to be friends again."

"You keep saying that, but you keep doing friendly things," I said.

"No, I don't."

"Then why didn't you tell your dad that it was me that smeared mustard all over his car?"

"I don't know," Terry shrugged, sounding even more annoyed—if that was possible. "I probably just figured you had been through enough that day. You didn't need my dad on your back too."

My eyes widened. I was on to something. "See? That means you care. You didn't tell your dad because you care—"

"Wrong." Terry stood and started to drag himself back upstairs, with me trailing right behind him.

"You came to testify because you care."

"You're wrong!"

"Admit it! You still care about me. You still—"

Suddenly, Terry rounded on me and roared, "Will you shut the hell up? I don't care. I don't give a damn about you!"

I shrank back. My mouth hung open. His words stung me hard. If Terry had punched me in the face, it would have been less painful and less humiliating. Actually, it wasn't so much his words. I've heard those words before. It was his eyes. He had his mother's eyes. And right now, his mother's eyes were looking at me and saying, "You are not a decent girl." I could feel my eyes moistening, but I was not about to let Terry get the satisfaction of seeing me cry. I scurried down the steps as fast as my legs would carry me.

Stupid locks. Damn stupid locks. I twisted and turned the latches, but I

couldn't get the door open. Maybe it was the tears that blurred my vision and prevented me from seeing my way of escape. They were coming now. Tears were spilling down my cheeks. My hands were shaking as I jerked the doorknob. It wouldn't budge. This was so stupid. All I wanted was to make peace, and I could have it. Now, all I wanted was to get out with a tiny sliver of dignity, and I wasn't about to have that either. I wiped my eyes and yanked the doorknob one more time before cursing it.

"Toya," Terry said my name so softly, but it was the only thing I could hear over the commotion of the jangling door and my own sobs. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"Why not?" I said, refusing to face him. "If that's how you feel, why not say it?"

"That's not how I feel. You just...you get me so...Never mind. It's no excuse. I shouldn't have said that to you."

"Whatever. Can you open the door, please?" I could hear Terry take a few steps down the stairs. I rested my head against the door. The burst of energy I used in trying to break out of there had drained me completely.

"I thought it was you," he said.

I looked over and saw that, instead of coming to help me with the door, Terry perched himself at the bottom of the stairs. "What are you talking about, Terry?"

"You said you wanted to know why I was so angry. I'm telling you why."

At this point, I didn't give a damn why he was so angry, but since I was a captive audience in his home, I had no choice but to listen to him.

Terry stared at the floor and fumbled with his fingers. He said, "Remember how, after Mercedes and I broke up, and you were going to set me up with my dream date?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I thought...you were going to be my dream date."

I wiped my eyes. I needed to give myself time to process his words. "I don't get it. Did you want me to be your dream date?"

"No. I just thought it would be you." He let out a frustrated groan. "I'm not explaining it right. It's like, after you told me that you had hooked me up with my dream date, it just dawned on me that it might be you. After a while, I sort of wanted it to be you. And I didn't realize how much I wanted you to be my dream date, until my dream date showed up and it wasn't you."

I started to speak, but something inside told me to be quiet, for once, and just listen.

"I was disappointed, but I thought I'd be okay with it," Terry continued, "But then when I saw you at school that day and you started going off on me about tutoring. I was like: Is that all I am to you? A tutor? So, I got pissed."

"But you had already asked Emily to the dance, right?"

"Because you sent her. She was supposed to be my dream date, not you. I

figured, since you didn't want me, and we had such a good time together, I might as well try and make things work with Emily." He thought of something that made him smile. "Then we got to the dance and I saw your date. What's his name? Deluxe?"

"Detox."

Terry nodded. "Yeah, yeah, Detox. When I saw him, I was like: no wonder. No wonder she didn't like me. She's into the bad boys. She's into those drug slinging, rapping, wanna-be gangsters."

"But Detox—I mean, Dwayne, wasn't my boyfriend," I said. "He's my friend. We grew up together."

Terry stopped and considered this new bit of information, then shrugged it off. "Whatever, it wasn't me. It wasn't me you were into. I was just some dorky, non-football playing, bookworm, you only let hang around you because you wanted a good grade."

"That is so dumb, Terry. You haven't tutored me in months and I'm getting a "B" in geometry. That hasn't stopped me from trying to be your friend. That hasn't stopped me from—" I stopped myself before I said too much.

"From what?"

"Nothing," I said, quickly. Yet I couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." I slapped my hand over my mouth to contain my giggles.

But Terry was not laughing. "See? I try to open up to you, and you laugh at me." He stood and was about to stomp back up the stairs when I hurried over to him.

"I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at the situation."

"Well, I don't see why this situation is funny."

I took a seat at the bottom of the stairs, then tugged Terry's wrist, an invitation for him to sit down beside me. He sat down. I toyed with my ponytail, as I pieced together the right words in my mind. I couldn't think of any cool or funny way to say it, so I just said it: "It's funny because...I-I was your dream date," I said, cooly.

"Yeah, right. Very funny."

"No, I'm serious, Terry. It's just like you said, I was supposed to be your mystery date that night, but then I got scared and Emily ended up going instead."

"Scared? Scared of what?"

"I don't know," I whined. "I was scared of how you'd react. I mean, it wasn't like you'd shown any interest in me before. You'd been falling all over yourself to get with Mercedes. And well, let's be honest, I'm no Mercedes. So, I freaked out and decided not to go. But then I got myself together and realized I was being silly, so I went to the restaurant anyway."

“You did?”

“Yeah. And I saw you and Emily there.” There was a tone of accusation in my voice.

“Oh. So, why didn’t you come over and say something?”

“Because you were on a date! Emily had her contact lenses in. And you two were all laughing and giggling and stuff. I was like, excuse me.”

Now it was Terry’s turn to laugh.

“It’s not funny. I was hurt. The next day, Emily was all telling me what a great time she had on her date with you and how you two were going to the dance together. And then you didn’t show up for tutoring. It just felt like I had been kicked to the curb. You had your new girlfriend now, so you just forgot all about me.”

“So that’s why you were so mad at me that day.” The tension had slowly eased its way out of his voice; out of his body. The light was starting to return to his eyes.

“Yeah, because you stood me up!” I said, defending myself.

Terry defended himself right back. “Well, you stood me up first.”

“But you didn’t know I had stood you up. At least, I sent a replacement date. It’s not like you sent a replacement tutor.”

He tried to think of a comeback but had none. He surrendered. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. Tutor or no tutor, I still would’ve been mad at you.”

We sat in silence for a moment, both trying to sort things out in our own minds. Something dawned on me. “So, wait, what does this mean? Are we friends again? Are we gonna be more than friends?”

“I can’t be friends with you, Toya.” Terry said, matter-of-factly.

“You keep saying that! Why not? I mean, everything’s out in the open now. Why can’t we—”

“I just know it won’t work.” He sighed. “Look, you know how I told you that remind me of my friend Kareem?”

“Yes,” and my heart sank. At a time like this, when we were sharing our most private feelings, the last thing I wanted to hear was that I reminded Terry of a friend—especially a friend who happened to be a boy.

“When you came along, it almost felt like God sent you because I needed another Kareem in my life.”

“Look, Terry, I’m sure Kareem was a nice person and all, but I—”

“But then, I started having all these feelings for you. Feelings I could never have for Kareem. I mean, I liked Kareem. He was my boy. But I didn’t want to spend every waking moment with him. I didn’t daydream about him in class. Plus, his skin wasn’t as soft as yours.”

I let out a tiny flutter of a laugh. Terry picked up my hand and held it between his. My skin so close to his. I felt warm and keenly aware of every sensation in my body. I rested my head against his shoulder and inhaled his

scent. That Irish Spring smell was back again. I loved that smell.

