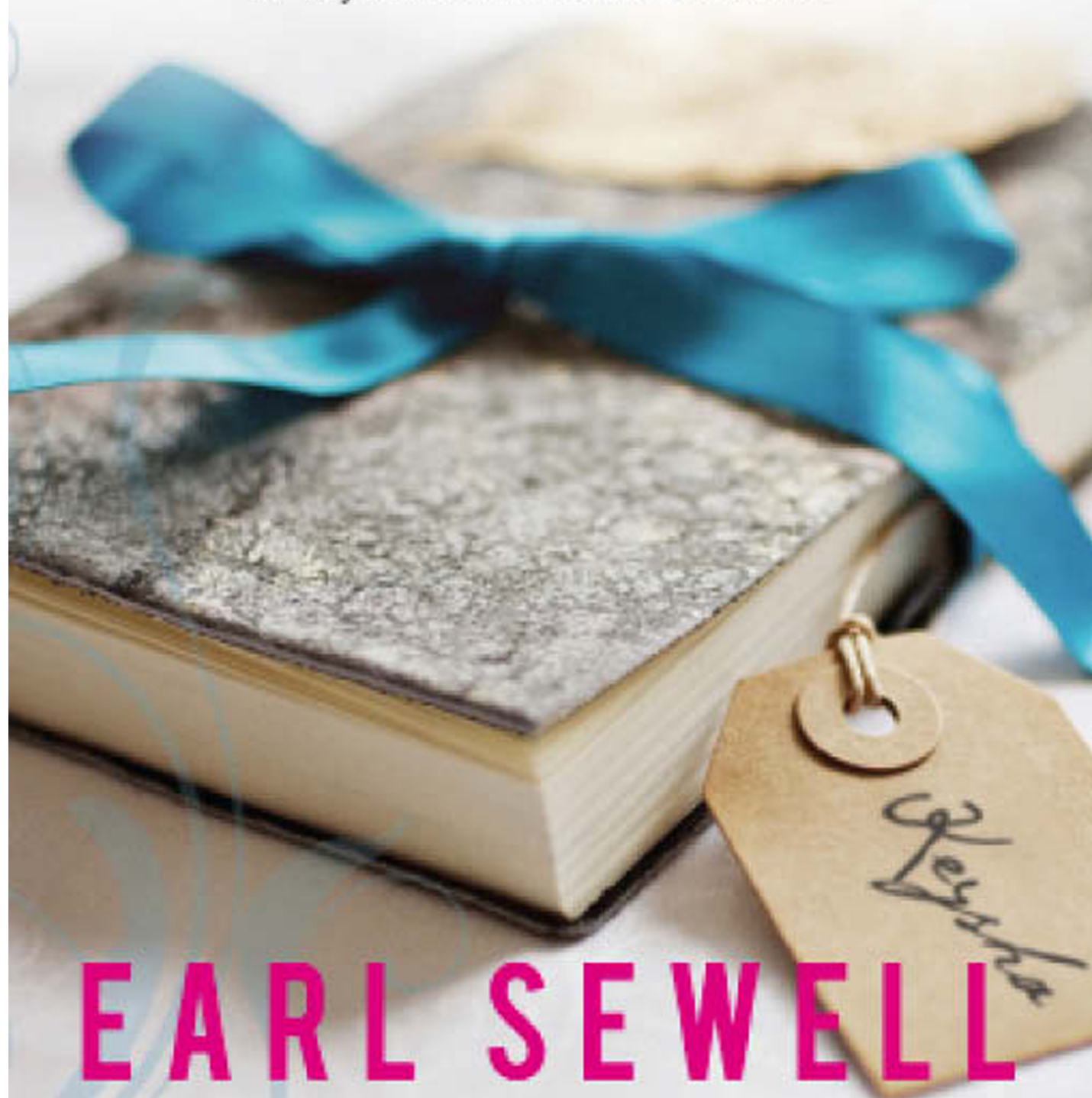


The Keysha Diaries

—Volume One—

A Keysha and Friends Collection



EARL SEWELL

Earl Sewell

**The Keysha Diaries, Volume
One: Keysha's Drama**

«HarperCollins»

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The Keysha Diaries, Volume One: Keysha's Drama / E. Sewell —
«HarperCollins»,

Do you know Keysha Kendall? Enter the world of the Keysha and Friends series – for the first time, the two original stories in this compelling series are collected into one special volume. **KEYSHA'S DRAMA** Sixteen-year-old Keysha Kendall is a judge's signature away from foster care when she's sent to live with the father she never knew. Suddenly she has her own room in his big fancy house, a high-powered stepmother and a popular half-brother who can introduce her to all the right people at her new school. But Keysha can't forget where she came from and she won't let anyone else, either. Why should her father and his perfect family have it so easy when she and her mother had it so hard? So Keysha hooks up with a rough crowd and does whatever she wants...until what she wants changes really fast... **IF I WERE YOUR BOYFRIEND** How has Keysha gone from popular to social outcast? A girl she thought was her friend planted drugs on her, and Keysha got caught. Now all of the negative attention has turned everyone against her. At school, Keysha is stared at and whispered about, no one will talk to her, and the girl who ruined Keysha's reputation just laughs in her face. So when a guy with his own bad rep offers to help, Keysha has doubts. However she soon realizes that Wesley Morris is more than just a hot guy, he is someone who has turned his own life around. Still her family doesn't want him anywhere near Keysha. But Wesley isn't willing to walk away. He'll even risk everything to prove Keysha's innocence... and save their relationship.

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Feel free to send me an email at earl@earlsewell.com. Please be sure to put the title of the novel in the subject line. You may also follow me at www.facebook.com/authorearlsewell or at www.twitter.com/earlsewell.

Dear person who currently has my diary and is invading my privacy,

Were you so curious that you had to pick up my diary to snoop around? Is this something you do often? Since you're holding this book, I bet you can't wait to find out what fascinating secrets and scandals are in these pages. Come on! Admit it! I would think the same thing.

Because you obviously want to know more about me and I feel like sharing today, I guess I'll start by telling you a little bit about myself. You may want to find someplace quiet where you can focus and pay attention. A lot has happened in my mere sixteen years on this earth.

My name is Keysha, but you can call me Ke Ke. And as it seems, I have way too much drama in my life. Drama hovers around my head, as if it's my own personal storm cloud. Have you ever felt

that way? Like one day, everyone wakes up and decides it is national hate on you day? The craziness I live with makes me want to scream.

My life isn't pretty:

My grandmother is incarcerated.

My mother is about to go to jail.

I don't know who my biological father is.

And I'm about to be shipped off to a state-run group home for at-risk teens.

And as if that isn't enough, I meet a girl in a situation similar to mine. I think she is my friend, but unbeknownst to me, she turns out to be a backstabber. Have you ever met a person who smiles in your face, but talks about you when your back is turned? I get angry every time I think about her. I'm serious. There should be a law against people like her.

On top of having to deal with that frenemy, there's a guy (with some serious issues of his own) who likes me. He steps to me with a line of poetry that he supposedly wrote for me, as if I would fall for that one. Well, maybe I do believe him, just a little.

Okay, I think that's enough for now. Are you ready? I am. Now turn the page, enter my world, and learn more about me in The Keysha Diaries, Volume One....

Keysha's Drama

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“Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor.”

—James A. Baldwin

one

No matter how hard I tried to get Ronnie's attention he wouldn't look at me. He avoided eye contact by toying with the ring tones on his cellular phone. His unwillingness to look me in the eye and speak directly to me annoyed me. Ronnie was seventeen and stood about five foot nine inches tall. He had brown skin just like mine and wore his hair French braided. That day he was wearing an oversize white T-shirt, baggy Sean John jeans and what appeared to be a new pair of Nike Air Force One gym shoes. We were standing on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building that he lived in with his mother. In the distance I heard the thud of music from a trunk amp bouncing against the air. Ronnie is my boyfriend, or should I say was my boyfriend until I caught him snuggled up with some girl inside of a movie theater. When I saw him and the other girl I decided to play it cool at first, you know, just to make sure that I wasn't overreacting. I discreetly positioned myself in a seat directly behind them so that I could keep a close eye on them. No sooner than the lights went down, Ronnie took off his jacket, hooked it around her shoulders and began kissing her. That's when I lost it. Before I could even think rationally, I began attacking them both. I slapped him on the head and pulled her hair. It wasn't long before two movie theater ushers rushed in to stop my assault as well as ask me to leave. At the time I didn't give Ronnie a chance to explain what was going on and who the girl was. To be honest, I really didn't care who she was. All I knew was that my boyfriend, who had told me at least twenty times he loved me the night before, wasn't acting like it.