I said, "So, all this time we've both been feeling the same way about each other, and never even knew it. I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't freaked out. If I had just gone through with the date in the first place."

Terry chuckled. "Based on our track record, we probably would have found a way to screw it up."

"Don't say that!" I said, nudging him. "I think we would've had fun. We would've stayed out past curfew and not even cared if we got grounded."

"Well, there's only one way to find out."

Terry stood up and held out his hand. I smiled. I placed my hand in his and he helped me to my feet. He led me to the dining room and directed my attention to the table. "Table for two." He pulled out a chair for me and I sat down.

Terry set out two napkins then opened the cookie tin and graciously presented it to me.

"Cookie?"

I reached inside and selected a cookie. A nice one with big, chunks of chocolate morsels smiling back at me.

"It figures you'd take the biggest one," Terry teased. He picked out his cookie, then asked, "Would madam like whole milk or two percent?"

In my snootiest voice, I replied, "Oh, two percent please. On the rocks."

Terry disappeared into the kitchen. I heard the rumble of the ice maker and tiny clinks as ice fell into a glass. A moment later, he returned with two glasses of milk and set one in front of me. "Let's do a toast."

"Oh, okay." I took a moment to smooth my hair. Trying to look sophisticated, I crossed my legs, my flip-flop dangling off my foot. "What shall we toast to, Terrence?"

"To dream dates," he said, clinking his glass against mine.

"To dream dates."

Over cookies and milk on the rocks, we talked and laughed for two more hours. Such a natural fit. The conversation was easy and flowed effortlessly from one topic to the next, covering the six months that had evaporated since we last had a meaningful conversation. But unlike six months ago, new topics had been mixed into the discussion. Feelings: *I like this about you. You like that? I missed this about you. You missed that? I feel this way. Oh really? You feel the same way too? Nice!*

Yet all good things must eventually come to an end. When my phone lit up, I knew it was Mom-Angie. I was going to have to leave soon. I read the text, then looked up at Terry. "She said she's about to take a break, so she's going to come pick me up soon."

"I can bring you home," Terry said, then realized he sounded a little too

eager. "I mean, if you're not ready to go yet."

I smiled then sent a reply to Mom-Angie, who responded right back:

Fine. U 2 better just be having cookies and milk over there!

I laughed out loud then said to Terry, "Uh...she said that would be fine." I helped myself to another cookie. "Hey. If you want, I can drive. I've got my learner's permit now."

"Nah. It's too dangerous out there."

"I'm a safe driver."

"I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about the streets! It's crazy out there, man! I mean, just a couple of weeks ago, this crazy homeless lady just ran up to my car and threw a pretzel at it!"

I rocked back in my chair and cackled hard, fueled by the gladness in my heart. I studied Terry's face. How it lit up when he laughed. How warm his eyes were when they stared back at me. I let my finger trace the contours of his face, as if confirming that he was real and not a figment of my imagination. My finger traveled down his arm, and I longed to be wrapped inside of them. My throat went dry, but I found a way to squeeze out the words, "I missed you."

He cleared his throat and said, "I missed you, too."

"I didn't think this day would ever happen. I didn't think we'd ever be friends again."

"I'm not your friend, Toya." He gently reminded me.

I knew what he meant. He didn't want to be my buddy. He didn't want to be the one upon whose shoulders I cried, when some other boy broke my heart. He wanted to be more than a friend.

I nodded. "I know. But, it's a shame, though. I used to have a friend named Terry, and he was just about the best friend a girl could have. Funny, smart, nice and...really, really cute."

Terry leaned in closer, and I could feel butterflies doing acrobats in my stomach. "Well, I guess it wouldn't be so bad to be your friend. As long as that's not all I was."

I leaned in, my lips inches from his. My heart was drumming out its own love song. "Definitely not. You're so much more than a friend."

"You mean, like a boyfriend?"

"Uh huh." I took a deep breath and prepared to taste his kiss, to feel the softness of his lips pressed against mine. Not inches, only centimeters away now, it felt like a magnetic force pulling us closer, still closer then...

Terry pulled back. "I can't."

I nearly fell off my chair. "What? What's wrong?" panting hard.

"I'm sorry. I want to, Toya. I really do." Terry squeezed my hand. "It's just...I want to do this right. I want to do right by you."

"Okay. What does that mean?" At this point, my head was spinning.

"It means, I want us to take our time. I can't kiss you if I haven't even

taken you out on a date.”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“But I do! I want you to see that I’m different than those other boys, Toya.”

“I already know you’re different. That’s why I like you.”

“Yeah, well, I like you, too.” He took my hand and looked sincerely into my eyes. “That’s why I want us to take our time. I don’t want to mess this up again. I want to get it right. I really want to get this right.”

“Okay, well, if that’s how you feel, then let’s wait,” I said then sat silently for a moment. Inside, I was fighting a major battle. On one side, I felt so flattered that Terry thought so much of me that he wanted to take his time. That he didn’t see me as some kind of amusement park ride, to be climbed on and ridden, never to be seen or thought of again until next year when he made another visit to the amusement park. On the other hand, my hormones were boiling inside of me, and I was feeling this undeniable urge to just pounce on him. The hormones percolated an idea in my head, and I said, “Ya know, technically we just had our first date. So, really you could—”

“Don’t even try it. I’m talking about a real date. Dinner and movie, the beach, the museum, the zoo—”

“Not the zoo. I got spit on by a camel when I was in the fourth grade and haven’t been back since.”

“So, we’ll buy you an umbrella.”

I shot him an evil look.

“Okay, forget the zoo. I’ll think of something nice.”

* * * * *

As promised, Terry drove me home a few hours later, ignoring my pleas that he teach me how to drive his motorcycle. I climbed off the bike, and he walked me to the door.

“So, when is our real dream date supposed to happen?”

“I don’t know. We’ll figure it out.”

“Well, if it’s half as good as the fake one we just had, I know it’ll be special.”

I found myself struggling to come up with something else to say. I wasn’t ready for Terry to leave yet, though I knew he had to go. He had rehearsal at 5:00. I didn’t want to be the reason he was late. Finally, I said, “Call me later?”

“As soon as I get out of practice?”

Not able to kiss Terry and not sure what else to do, I turned and reached for the door. Terry placed his hand on my arm and gently turned me around. He bent down and placed a kiss on my cheek, so tender that it felt like a feather tickling my skin. I reached up and wrapped my arms around him. I felt warm. And safe. And treasured. And underneath all that, I felt a tiny

Cat Meyers

pool of sadness, because I knew it would not last.

CHAPTER 35

“Happy Birthday!” each of my guests cheered when they entered the backyard. So far, the day hadn’t been all that happy. I couldn’t remember the last time I had a birthday party. Miss Lillian, one of the nice foster parents I had, baked me a cake and took me to the movies when I turned twelve. That was nice. For the most part, though, I moved around so much, it was hard for my other foster parents to keep up with my birthdays. Or grow to like me enough to make a big deal about the day I was born.

Honestly, I didn’t want a big fuss on my birthday. It just brought to mind the days before foster care, when my whole family would get together to celebrate all the June birthdays in the family. That meant me, my Uncle Larry, my cousin Cheryl, and twin cousins, Dante and D’Andre.

Knowing I might never have one of those big family birthdays again had me in less than a celebratory mood today. But I knew this was a big deal for Chelsea and Mom-Angie. They had been talking it up for the past two weeks: “How about a skating party or a pool party? No, a bowling party! You like bowling, don’t ya?”

I didn’t want to hurt their feelings, because all I wanted to do was lie in bed, stuff my face with Oreos, and hide from the rest of the world. However, to be a grateful foster kid, I agreed to a small get-together. A cookout in the backyard with a few friends over. The *few friends* turned out to be about twenty-five people, including my friends from track, some girls from church, and a couple of kids I’d never seen before. They must have been kids from the neighborhood who wandered over when they heard the music and smelled grilled burgers and barbecued chicken in the air.