The movie theater incident happened weeks ago. I hadn't seen or heard from Ronnie since that time because I had to move away due to a load of family drama that was going on in my life. During the time I was away, I cried a lot partly because of the situation my family was in and partly because I really missed Ronnie. Now that I'd returned to my old neighborhood, I thought for sure Ronnie had missed me at least a little. I also wanted to give him a chance to explain himself as well as see if we could forget about what happened in the past and start over. Besides, I'd heard that he was no longer with the girl he'd been caught cheating with.

I tried once again to get Ronnie to acknowledge me. When our eyes finally met, I could tell he wanted me to disappear and forget that we ever had anything meaningful.

"Why did you even come around here looking for me?" he snapped at me as if the very sight of me irritated him like a bad skin rash.

"Don't you bark at me like that," I shouted back at him. "I thought you'd missed me and I wanted to give you a chance to explain yourself. So, what happened between us, Ronnie?" I asked straight out.

"I've already told you. It's over between us. You're playing too many games, girl. I'm just not into you anymore."

"But why? What did I do?"

"You're crazy for starters," Ronnie said and then was silent for a long moment as I waited for him to elaborate. "Look, you just need to forget you even know me. In fact, just erase my name and face out of your memory."

"How can you say that to me? After all we've been through? You told me you loved me and no matter what we'd be together. You promised me, Ronnie, you promised me that you'd never hurt my heart." I raised my voice at him. I couldn't help it because my heart was hurting. It didn't matter that we hadn't seen each other in two months, my heart was still broken and I wanted an explanation.

"Look, girl!" he said, pointing his index finger at me as if it was a weapon.

"Oh, now I'm just some girl?" Whenever I got upset about something, no matter how calm I tried to be my voice would always express how I truly felt. "Get your finger out of my face." I quickly grabbed his index finger and tried to twist it off his hand. I wanted to hurt him at that moment. I wanted him to feel the heartache and pain I felt. We tussled for a moment before he broke free of my grip.

"You need to leave, Keysha. I'm not playing with you. Go on back home to your mama."

“So what are you saying, Ronnie?”

“Keysha, I’m through with you. What part of that isn’t getting through your thick skull?”

“How can you just turn your feelings for me off like that? I mean, I thought about how I felt about you every day. I even called you after the incident and left messages for you asking you to call me back so we could talk but you didn’t. I even called you when I found out that I had to move away for a while. I thought for sure you’d at least want to know where I was being shipped off to but you never contacted me.” I was pleading my case. I reminded him of my good-faith efforts to stick by his side. I was hoping that he’d feel some sense of guilt.

“Keysha, I’m just not feeling you like that anymore. You were cool for a minute but then you started smothering me. You called me too much, you didn’t like it when I wanted to hang out with my friends instead of you. On top of that you’re too bossy. I just can’t get down with a girl that acts crazy and bossy all of the time. You need to roll out and leave me alone.”

“Okay, I’ll change. Will that help?” I asked, hoping to find the words he wanted to hear.

“No, just leave me alone, all right.” Ronnie finally put away his cellular phone. “I’ve just erased your name, number and special ring tone from my phone. It’s been real,” he said and then turned his back and walked toward his building.

“I hate you, Ronnie!” I shouted out as loudly as I could. I wanted everyone within the sound of my voice to know how upset I was. I suddenly didn’t care about making a public scene.

“Yeah, whatever. Don’t come around here looking for me anymore,” he said as he entered his building. At that moment rage pumped through my blood and I rushed into the building behind him. I grabbed a fistful of his pretty braided hair and tried to snatch it out of his head. He reached back and put his hand over my fist and tried to pry it away.

“Let go of my hair, Keysha!” he shouted out as we scuffled. At that moment I heard the door to his apartment open. Ronnie’s mother came into the hallway above us on the next landing.

“Let him go before I call the police on you!” she screamed at me. Part of me didn’t care if I went to jail but another part of me did. I held on to his hair for a moment longer and then yanked really hard, ripping his hair from his skull.

“Get out!” his mother commanded me. She was much larger than I was and for all my spunk I knew I was no match for her. “And don’t let me catch you back around here anymore. Do you understand me?”

I rushed out of the building before Ronnie or his mother could come within arm’s length of me. Once I got outside, I ran as fast as I could. I wanted to get away from them. In many ways, I wanted to run away from myself, but I knew that was impossible. When I finally stopped running, I was a good four blocks away. I decided to rest on a bus bench so I could catch my breath. I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my thighs as I waited for my breathing to regulate. For a moment, I thought about crying but I couldn’t summon up any tears because I was too angry. My life was so messed up. I swear, sometimes I wondered if some mythical witch or wizard placed a curse on me. I swept my fingers through my hair as I mulled over my situation. My mother, Justine, was crazy as well as pregnant. I had to admit that it tripped me out when she admitted she was going to have a baby. Justine is a real piece of work. In fact, her brain should probably be donated to science because her thought process is completely twisted. My mom became pregnant with me when she was very young. She acts more like my girlfriend than my mom. She cares more about partying than she does about keeping a roof over our heads, a decent job or food on the table. Sometimes, well most times, we fought and argued with one another. I didn’t like her because she didn’t act her age and in some ways resented the day I was born. At least that’s the way I felt.

A bus stopped in front of me, and the driver opened the door thinking that I wanted to get on. I looked at him for a moment and then waved him on. I sat upright on the bench and glanced at the green and white street sign. I was at the corner of Chicago and Laramie Avenues, which meant that I was in the heart of the hood. My mom and I were staying in a basement apartment a few blocks up.

I hated the place. It was run-down, dirty and infested with roaches and rats. It was nothing like my Aunt Estelle's home. She had a beautiful high-rise apartment overlooking Lake Michigan. I used to live there with her husband, Dr. Richard Vincent, my Grandmother Rubylee and my cousin Nathan. It was nice living in such a grand place, but that all changed because my Grandmother Rubylee, who was crazier than my mom, was stealing money out of Richard's bank account. She got caught by the police and is serving time for her crime. Shortly after my Grandmother Rubylee was arrested, my Aunt Estelle passed away, and that pretty much ended the welcome of Justine and me in Dr. Vincent's home. All of that happened about two months ago, right around the time I caught Ronnie at the movie theater with some girl.

* * *

I decided it was time to get up off the bus bench before I started to look like a female version of Forrest Gump. As I continued on my way home, I thought about school, which would be starting soon, but I wasn't looking forward to it, especially since my mother didn't have money for back-to-school gear. I knew kids were going to talk about me walking around in last year's fashions. I was real self-conscious when it came to fashion and my appearance. My face was filled with pimples and my hair was overprocessed from doing one too many home perms. I thought my nose was too big, my butt was too big, my breasts were too small and my legs were too skinny. I was thinking about my situation and self-image so hard that I actually walked past my apartment building and had to turn around and go back. The building was a large red brick structure with three separate entrances. I had to walk down the block a little ways to the very last entrance, which was near an alley and vacant lot where alley mechanics liked to park their hoopty-mobiles and work on them while they drank alcohol. If they couldn't get their cars running they'd just leave them there until they could. From time to time, if the cars sat too long, eventually parts would come up missing. The entrance to my building wasn't secure at all. The landlord got tired of putting locks on the doors because tenants or their guests continually kicked in the door to gain entrance. I think people did that sort of thing because they didn't have much else to do. I was about to enter the vestibule of the building when I heard someone call my name.

"Keysha, hold on a minute." I stepped back out into the sunlight and saw Toya Taylor, a friend that I'd known for years. She lived in the apartment across the hall from me. Toya had a baby she was continually trying to get neighbors to watch for her while she roamed the streets trying to keep up with her baby's daddy. Toya is sixteen but the father of her baby is a few years older than her. Toya was also rather conceited when it came to her hair. She was one of those girls who had a finer grade of hair as opposed to a coarser grade. She loved to show it off and brag about its length. Today for some reason, she wasn't in the mood to show off her hair because she had it tied up in a black head scarf.

"Hey, what's up? Why do you have on that head scarf? It's hot as hell out here." I was being nosy. I wanted to know what was going on with her hair.

"Girl, my baby's daddy is tripping. He doesn't like for me to be outside by myself with my hair down so he makes me tie it up when I'm not around him."

"Well, if it makes him happy then I guess it is okay," I said, even though I didn't believe her for one minute. I think she did something to her hair and now it's messed up and she doesn't want to get ridiculed for having damaged it.

"Where have you been? I came over looking for you this morning but you weren't home."

"Girl, I got into a fight with Ronnie," I said as I sat down on the step. Toya sat beside me.

"What about? You told him that you wanted to give him a chance to explain himself, right?"

"Yeah, I told him, but it didn't matter. He still treated me like I was a fly at a picnic. I got so mad at him that I pulled out a patch of his hair."

"For real?" Toya's voice was now filled with excitement. "What happened next?" she asked, wanting to know every detail.

"His mother came out into the hallway where we were," I said as I scratched my arm.

"You fought his mother, too?" Toya asked, jumping ahead of my story.