It was June 27th, a sunny, 85-degree day. School had been out for over a week now, and it seemed like my life was busier than ever. With school being out, I was working more hours in the salon now, taking SAT prep classes on Saturdays, and I still had to make sure I got a good run in five days a week, to

keep my legs strong. I was going to be captain next year, so I had to set a good example. Next month, I will add to my routine, summer school and some summer track meets. I had to fight to keep my schedule open to spend time with Terry. Terry, whom I still had not kissed.

The party really started picking up at around three o'clock. Miss Meagan showed up with a date. "Mr. Childress?" I shrieked when the gorgeous lawyer in surfer shorts showed up with my social worker.

"Call me Grady, remember?" he said, as he handed me my present. It even had both of their names on it.

"I still don't know how it happened," Miss Meagan said later, when I cornered her outside the bathroom. "One day, I was yelling at him about another case where I felt he was being an arrogant jerk. Next thing I know, I was going out to dinner with him. It's scary how persuasive he can be."

"I knew you liked him," I bragged with a big grin on my face.

"Well, then you must know something I don't know, because I'm still not sure how I feel about him," said Miss Meagan, as she applied a coat of pink lip gloss to her already shiny lips.

"Then why are you going out with him?"

"I told you, he's very persuasive. I think he might be using magic or something. He keeps asking me out and I keep saying yes, but I keep meaning to say no."

I wasn't trying to hear that lame excuse. "Whatever. Just admit it. You like having this really hot guy falling all over you."

That made Miss Meagan laugh out loud. "Well, who wouldn't? But enough about my personal life, how about yours? I was looking for your boyfriend downstairs. Is he here?"

"Nope," I said, in a tone that was sadder than I intended.

"Why not? Did you break up already?"

"No!" If I sounded annoyed, it was because I was annoyed. Miss Meagan was only the twentieth person to ask me that today. Almost as if the whole world had placed money on some secret bet. The *how long Terry would put up with me bet*. "He had to work. He'll be here in a little while."

"Oh, okay," Miss Meagan said, but still looked concerned. "Are you okay?"

"Yes! I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You know you can talk to me about—"

"Miss Meagan, are you here as my guest or my social worker?"

Miss Meagan raised her hands in surrender. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'll let it go." She followed me back to the backyard, where we both gawked at the sight of Grady Childress doing some wild, non-rhythmic dance to a pulsating song by Pitbull.

"Come on, Meg," he shouted. "Let's show 'em what you got!"

And to my surprise, Miss Meagan gyrated her tiny hips right on out there

and danced with him. They made a cute couple. And I definitely could see them dancing like that at their wedding reception.

As a matter of fact, I looked around and realized that love had sprouted up all around me. Chelsea grabbed Alonzo by the hand and dragged him onto the make-shift dance floor, too. Kayla brought along her boyfriend, Mario, who was home from the University of Maryland, and they were out there shaking their booties. Emily, who dropped tattoo boy, brought a clean-cut boy who looked a lot like Harry Potter, glasses and all. They weren't dancing, but seemed to be enjoying themselves in an intense game of chess.

Suddenly, Dwayne burst onto the dance floor with Kristi Wells. They danced obscenely close like they were in some X-rated music video—that is, until Mother Pearl shooed them away with a fly swatter. Finally, there was Mom-Angie and Mr. Kevin, still going strong. They weren't on the dance floor either. Mr. Kevin was working the grill, with Mom-Angie as his trusty assistant. He serenaded her, using the spatula as his microphone.

I sat on the backyard steps with a plastic birthday tiara on my head, waffling back and forth between laughing at all the goofy dances I was seeing and being close to tears because I felt like such an outsider. I was tempted to check my cell phone, knowing it was pointless. Terry had an hour to go on his summer job at the Banana Republic. Then it would take another half hour to get to my house. Even then, he couldn't stay long. He got a part in the community theater's production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and rehearsal started at seven.

I felt guilty for feeling sad. I definitely was not one of those girls who couldn't be happy unless she was sitting up under her man. At the same time, there was something about Terry that always reassured me and made me feel safe. When I was feeling playful, I would call him my Mr. Boo Bear, like the fuzzy brown teddy bear I used to cling to during scary thunderstorms when I was a kid. Terry hated that name, but said I was free to cling to him anytime I wanted.

"Happy Birthday," a familiar voice whispered from behind me.

I whipped my head around and cheered. "I thought you were still at work!"

"They let me leave early," Terry said, as I flung myself into his arms. "Come on, now. You know I couldn't miss my girl's birthday party."

His girl. I loved it when he said that—and he did say it often. "Well, I'm glad you made it. You want something to eat?"

Terry scanned the surroundings. "Everybody else is dancing. Shouldn't we be dancing, too?"

I twisted up my face. As crazy as I was about Terry, I was not crazy about his dancing. He was a horrible dancer! "You must've been in the library when God handed out rhythm," I always teased him. And he had the nerve to be the drummer in the church, too! A darn good drummer—though his hands

must've stolen all the rhythm, because it sure never made it down to his feet. But before I could say no, Terry yanked me onto the dance floor. I tried to get him to do a simple two-step. Step touch. Step touch. He refused. Instead, he started hopping around, waving his arms like he was doing some sort of Native American war dance. I saw that the good dancers were laughing at him, some even pointing at him. But instead of being embarrassed, I kicked off my flip flops and did a little war dance of my own.

Now I understood why Terry danced this way. It was actually quite freeing. Moving my body however I wanted to, not caring at all about what people thought. It sort of reminded me of running. So, I put all of the effort and energy into the dance, just as I did when I was on the track. My forehead glistened with sweat, and the fake tiara was now lopsided on my head. Happy Birthday! When the music switched to a reggae song, Terry showed me how to break my war dance down to a slower, island groove.

A cake with seventeen flaming candles illuminated my face. My guests crowded around me, singing the birthday song. Just before I blew out the candles, someone shouted, "Make a wish!"

I stopped for a second to give my wish careful consideration. I wanted to get it right. Yet, when I looked around at all the faces that eagerly awaited my next move, my heart flooded with joy. Mom-Angie, Chelsea, Terry, Emily, Kayla, Mother Pearl, Mr. Kevin, Miss Meagan, Mr. Childress, Kamisha, and what looked like half the track team, Miss Wallace, and even a face I had known since childhood, Dwayne. Where had they all come from? When had my world become so full of all these beautiful, beautiful faces?

It dawned on me that I hadn't started out in this new town looking for a fresh start. Just another crappy, old foster home. Mom-Angie helped me see that moving out here was my chance at starting over with a clean slate—and I worked so hard to keep my slate clean. Now, I realized my slate was no longer clean. It was full again. This time, filled with people who loved and supported me. People who didn't judge me for the sins of my past. But were rooting me on to a better tomorrow.

I knew what to wish for. I inhaled and blew out all seventeen of those candles in one breath, and the crowd cheered.

"What did you wish for?" Chelsea asked.

"I can't tell you that," I replied, though inside I hoped that the smoke wafting from the candles would carry my wish right up to heaven: *Thank you, Lord, for my new family. Please watch over my old family.*

While I helped Mom-Angie carve up huge hunks of cake and pass them around, Terry tugged at my elbow and whispered, "I gotta go."

I walked him to his bike, purposely dragging my feet just to keep him there a little while longer. "Thanks for coming," I said.

"Are you serious? I never miss a chance to get my dance on," Terry bit his bottom lip and did a little silly dance.

I laughed. "Yeah, you were definitely the life of the party." I took a step closer and laced my fingers through his. "You know what would have made this day really special?"