"No. I didn't fight his mother. When I saw her I turned and ran out of the building."

"So, are you sad about the breakup?" Toya asked. "Because if my baby's daddy broke up with me, it would be on. I'd have to hurt him." I wanted to point out the fact that I'd heard that her so-called man had another girl he was dealing with, but I didn't want to go there with her. I just wasn't in the mood to fight with anyone else right then.

"So, what's next? What are you going to do? You've got to find a new man."

"Girl, I'm not thinking about boys right now. I'm thinking about school and trying to get through another year." I glanced up at a few billowy clouds and then down at my feet. My gym shoes had seen better days.

"I think I'm going to drop out of school," said Toya.

"Why do you want to drop out of school?" I asked, looking at her strangely.

"I can't find anyone to watch my baby. Do you know they want, like, eight hundred dollars a month to take care of my baby? I don't have that type of money. That's why I was really hoping that you were pregnant because we could've helped each other out. Maybe we could have gone to school part-time or something. While I was in class you could have babysat for me and vice versa. Our kids would've grown up together and been very close."

"You know, at first I wanted to be the mother of Ronnie's child because I thought it would bring Ronnie and me closer but now I don't. Especially after what happened today."

"Even if Ronnie wasn't around, you would've had me and we would've been close," Toya said but that didn't make me feel any better. Besides, I'm not sure if I would've ever left my baby with Toya. I mean, she did okay with her little boy, but I think caring for him was much more than she bargained for.

"So what are you going to do if you drop out?" I asked.

"I don't know. Probably sit around, play cards and collect a government check. I wouldn't have to worry about teachers or homework or anything. All I'd have to do is chill out." Toya began to bite her fingernails.

"Don't you think you'll get bored? Don't you want to make money and live in a big house, drive a nice car and have enough money to buy yourself some serious bling?" I asked.

"Girl, that's what a man is for. My boo is going to take care of me," she stated as if her life plan was rock solid. In her mind Toya had it all figured out. At times talking with Toya annoyed me because she didn't have any ambition. At least I had that, I thought to myself.

"I'm going to go inside. I'm starving," I said as I stood up.

"You want some company? Me and the baby could come over," Toya said.

"No, I'm cool," I answered her then walked inside of the apartment building. The last thing I wanted to do was hang out with Toya and her baby.

two

The apartment my mom and I lived in felt more like a big square box than a studio apartment. Once inside there really wasn't much to see. On the right wall was an old white stove that looked as if it'd come from the Stone Age. I was continually amazed that it actually worked. The refrigerator, which was next to the stove, was just as ancient. It was white with a chrome handle that had to be pulled toward your body before the door would open. There was one window at the back of the room. It looked out over the abandoned lot where the alley mechanics work and loiter. The window didn't have a curtain, just a dingy white shade. On the left side was the bathroom, which was long overdue for a makeover. Sometimes I was completely grossed out by the murky brown water that came out of the faucet. You had to let it run for a while before it changed color. Next to the bathroom was an oversize door, which was where the Murphy bed was located. That was about the only cool thing about the place. A bed that actually folded up into the wall was kind of neat. My mom slept on the Murphy bed and I slept on the sofa-sleeper, which was near the window. We didn't have any closets,

only two large dressers that were positioned outside of the bathroom. We had one small television that sat atop one of the dressers, but it didn't have cable, so as far as I was concerned, it had limited value.

I went over and laid down on the sofa. I threaded my fingers behind my head and closed my eyes. I blocked out all of the sounds of the city—the wailing fire engine, the loud trunk amps and the sound of multiple conversations. My mind was flashing images of the events that had occurred over the past few months. Directly after the death of my Aunt Estelle and the conviction of my Grandmother Rubylee, my mother was arrested for driving around as a passenger with a friend of hers in a stolen car. While her case was being ironed out, Grandmother Rubylee got in touch with her father's relatives and convinced them to take me in for a little while. I hated living with them because they were mean-spirited people. They treated me like their maid, and if something malfunctioned or got damaged, it was my fault. Even if the utility bill went up, it was my fault. When the charges against my mother were dropped, I was relieved and excited to be back with her. It was clear that things were going to be hard for us, but I figured my mom would step up and make sure we were safe. At least, that was what I was hoping for.

Sometimes I fantasized about who my father was and what it would have been like living with him. I'd never met my father, but in a way, I'd always hoped that he'd magically appear and come and rescue me from my situation. But that was just a dream from the fairy tales of my imagination. I knew someone out in the world was my father, but I didn't know who, and Mother wasn't actually sure, either, or that was what she'd told me over the years. A loud knock at the door startled me back into reality.