"What?" Terry asked, as if he didn't already know the answer.

I closed my eyes and puckered up as if ready to receive my big birthday kiss. Terry leaned in slowly and kissed me on the cheek.

I groaned. "Can't blame a girl for trying."

"I'll see you tomorrow," Terry said, almost as if he wasn't sure.

"Of course!" Tomorrow was the day I had been waiting for. Tomorrow was our first official date. I had been waiting a month for tomorrow.

It wasn't as if Terry didn't want the first date to happen. Things just kept getting in the way on both ends. His play took up two weekends. And, on my end, there was the State Championships, for which Excelsior took first place. In between, came Chelsea's science fair, for which I spent hours helping her pretty up her presentation and wanted to be there to support her. Then we both had finals to study for. Terry didn't mess around when it came to finals. But we did manage to squeeze out some time to be together. For one thing, we had gone back to having lunch together, something that made Emily rejoice.

"It's about time!" she said, the first day I set my tray down beside Terry's. "I was getting tired of laughing at his lame jokes."

"Hey!" Terry protested.

I jumped to his defense, "I'll laugh at your jokes, Boo. It's not Emily's fault she's not sophisticated enough to appreciate your sense of humor."

In addition to lunch, Terry was back to bringing me home from school. Instead of him tutoring me, we just studied together. Then there were text messages, instant messages, little notes that I would find stuffed into the slit in my locker, and phone calls that lasted late into the night. But still no kiss.

Terry was adamant about waiting. Sometimes we even fought about it, especially in the beginning. Then I got a revelation one day in therapy. Terry wasn't rejecting me. His insistence that we not rush into that first kiss was his way of treasuring me. This was a foreign concept to a girl who spent most of her young life believing that a clear sign that a boy liked her was how fast he tried to get in her pants. I knew now it wasn't really me that those boys liked, it was my body.

Terry liked my body too—he wanted to be sure I knew that. He also liked my jokes, my smile, my opinions, my gentleness and my stubbornness. Once I accepted that Terry wasn't trying to run some kind of game on me. Or trying to somehow punish me. I learned to cherish this early, kiss-less stage of our relationship, and my feelings for him grew that much stronger. But I kept my lip balm handy, just in case he changed his mind.

My birthday would have been the perfect time for Terry to change his mind. Of course, he didn't. He gave me a big squeeze and one last kiss on my hand.

"Can you come back after rehearsal?" I said, feeling no shame for being greedy with his time.

He shook his head. "I need my beauty sleep."

"Why? You could sleep for the next ten years and you'll never be more beautiful than me?" I teased.

"Girl, you're lucky it's your birthday."

"I sure am," I said, sweetly. I reached up on my tiptoes and whispered in his ear, "I'm a very lucky girl."

When I opened my eyes the next morning, I knew tomorrow had finally come. My first date with Terry, my first real date ever, had finally come. I had an 11:00 appointment at Sassy's, where my shampoo girl was a bright, fourteen-year-old with big feet, named Chelsea. Chelsea had a brutal shampoo technique. Twice, I was afraid she was going to rip my hair out by the roots. I survived it, knowing my job as shampoo girl was secure. Mom-Angie gave me some flirty curls and bronze highlights that were just right for summer.

"Terry's eyes are gonna fall out of his head when he sees you," Chelsea said, while filing my nails. "You'd better read some of those pamphlets mommy gave me on celibacy."

"Uh, I think I'll be okay," I said. *At the rate we're going I won't have to worry about sex until I'm sixty-five.*

After a long soak in the bathtub with lilac-scented oils, I slipped into a white, halter-topped sundress that danced just above my knees. I slid on chunky gold bangles, a gold anklet, and slipped on my sling-back sandals, then waited. It was 5:46. Terry said he'd be there at six. That meant I had 14 minutes to sit around and be anxious. Time seemed to creep by on the backs of elderly snails. I sprayed a few shots of water on my blossoming African violet. My reminder of everything good that could bloom in my life, if I just gave it a chance. I

stared out the window and hoped to see the car pulling into the driveway, but that was only making me more nervous. I picked up the phone and started to call Emily, then hung up. The last thing I needed was for Emily to flake out and cause me to start doubting myself again. I was on my own. I was going to have to get through these next, now eleven minutes on my own. "God, please help me not to ruin this."

My reflection in the mirror made me do a double-take. I looked darn good. The dress hugged my curves just right. I felt like I should be on the cover of Vogue. Maybe I was overdressed. Maybe this dress would send the wrong message. I was going for cute and casual, not sexy and sassy. For any other boy, sexy and sassy was a good thing. But with Terry, who knew? I

wanted him to drool all over me, not throw a coat over me to cover me up. Just as I was about to dig into my closet and pull out my jeans, the doorbell rang.

I heard Chelsea yell, “Your date’s here!”

He was early. Seven minutes early. I took one last look in the mirror, scooped up my purse, then slipped out the door.

You would have thought it was prom night. So much fuss! I walked down the stairs to the flicker of digital camera flashes. Chelsea wanted to capture every moment. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, Mom-Angie teased my hair and dusted my face with translucent powder to take care of the shine. I didn’t even see Terry at first. I was temporarily blinded by the flash. Once my eyes readjusted and I was able to focus, I saw him. Cute and casual. Dark jeans, red Polo shirt, holding a small bouquet of wildflowers.

“Aw!” Mom-Angie and Chelsea squealed.

“Thanks,” I said, feeling suddenly awkward about hugging Terry in front of these eager eyes. So, I gave him a quick hug. Again, mother and daughter squealed.

“Aw!”

“Will you two cut it out?” I snapped.

“We can’t help it,” Chelsea said, nearly in tears. “You look so cute together.”

I rolled my eyes and handed the flowers to blubbing little adolescent, “Can you put these in some water, please?”

Chelsea thundered out of the room, while carrying the flowers as if they were as fragile as glass. I turned to Mom-Angie, who was still grinning at me. Not sure of what to say at a time like this, I shrugged and said, “I’ll see you later.”

She bear-hugged me, and with earnestness in her voice, said, “Have fun, okay?”

Terry managed to pry me from her arms, “Don’t worry, Miss Angie. I’ll take good care of her.”

Choosing to leave his motorcycle home, Terry borrowed his dad’s car instead. He held open the door, and I climbed in. As soon as Terry slipped behind the steering wheel, his phone vibrated then his face tensed. He pulled the phone out of his pocket and, without even bothering to check the caller ID, silenced it.

He didn’t think I saw the name on the caller ID. I didn’t have to see the name. The way his jaw clenched told me all I needed to know.

“Aren’t you going to answer it?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“It’s okay. Really. I want you to answer it.”

"I don't want to answer it."

"She's just gonna keep calling back until you answer it."

"Then I guess I'd better turn it off," Terry said, as he held the "End" button down. The phone sang a little happy song, then went dark. "There. That's better."

I folded my arms. "No, it's not better. Now, she's going to think I made you turn it off."

"Why do you care what she thinks?"

"Because she's your mother and she hates me." I already knew that Terry's mom, Cindy Miller, didn't think of me as a "decent girl," but now that I was Terry's girlfriend, the woman despised me. Even worse, she didn't even try to hide her feelings. Terry formally introduced me to her backstage after the opening night of his play. The woman looked at me like I was a piece of crap, stuck to the bottom of her Red Bottom shoes that needed to be scraped off. I tried to be friendly, paid her compliments, "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Miller. I love those shoes. Wow! That dress looks great on you."

But she only frowned at me. "Weren't you the girl who I caught calling my son in the middle of the night?" then shot Terry a look that clearly said: *Is this the best you can do?*

Those were just about the only words she even bothered to throw in my direction that night or any other night since. She must've assumed that freezing me out would put a chill on the relationship. Yet when me and Terry were still spending time together after a couple of weeks, and it seemed her son's feelings were getting stronger, Mrs. Miller switched strategies from the freeze out to turning up the heat. If she knew that Terry was out with "that girl," she would call and say she needed him to run an errand, so he'd have to cut his time short with me. At first, Terry kept falling for it, but eventually his honor student mind caught on. He took a stand and told his mom he'd do whatever she wanted *after* he was finished spending time with me.

"See, I told you that girl was a bad influence. She's already got you disrespecting me."

"I'm not disrespecting you, Ma." Terry said, trying hard not to lose his patience.

"Every moment you spend with that trash disrespects me." Mrs. Miller said it loud enough that I was bound to hear her through the phone, though I pretended not to. Terry wasn't fooled. He knew that I heard her, so from that point on, he stopped taking his mother's calls when I was around.

"I don't want to fight about this." Terry now said, as he gunned the engine and backed out of the driveway.

"I don't want to fight either. I just want us all to get along."

He chuckled. "Well, you can forget that. My mom hates all my girlfriends."

I didn't believe him.

"I'm serious. I've never brought a girl home that she liked. Never."

"Never, huh?" I shifted in my seat to get a good look at his face, using my eyes as a lie detector. "What about Mercedes?"

"Thought she was an airhead."

Well, at least we agree on something, I thought. "And Emily?"

"Too quiet. Mom says, quiet girls are sneaky. But it's not about the girl, Toya. She looks for a reason to hate them: either they're too ugly or too pretty, too short, too tall, too fat, too skinny. One girl, she told me, was too perfect."

I already knew my flaw. I was too ghetto. Terry's mom pegged me as one of those hood rat girls, who would purposely get knocked up just so they could trap a sweet, innocent boy like her dear Terry. Mrs. Miller had invested too much in her son. He was going to be rich and successful; and she didn't want some little ghetto princess holding him back. Since I had no plans of having a baby until I was in my thirties, Mrs. Miller really didn't have anything to worry about. I had plans of my own, dreams of my own. And I did not need a "baby daddy" to achieve my goals. Right now, my goal was to have a great first date and not let anybody get in the way of that.

I rested my hand on top of Terry's and said, "You're right. She's your mother and you know best how to handle her."

"Well, thank you," he said, a little worried that I had given in so easily. "I appreciate that."

The car picked up speed and we were on our way. As we rode along, something new crept into my mind. "So uh... how many girlfriends have you had?"

* * * * *

Dinner at the Cheesecake Factory. It was my choice. I was going to pick my favorite restaurant, but going to the Olive Garden would only remind me of my mother and the Christmas lunch we shared when we were still on speaking terms. We celebrated Chelsea's birthday at the Cheesecake Factory this past March, and I remembered liking it, so there we were. I guess I wasn't the only one who liked it. The place was packed. There was at least a forty-five-minute wait. Luckily, Terry had a friend, Alicia, from the Drama Club, who was a hostess there, and she managed to bump us to the top of the list.

From where I sat, I could see the whole restaurant. There were lots of couples out for a night on the town on a hot Saturday night. Laughing, flirting, holding hands, stealing kisses. To be surrounded by so much love, I felt strangely cold. As hard as I tried, I couldn't get Terry's mom out of my head. I couldn't really blame the woman for wanting to protect her son. If I had a son and he brought home a girl like me, I might not be too happy about it either. The more I thought these thoughts, the more I could feel myself

shrinking back. My hair was just as pretty, my dress just as beautiful as anybody in the place, but I felt trashy.

In a flash, I was gone; no longer sitting in the restaurant chatting with Terry, though my body remained in the seat. The rest of me had been sucked into a swamp of self-loathing. I saw no way to climb out. There was no more spark. My eyes were vacant. My mouth had been emptied of words. And in this noisy, bustling restaurant, my silence drowned out the rest of the crowd.

“Are you okay?” Terry finally asked.

“Mmm hmm.”

More silence, which Terry tried to fill with some semblance of conversation. “Are you sure you want to see this zombie movie? I heard the Kevin Hart movie was hilarious.”

“Whatever you want to see is fine with me.” I said, thinking I was being agreeable, but really I was getting on Terry’s nerves.

He didn’t give up. “You know what you want?”

“Huh?”

“I said, do you know what you want to eat.”

I stared at the menu, trying to make my eyes focus. “Um...I’ll just get whatever you’re getting.”

“Okay. I’m getting the peanut butter and jelly, with baked potato on the side.”

“Sounds good.” I hadn’t heard anything he said.

“Toya!” He startled me.

“What?”

“What is wrong with you?”

“What?”

“Did you hear a word I said?”

“Huh?” and I realized I still hadn’t heard a word he said. “I’m sorry, Terry. I was thinking about something.”

“Thinking about what?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing,” I replied, trying really hard to sound cool.

Terry wasn’t buying it. “You’re thinking about my mother, aren’t you?”

“Huh? No! I told you, I’m over that.”

“Then what is it?”

This was bad. I used to be good at lying. Now it was a struggle to come up with a good excuse for being so distant. “I just...I’m just a little nervous, that’s all.” *Good one, Toya. Talk about your feelings. That shuts the boys up every time.* But I forgot that I wasn’t talking to the average boy, this was Terry.

“What’s making you so nervous?” He probed deeper, sounding like the son of a psychologist that he was.

“You know. It’s our first date. I want everything to be perfect,” which was the truth—sort of.

“It is perfect. All you have to do is relax and—” Terry’s eyes lit up as he

reached into his pants pocket. "I know what'll help you relax."

"What are you—"

From his pocket, Terry pulled out a tiny gift box with a silver bow on top. "Happy Birthday."

"Terry! You didn't have to...I thought we said dinner and a movie was gonna be my present."

"It is...," Terry said with a big, satisfied grin on his face. "But I wanted you to have this too."

Instead of the eager anticipation I normally felt when I opened a present, I felt dread. I opened the box. I was speechless.

"I saw them at the mall yesterday and they made me think of you...," Terry said. "You know, how you told me that your mom made you give back the earrings she gave you."

They were beautiful. A pair of gold, heart-shaped earrings sparkled in my hands. They weren't nearly as flashy as the ones my mother gave me. They were simple and elegant and absolutely the last thing I needed to see right now. It must have shown on my face.

"What's wrong? You hate them, don't you?"

"No. They're beautiful. It's just..." I couldn't look at him. He looked so hurt. What a mess! This date was a mess. I was a mess! I had to get out of there before I made it any worse. I scooped up my purse, slapped the earrings inside then bolted for the door, blurting out, "Um ...I've gotta go to the bathroom."

Like a woman whose weave was on fire, I sprinted through the dining hall, dipping and dodging my way through the tables. My heart was pounding its way out of my chest. I flew through the lobby, dashed by the pretty display of cheesecakes, sped right past the ladies' room, and right out the front door.

CHAPTER 36

The warm, muggy air almost suffocated me. I took in quick, shallow breaths as my mind—what was left of my mind, for I was sure I was losing it—my mind raced, trying to decide my next move. If I walked across the parking lot, I could catch the 124 bus and be halfway home before Terry even realized I was gone. What difference did it make anyway? After tonight, I wouldn't have to worry about a kiss anymore. I'd be lucky if he ever spoke to me again.

I pulled out my phone to see how much time I had until the next bus came. It was 7:22. I rode that bus a million times before with Emily and knew it left around 7:40. If I hurried, I could make it. But when I went to put the phone back in my purse, I saw Terry's gift. It had been the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for me. Terry tried to right a wrong that had been done to me by my mother, and I was going to repay him by standing him up at the Cheesecake Factory.

"Would you like to wait for your date to come back before you order?" I could imagine the waitress saying.

I pictured him checking his watch and saying, "Well, she's been gone for over an hour, I don't think she's coming back."