"Who is it?" I asked aloud.

"It's me, Toya." Dang, why doesn't she take a hint? I thought to myself. I just want to be alone right now. I opened the door and she was standing there with her son perched on her hip.

"Girl, I need a real big favor from you," she said. I wasn't in the mood to give out any favors, but before I could tell her that, she unlatched her son, Junior, from her hip and handed him to me.

"I need you to watch him for about an hour," she said. I prepared to hand him back to her.

"Have your grandmother watch him," I said.

"Come on, Keysha, you know that she's going blind and can't see too good. I only left him in the house because he was asleep. I mean, she can watch him but it's not like she's really keeping an eye on him."

"Then why don't you take him with you? He's your son," I said.

"Girl, because I just got a phone call from my cousin telling me that my man is on her block all hugged up with some girl, and I need to go see what's going on with that." There was a long moment of silence between us. I wanted to tell her that she should take her baby with her because I just wasn't in the mood to deal with him right now.

"Come on, girl. I promise I'll only be about an hour." I sighed, and she took my grumbling sound as confirmation that I'd watch him.

"Thank you so much," she said, then left abruptly.

"Don't leave him here all night, Toya. I have to register for school in the morning," I yelled out behind her as she rushed down the corridor and out of the building.

Junior was quiet and didn't say much at all. I could tell that he was in some sort of deep thought. He was about fourteen months old and had beautiful eyes. I sat him down on the sofa and asked if he wanted something to eat.

"I don't have much, but I think I can whip up something that will hold you over for an hour," I said to him. Junior didn't respond. He only stared at me with sad eyes. I knew the sadness in his eyes all too well. I suppose in many ways he and I had something in common—a mother who wasn't ready, or equipped, to be one. I opened up the refrigerator and removed a package of bologna to make a sandwich. I suppose he can eat this, I thought to myself, uncertain of what he could and couldn't eat. I fixed him up the perfect sandwich and just as I was about to cut it into smaller portions, I noticed

that he'd drifted off to sleep again. This baby was still asleep when Toya woke him up to bring him over to me, I thought. I placed the sandwich back in the refrigerator in case he wanted it later on. I went and sat down next to him and situated him so that his head was resting on my lap. I began to stroke his hair and think about what it would have been like if Ronnie and I would've had a baby. I wondered what his or her skin complexion would have been like. I wondered if the baby would've looked like me or him and if we would've made it in spite of all the obstacles that would have been in our way. Ronnie was my first, and I suppose in some ways I'd never forget him. I thought he loved me just as much as I loved him, but I was wrong. Ronnie was only interested in getting down with me and nothing more. It's hard when you don't feel loved. Now that I think about it, that was the reason behind sleeping with Ronnie in the first place. He kept telling me how much he loved me and I believed him. I mean, when a guy tells you that he loves you, he has to be serious about you, right? I mean, I can honestly say I'd never heard my mother tell me she loved me. Sometimes, I just wanted to be hugged. Even though I was a teenager, I still liked to be hugged, but my mother wasn't the hugging type. I felt like I was going to cry when I thought about how empty that part of my heart was. I stood back up and went over to the countertop, which was next to the stove, and retrieved some mail that I'd placed there. I gathered all of my school registration forms, found an ink pen, then sat back down on the sofa and filled out the forms. In many ways, going to school was the only thing that kept me sane. Now how sad is that for a teenage girl? I mean honestly, I didn't know of any girl my age who actually liked going to school.

* * *

About two hours later, Toya returned. When she knocked on the door, I was all set to snap out on her for taking so long. I'd gotten irritated trying to keep Junior entertained because he only slept for about forty-five minutes. Keeping his little bad butt entertained was no picnic. When I opened the door, I held my words because patches of her pretty long hair had been ripped out. The T-shirt she was wearing had been ripped and the side of her face and neck had clearly been scratched up.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"It's a long story. Where is Junior at?" I turned around to call her son to the door but he was already making his way to her side. He gave her leg a bear hug.

"You got into a fight, didn't you?"

"I had to let her know not to sneak around with my guy," Toya said. As I scrutinized her more closely, it appeared that the other girl had got the best of Toya, but I didn't say anything.

"Well, tell me how it went down," I said, wanting to know every detail. I was about to step aside so that she could come in but she wouldn't.

"I don't want to talk about it right now, but I will tell you this. I found out that he has a baby with her, as well."