Then the waitress would look at him with pained eyes and say, "Aw, you poor thing! Well, you're better off without her. She looked like a real piece of trash."

I shook off that thought. In a brief moment of sanity, I dialed a number and listened to the phone ring.

"Hello."

The sound of that voice made me want to cry, but I choked down the emotion and tried to sound cheerful, "Hey."

"Toya? What are you—is everything all right?"

"Yeah. Fine."

"Then why are you—where's Terry?" A gasp. "Did he get fresh with you?"

"No. No, Mom-Angie. Terry's good."

"Well, if you're fine and he's good. Why are you calling me, getting me all hysterical?"

"Because..." I sighed. "It's terrible. I'm such a mess!" Through tears and heavy sighs, I proceeded to catch my foster mother—and counselor—up on everything that happened from the moment the Terry's phone first vibrated. "...And you should see these earrings. They're so beautiful. Why? Why would he do that?"

"Because he likes you."

"Yeah, but why? Doesn't he know he can do much better than me?"

Mom-Angie was quiet for a moment. "Oh, I see. So, you actually believe that garbage his mom's been saying."

"No!" I said, confidently, then whined, "Maybe—a little."

"Toya!" Mom-Angie sighed, "You've come so far, Honey. Don't let one person take away what you've worked so hard to build."

"I'm trying not to, but sometimes I just feel so, so...damaged. Like those dented cans of peaches in the supermarket. You know, the ones they sell for fifty cents because nobody wants them."

"But you're not damaged," Mom-Angie said, in a soothing voice.

"Yes, I am. I've been abused, abandoned, tossed aside. You name it. I've done it. And Terry..."

"Knows all about it."

"...Deserves better," I said, and then felt another wave of tears spilling out of my eyes.

"Isn't that for him to decide? I mean, it's not like he's been on the moon for the past year. He knows about your past, Sweetie. But even better, he's taken the time to get to know you. Just like I have. And take it from me, you're worth a whole lot more than some ol' dented can of peaches."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. You're more like a big can of imported coffee. Now that's expensive! Dent or no dent," Mom-Angie teased. "You're smiling. I can feel you smiling."

I was smiling, which was why I called her in the first place. I knew if anyone could talk me off the ledge, my Mom-Angie could. Yet, as desperate as I was to turn my back on the ledge, something kept calling me back. "But what if Terry—"

"What if nothing!" Mom-Angie switched on her no-nonsense motherly tone. "Look, if you like the boy, you make it work. If you don't like him, then be woman enough to walk back into that restaurant, look him in the eye and say: 'Hey. Thanks for the date, but it's not going to work cuz I'm a big chicken and I'm afraid of your mommy.' Now, which one do you want to

do?”

“Make it work,” I mumbled.

“I can’t hear you.”

“Make it work,” I said louder.

“Good. Now, you get in there and you make it work. You hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Just before I hung up the phone, Mom-Angie added, “Oh, and Toya?”

“Yes?”

“While you’re there, can you pick me up one of those white chocolate cheesecakes?”

“I want the one with the Snickers in it.” I heard Chelsea yell in the background.

“And get Chelsea the Snickers Chunk cheesecake.”

Before heading back to my table, I made a quick stop in the ladies' room. In the mirror, I could see that my face was all sweaty from being out in the humidity. My hair was completely flat. Still a mess. I splashed cold water on my face and instantly felt refreshed. When I looked back at the mirror, I saw something different staring back at me. Not a face, but many faces. The faces that had been smiling back at me yesterday when I blew out my birthday candles. Those people didn’t see me as trash. Because that’s not what I was to them. I was a friend, a girlfriend, a teammate, a sister, a daughter. It was just like Mom-Angie told me all those months ago. In order for people to see the good in me, I had to start believing there was good in me. Once I believed it, others would start believing it too.

And that’s just what happened. Slowly but surely, people started to see the good in me, too. Even when I took my eyes off the good, it was still there, because, as I now realized, it had been there all along. I had been so busy staring at the dents in my can, it never even dawned on me that the peaches inside were still good. And dents could be smoothed out. Sweaty faces could be dried off. And flat hair could be pulled into the most dazzling ponytail.

Like a cheerful little bunny, I bounced back into the dining area, my brand-new earrings bobbing on my ears. Terry was alone at the table, sipping on his water with lost puppy dog eyes. I snuck up from behind him, threw my arms around his neck and planted a big kiss on his cheek. “That’s for making this the best birthday ever!” I said and fell back into my seat.

Before the stunned Terry could open his mouth, Sandi, our waitress, appeared. She must’ve been lurking around the table the whole time I was gone, because there was a hint of an attitude in her charming voice. “Well, there she is! So, are you two ready to order?”

“I’m not hungry,” Terry grumbled.

Sandi the Waitress looked appalled. Until I let out a fake laugh. “He’s

joking. He's so funny!" I snatched up the menu and scanned it quickly. "Um...Babe, I don't see the peanut butter and jelly on the menu. So, why don't we both get the quesadillas for an appetizer, a couple of Caesar salads, and two parmesan chicken sandwiches with fries?"

I looked at Terry. Sandi looked at Terry.

"Fine."

Sandi finished jotting down our order and then scooped up the menus. "I'll bring you some more waters."

When the waitress was gone, I found myself in a stare-down with Terry. I smiled, innocently, hoping he would find me so irresistible that he simply could not stay mad at me.

"What?"

"What? Is that all you have to say to—" He sounded like he was about to explode, but he bit his tongue and instead asked, "Are you on something?"

"Am I on what?"

"I don't know. What did you do when you disappeared?" He leaned in, lowering his voice. "Did you...you know, smoke something?"

"No! Of course not! You know I don't do drugs."

"I don't know anything. I mean, one minute you're totally out of it. Next thing I know, you disappear to God knows where; and when you come back, you're bouncing all over the place like the Sunshine Fairy."

"I know. I'm sorry. That's why I left. I had to send that sad, gloomy Toya back to where she came from. She was ruining our date."

Terry let that one sink in a minute. "Well, where did she come from?"

I shrugged. "The past."

"Interesting." His shoulders relaxed. "You think she'll be coming back anytime soon?"

"Not if I can help it. She's a pain in the butt."

Terry smiled —finally. "She's not a pain. She's just scared. But it's okay, I get scared too, sometimes."

"You do?"

"Yes! Especially when I see my date running across the parking lot."

* * * * *

I climbed out of the car a changed woman. Laughing, smiling, arms swinging carefree at my sides. Terry shut the car door behind me. In one hand, he carried the bag that held two hunks of cheesecake for Mom-Angie and Chelsea, his free hand rested around my shoulder.

"Well, we did it. We survived our first date," he said, playfully.

I inhaled the sweet scent of summer in the air, then exhaled. "You think there'll be more?"

"I hope so. Though, I probably won't be taking you to see anymore horror movies."

"Yeah, right!" I nudged him. "You were scared, too! I saw you squirming around in your seat."

"That's cuz you were squeezing my hand so hard."

Terry had me laughing all the way to the front door, then he grew quiet. He sat down on the top step. I plopped down beside him. As a little girl, I used to love gazing up at the moon and wishing on the stars, but it had been a long time since I even bothered to look up at the nighttime sky. Now, I couldn't tear my eyes away from it. The stars bedazzled the night, like silver glitter against a velvety swatch of midnight blue, while the pale-yellow moon sat high and seemed to be smiling down upon us.

It was as if God had created this masterpiece of a night for two young lovers to admire. I wondered what I could see if I sat on top of the moon. Hanging up there with all the stars, could I see tomorrow? Could I look down through the clouds and spot a young girl who was absolutely glowing in the presence of love.

I remembered something. "Ya know, this is where we first met."

Terry did a quick search of his memory. "I thought we met at church."