"Girl, stop lying." I didn't want to believe what I was hearing.

"I'm not—" Toya's voice cracked from all of the emotional energy she was trying to contain.

"I'll talk to you later," she said as she picked up Junior and walked across the hall to her apartment.

* * *

It was getting late, and my mother hadn't arrived home yet. When she left earlier that day, she only told me that she was going to take care of some business and would be back. I was hungry, so I pulled out the black skillet from the cupboard along with the rest of the bologna and cheese and fried myself up a sandwich. I loved fried bologna and cheese. I pulled down my mother's Murphy bed and turned on the television before I sat down. I flipped through the channels and finally stopped to watch a rerun of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*.

"Why can't I live like Hillary Banks?" I said aloud. "Have a rich daddy, a goody-two-shoes brother and a crazy cousin who's always doing something that he doesn't have any business doing." The lifestyle that the characters were living seemed so phony and unrealistic to me, but I still enjoyed

watching it. During a commercial break, I heard the key enter the lock in the door. A moment later my mom walked into the room. She opened the refrigerator and noticed that the bologna was gone.

"I know you didn't eat all of the damn bologna," she started snapping out on me. Her voice was loud and confrontational, which made me edgy and confrontational, as well.

"I was hungry. What was I supposed to do? Slit my wrists and suck my own blood for food?"

"If it fills you up, that's what you need to do," she shot back sneeringly.

"Whatever," I said, sucking air through my teeth and rolling my eyes at her.

"You better stop rolling your eyes at me before I knock them out of your head." I ignored her violent comment for the moment. She then moved in front of the dresser where the television was and began removing some of her clothes from the top drawer.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Out to a club," she answered.

"You know I register for school tomorrow and I still need supplies," I reminded her.

"And?" she replied as if my needs were not her priority.

"I need those school supplies," I answered her back loudly. I hated it when she acted as if I was unimportant.

"Borrow some supplies from a classmate. I don't have any extra money." She slammed the top dresser drawer closed and then opened up another one.

"But you have money to go to a club," I said, hoping to make her feel guilty about her judgment. She turned and pointed her finger at me.

"Hey, what I do with the money I bring up in this house is my business. I don't have to answer to you for anything! If you want school supplies go get them yourself. I don't have time to deal with you. You're just dead weight on my shoulders, and you're slowing me down. As grown as you are you should be out on your own." Her attitude toward me really hurt, but I wasn't going to let her know. I wasn't about to allow her to get under my skin.

"So you don't care whether I drop out of school or stay in?" I barked at her. I really hated her as a person. At times Justine could be cold, like a pail of ice, and other times she acted as if we were the best of friends. That day, her mood was icy.

"You're only going to drop out and get on public assistance anyway. You didn't get pregnant this time but the next time you will," she said, referring to the time I thought I was pregnant by Ronnie. Thankfully it was a false alarm. "Pregnancy may not be the worst thing for you. At least you'll be able to bring a government check home." Deep inside I was yelling at her and wishing that horrible things would happen to her. Deep inside I wanted the power to strike her down with a bolt of lightning so her feelings would hurt as much as mine. The fact that I didn't have that type of power bothered me. Someday, I'd make her regret the way she treated me. My only wish was for that day to be today.

three

When I woke up the next morning, my mother hadn't come home from her night at the club. I swear, sometimes I fear that the police are going to knock on the door and tell me she has been killed or something, I thought to myself. I knew a long time ago that to a certain degree I'd have to take care of myself early on in life, but at times I really just wanted to be a kid with a normal life. I tossed aside my blanket, placed my feet on the cold floor and then stood up and took a long stretch to begin my day. I went inside the bathroom, took a shower, got dressed and gathered up my school paperwork before heading out the door. When I exited the building, I ran into Toya, who was sitting on the stoop shuffling a deck of cards.

"Where are you headed to?" she asked, glancing at me. Her face still looked pretty bad. Overnight a bruise had formed on her cheek.

"I'm going to register for school. Aren't you coming?" I knew that she wasn't but I thought I'd ask anyway.

“No, I don’t have anyone to watch Junior. My grandmother is tripping. She told me to take him with me to registration.”

“Why not? I mean, today is only the first day of registration,” I reminded her.