"No, I first saw you at church, but we met right here on this porch. Remember? I braided your hair for football camp."

"Yeah. Hey, didn't you stab me in the head with a comb that day?"

I slapped my hand over my mouth. "I forgot all about that part."

"I didn't." He rubbed the back of his head, as if it still hurt.

"I'm sorry! I was nervous. I mean, this cute boy comes over and wants me to braid his hair. I didn't know what to do with myself."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I always stab people in the head with a comb when I'm nervous." Terry laughed as I buried my face in my knees, mortified. He let me off the hook by brushing his chin against my shoulder and saying, "So you thought I was cute, huh?"

I nodded, still covering my face.

Gently, he took my hands from my face. "I thought you were cute, too."

I looked up at him and smiled. "You did?"

"Gorgeous."

"Not gorgeous enough to ask out."

"I was scared. Who wants to go out with a girl who carries a deadly weapon?"

"A comb is not a deadly weapon!"

"It is when *you're* carrying it." He put my hand to his lips and kissed it. "I was thinking about growing my hair out and getting braids again."

"Why?" I snatched my hand back. "Please don't tell me you're thinking about playing football again."

"No. I just thought it was a good look for me."

"Oh, thank God!" I breathed out a sigh of relief.

He was a little offended. "But it's good to know you'd have my back if I

did decide to play.”

“Oh, I’d have your back, all right,” I said. “...and your arm and your leg and any other body parts you left on the field.”

Now, it was Terry’s turn to cover his face, mortified, but still laughing. When he looked up at me, his face turned serious. “I’m really glad you’re my girlfriend.”

“Me too. I-I mean, I’m glad you’re my boyfriend.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever met a girl who made me laugh like you do.”

“Thanks.” I wasn’t sure if that’s what I wanted to be known for. *Not the prettiest girlfriend, but she sure was the funniest.* Sort of like being the fastest girl at fat camp; or the coolest girl in tuba section of the marching band.

Again, Terry must’ve been reading my mind, because he stroked my face, delicately, and said, “You’re definitely the most beautiful girl I’ve ever dated. Smart and brave and...if I don’t kiss you soon, I think I’m gonna bust.”

His mouth was within an inch of mine when I pulled away. “Oh yeah...about that. I think we should wait a little longer.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’m ready yet,” I teased. For once, I got to watch Terry squirm. But not for too long. After all, I had been dreaming about this moment since I first laid eyes on him. “Maybe we should wait till after our wedding day, or our kid’s first birthday.”

Terry nodded and said, “That’s cool. I can wait.” He stood up.

“Hey! I was kidding. I was just kidding!” I tried to pull him back down beside me, but he wouldn’t budge.

“No, you’re right. It’s too soon.”

I jumped to my feet. “Quit playing! You know I was only—”

I always pictured our first kiss in slow motion, hearts pounding, anticipation building, as his lips crept closer to mine. Maybe even with violins playing in the background. It wasn’t like that at all. As soon as Terry pulled my body close to his, and pressed his lips against mine, it felt like all the air escaped from my lungs. I melted into his arms, losing all sense of time and space.

This was more than a kiss. This was a conversation. An expression of deep affection. A communication of feelings too intense for words. It was worth it. I would never admit it, but it was so worth the wait. A kiss I would remember for the rest of my life. A kiss that would make my eyes turn all dreamy whenever I retold this story to some girl who thought she knew, but really had no clue, what it felt like to really be kissed.

In between surges of passion, we came up for air. “Wow. You really are a good kisser.” I said, still breathless.

“You sound surprised.”

“I’m not. But I was just thinking, we probably should have waited a little longer. Like until after graduation or something.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because, now that we’ve started, I am never going stop kissing you.” I leaned in again. Each kiss sweeter than the last. And just when it seemed like I would fulfill my promise to never stop kissing him, the porch light flickered off and on.

“Okay, you two. You’re gonna melt my cheesecake.” Mom-Angie stood in the doorway in her bathrobe, her arms folded. “Say goodnight, Terry.”

Terry looked at me like he was being asked to part with his favorite teddy bear. “Good night.”

I sighed, still clinging to his sleeve. “Good night.” When I finally let go, Terry kissed me on the cheek. I watched him head back into the car and wave, one last time, before driving away. My lips were still tingling, and my heart felt full. As full as that giant moon hanging up in the sky. Too full for sadness, or fear, or even doubt. Yet there was always room for hope. Maybe this would last. Maybe we would be one of those couples, high school sweethearts, who stayed together for the rest of their lives. How did Mom-Angie put it? “You have to believe it first. That’s what faith is. Believing it will happen even when you can’t see it.”

And at that moment, I believed.

EPILOGUE

August 14, 2015 - A wise woman once said, “Girl, you ain’t been kissed, until you’ve been kissed by a man who truly loves you.” And she was so right! I know it for a fact, because today, Terry told me that he loved me. I still can’t believe it. That’s why I’m writing it all down. I don’t want to forget this day, for a couple of reasons. And I know it’s been a while since I’ve written anything in here, but I’ve been busy. Seriously, who feels like coming home and writing, when they’ve spent all day in summer school? Anyway, back to the love!

Me and Terry were out at Target picking up some school supplies. All day, he was talking my ears off about what schools he still wanted to apply to. I was trying to be a good girlfriend. To be supportive, since he was so excited. But inside, I was having a mini-meltdown. I kept thinking, this time next year we’ll be going our own separate ways. He’ll be off at Harvard or Yale. And I’ll be God only knows where.

That’s all he talked about the whole way home. I felt like shaking him and saying: *Will you shut up! What are you so excited about? Can’t you see I’m dying over here?!!* But I didn’t. I just smiled and said, “Good for you, Terry. That sounds great.”

Finally, he was like, “Well, what schools are you looking at?” And I told him I didn’t know. I was just going to play it by ear. He looked at me real strange and said, “Okay, but that really doesn’t help me.”

Then I said, “What are you talking about, Terry?”

And he said, “I guess I just figured, we’d try and pick the same schools. You know, so we could go together.”

I was blown away. I mean, I didn’t even know he was thinking about me like that. I started feeling nervous. Don’t get me wrong, I was happy. I was definitely happy to hear him say that. But then—you know me—my mind started running through all the things that could possibly go wrong with his

plan, like: My grades aren't good enough, so I end up going to some low-budget school, and he goes too because he feels guilty then ends up hating me because he missed out on his dream school.

Or we both get into some big, fancy school and he ends up falling in love with my roommate—some stuck-up little, Ugg-boot-wearing princess, whose biggest worry is whether to have her daddy buy her a nose job or a boob job for her 21st birthday. And I'm stuck at this snooty school, with no friends, no man, a million miles away from home. I was getting all freaked out, but I tried to play it off by saying, "Are you sure you want to do that? What makes you think we won't be hating each other again by the end of the school year?"

Then he said it: "Because I love you, Toya."

And you know what? I said it right back. Without overthinking it, without getting all weird about it, I just said it: "I love you, too." It felt so good to say it. Not like I hadn't been thinking it. Apparently, Terry had been thinking it too, cuz he said, he's been wanting to say it to me for a while, but he was afraid he might scare me off. I wasn't scared. It felt so natural, like saying "good morning" or "how you doing?"

Best of all, I am the first girl he ever said that to—unless you count Amy Chen, who was his girlfriend when he was in the first grade. Amy Chen! The girl who shaved her head bald, last year. Now, she's got red pimples on the top of her head. Though Terry insists she was cute in the first grade. "And she'd let me kiss her, if I gave her bubble gum," he added.

I dug in my pocketbook for a piece of bubble gum, but all I had was a cough drop. I asked him, "What can I get for this?" And that's when he did it. He kissed me. Only it wasn't the boy who likes me that was kissing me; it was the boy who loves me. It was really nice. Really nice. I said, "You used to kiss Amy Chen like that?"

He fell out laughing, "Eww! I was only six years old."

Which was good, cuz I didn't wanna have to go beat Amy down. Then Terry gave me that look he always gives me when he's trying to be serious, and he said it again. "I love you." I said it back. We kissed some more.

Just when it was really starting to get good, Chelsea busted through the door. Actually, she just walked in the room, since I'm not allowed to have the door closed when Terry's in my room. But it felt like she busted in, because we both jumped.

Then came the crazy part:

Chelsea told me that Miss Meagan had stopped by earlier for her regular meeting with Mom-Angie. She dropped off this letter for me, which Chelsea gave me, then stood there and waited for me to open it.

After I kicked her out of my room, I opened the letter.

I stared at the words for what felt like forever, trying to make sense of what my eyes were seeing. Terry touched my shoulder, and I snapped out of my trance. I sat down on the bed and collected myself. I had to wait for my

hands to stop trembling before reading the letter. It went like this:

Dear Tee-Tee,

I know I'm probably the last person you ever expected to hear from, but here I am. I've missed you so much, baby doll. You may not believe that since you haven't heard from me for so, so long, but you are always on my mind. I would've written to you sooner, but your mother wouldn't give us any info. She kept saying, she wanted to wait until you and her worked things out first before bringing in the rest of the family. I didn't like it, but I didn't want to start no trouble.

I was so excited when I heard that you were coming to my birthday party. I was going to cook up some of your favorite macaroni and cheese. And all of your cousins were going to come, just to see you. Even the ones from down South. You remember Jesse and Peanut and them? Well, they remember you. So anyway, you can't imagine how disappointed we all were when we found out you weren't coming. I keep telling Tamika, "You gonna have to answer to God for choosing a man over your own baby girl, like that." But you know how she is.

I begged Tamika to at least give me your number, or your social worker's number, so I could talk to you. Just because she didn't want anything to do with you, didn't mean the whole family had to suffer. She refused to give me the number. I didn't know what to do. I'm not used to dealing with the system. All I could do was put it in God's hands. Don't you know, the Lord heard my prayers?

I've been over your mom's house a lot lately, helping her out with the baby. The other day, I was straightening up around the house, and I found this envelope in the trash. It was a

letter from the social worker. Well, I said, "Thank you, Jesus!" and stuck that letter in my brassiere until I got it home. That's how I was able to get in touch with your social worker.

She told me you were doing real good. I was so happy to hear that, because I've heard those foster homes can be something awful. And you're on the track team! You know, your daddy was a real fast runner. He wasn't on the track team or nothing. But a couple of times, I caught him sneaking into your mother's room, and before I could go and get my baseball bat, your dad would be flying up the street like the wind.

Since I know you're doing so good where you are, I told the social worker that I wasn't trying to get custody, I just wanted to be able to see you. She said that would be up to you, but she would give you my letter. So I hope that you get this. I'm putting all my information in this letter. My address, phone number, cell phone. I'm even on the internet now. Dante and D'Andre set me up with my own email address.

They're doing fine and they told me to tell you hi. Your Pop-Pop is doing good too. Just as crazy as ever! The doctor told him to lay off the salt, so I stopped buying all them salty snacks he used to like. Doggone if I don't keep finding little bags of Doritos hidden all over my house. He's been giving the twins money to buy that junk and letting them keep the change. Maybe you can talk some sense into him. He always listened to you.

Toya, I am so sorry for all you've been through. I want you to know that I pray for you every night. I hope you decide to get in touch with me, but if you don't, I'll understand. And I'll still love you. I almost forgot! I put a picture of your baby brother in the envelope. He's such a good baby. And greedy! Every time

he sees me walking towards him with a bottle in my hand, he just starts grinning and grinning. Any chance I get, I tell him all about you. I don't care what your mother says, as long as there's breath in my lungs, that boy's going to know that he has a big sister out there, and she's a good person. Take care of yourself, baby doll. Hope to hear from you soon.

I love you, always.

-Granny Jean

By the time I finished reading the letter, I was bawling my eyes out. Then when I saw the picture of my baby brother, I really lost it. At first, I wasn't sure if I wanted to see him. I knew his name was Ricky, so I was afraid that he would look just like his father. He doesn't. Thank God! He looks just like my mom. And he's got these cute little chubby cheeks. He seems so sweet. Innocent. Like he has no idea what kind of mess he was born into.

I don't know what to do about Granny Jean's letter. I want to see my family, but at the same time, these past few months have been so nice. You know, not having anybody call me names or threatening me. Not having to peek over my shoulder and wonder if someone's stalking me. I like living drama-free. But I also love my family. I've come to accept the fact that having my family in my life means having the drama. The question is, can I deal with it? Do I want to deal with it?

Terry said, whatever I decided to do, he would have my back. That's nice, but it really doesn't help me make up my mind. After he left, I read the letter five more times. Cried every time. And I'm still confused. I guess I don't have to make up my mind right now. I'll talk it out with Mom-Angie and Miss Meagan. They'll listen, give me their opinions, then I'll end up calling Granny Jean, anyway. I know I will. I'm already smelling that macaroni and cheese and hearing her laugh right now.

Anyway, I'd better get going. Emily wants me to go with her today. She's about to get another tattoo. I told her I'd go with her, but I'm not getting no tattoo. My body is a temple and I'm not putting no graffiti on my temple. If I ever did decide to get a tattoo, though, I know just what I'd get. I saw it on Animal Planet. It's a butterfly shedding its cocoon and just flying away. I sketched it out and showed it to Terry. He said it would never work, because the way the cocoon was falling away from the butterfly's body, makes it look like it's taking a dump. And I would get tired of explaining to everybody what it really meant. He's probably right.

But that doesn't mean I couldn't still use it. I'd just have to have someone who actually knows how to draw, sketch it for me: A beautiful butterfly breaking free of the shell that had been holding her back, taking flight for her next adventure.

Just like me.

Toya Young-Hughes





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catresa “Cat” Meyers is an Attorney and Assistant Professor in the Criminal Justice Department at Temple University. Prior to becoming an attorney, Cat worked for a number of years as a foster care Social Worker and Therapist.

In discussing the reasons why she wrote *Boy Toy*, Cat explains: “Several years ago, I interviewed for a volunteer position with an organization that advocated for abused children. One of the interviewers started describing some of the abuse cases they handled, which were truly heartbreaking. She wrapped it up by saying: “...and it’s just awful. I mean, those kids’ lives are *ruined!*” I knew what she meant, but inside I cringed a little. I had to politely let her know that those kids’ lives weren’t ruined—well, at least they didn’t have to be. Yes, it can be hard at times; and there will be moments of tears and rage. As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I’m a witness to all of that. But I also know that many survivors, including myself, experience a tremendous amount of peace, joy, love, success and fulfillment! This is a message I’ve always strived to convey to all of the “Toya’s” in my life: Young girls who were sexually assaulted and now feel like they are damaged goods—ruined; and because of that, they are not entitled to the best that life has to offer. I guess I think of *Boy Toy* as my love letter to all those girls (and women), who got off to a rough start. I want them to know that doesn’t have to be the end of their story. They have the power to write the ending they want in life. I want them to know that, just like *Toya*, there is a lot of good out there that this world still has to offer them; and there is so much good in them that they have to share with this world...”

When she’s not writing, Cat enjoys the beach, making it a personal mission to visit as many beaches as she can around the world. She also loves painting, sketching, baking, and playing tennis. To find out more about Cat and her writing projects, check out her website: www.catmeyers.com, where you’ll discover other gems such as:

- Book Club Discussion Questions for *Boy Toy*
- Excerpts from her upcoming novel
- Info about all of her more recent books.