“Girl, I have bigger things to deal with than registration and school. I’m trying to figure out when my man had time to have a baby with another girl. Plus my face and hair are jacked-up right now.” Toya was quiet for a moment and I didn’t say anything. “I mean, she’s not even good-looking, Keysha. Her hair isn’t as long as mine, her skin looks bad and she has a big gap between her upper front teeth. She pulled out my hair, Keysha. I swear, when I see that girl again, I’m going to cut her with this.” Toya reached into her front pants pocket and pulled out a barber’s straight razor. “Once I cut her in the face, I’ll bet she’ll think twice before messing with me.”

I wanted to ask the obvious question, which was, “Why isn’t she mad with her man for cheating on her?”, but Toya didn’t think like that. It was never her man’s fault. It was always the other woman’s fault.

“You’ll have to tell me all of the details when I come back,” I said, not wanting to listen to her issue at that moment.

“Why are you rushing off? You don’t have time for me now? I listened to you yesterday when you talked about breaking up with Ronnie,” Toya said, raising her voice at me. I felt guilty for a brief moment and was about to give her a little of my time, but then I glanced up the street and noticed my mother approaching with some guy. He appeared to be some stray man she’d picked up at the club to keep her company.

“Toya, I’ve got to go. I’ll talk to you about this later.” I wanted to leave before my mother made me greet her new friend.

“What the hell, Keysha? I thought you were my girl. I thought you cared about what I’m going through.”

“I do, Toya, but I’ve got to get to school. Do you have your enrollment forms? If not I could pick them up for you.”

“I told you, I’ve got better things to do. Why do you care about school, anyway? You’re not an A student. You know that you don’t want to be there listening to some boring-ass teacher. You’ll have more fun sitting here with me all day playing cards. After that we could watch that television program where people get on it and start fighting. I love that show.”

“I’m going to have to pass on that today. I don’t want to go to late registration. Besides, this is a chance for me to get out of the house. My mother is coming with some weird-looking man.” I nodded my head in the direction of my mother. “I’ll catch you later,” I said and moved past her. I crossed the street to walk down the other side so that I could just wave to my mother and keep on going, but she made me stop and cross back over to where she was. I took in a deep breath and prepared to deal with the nonsense that would fly out of her mouth.

“What’s up, girl?” She greeted me as if she were my best friend instead of my mother. I didn’t respond right away because I was scrutinizing her outfit. To put it mildly, my mother’s outfit was a hot mess. She was too old for the style of clothes she was fond of wearing. She had her oversize behind stuffed into a pair of low hip-riding Phat Farm jeans, which were in desperate need of a belt. She had on a white belly top that exposed her pregnant chocolate tummy, her stretch marks and an old tattoo of a red rose. I’d tried on occasion to help her find clothes that were more appropriate, but she didn’t like the fashions I’d picked out.

“I know, girl, I’m fine as wine,” she said, mistaking my horrified expression for approval of the way she looked. “I couldn’t take two steps without a car honking a horn at me. Isn’t that right, Simon?” She looked to her friend to confirm the truthfulness of her statement.

“You know all the men want you, baby,” said Simon. The way he was looking at me made me feel as if a thousand bugs were crawling on my skin—honestly, dude made my skin crawl as if I were watching an episode of Fear Factor.

“What’s your daughter’s name again?” asked Simon as he continued to rape me with his eyes.

“Keysha, fool. You know that,” my mother answered him.

“Give me a break. I haven’t seen this girl since she was a baby,” said Simon. He looked over at my mother, and that’s when I noticed a hideous scar that ran from his right earlobe, across his cheek and down to the corner of his lip. The site of the scar caught me off guard, and now I was the one doing all the eye raping.

“You don’t remember Simon, do you, Keysha?” asked my mom.

“With a face like that how could I ever forget him,” I said.

“I got this scar at one of the parties your Grandmother Rubylee used to host years ago. I was helping her collect a debt,” Simon said as he continued to stare at me as if he were studying for an exam.

“Simon is an old friend of the family from around the old neighborhood,” said my mother. “We used to hang out and party together all the time. We had some good times together, didn’t we, Simon?”

“Yeah, we did,” he said, smiling at the memory.

“So you two used to date or something?” I asked.

“Something like that.” Simon’s answer was very vague.

“We ran into each other at the club last night. We got to talking about the old days and the good times. Simon is starting up a business,” said my mother. “We’re going to go in the house and talk about it.”

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes because I didn’t care about what her and Simon were really up to. One thing was for sure, it wasn’t about starting a legitimate business.

“Justine, she looks too damn familiar. Who’s her father?” Simon smiled at me and his teeth were as yellow as a lemon. I cringed at the sight of them.

“Why do you want to go and ask me a question like that in front of her?” Justine got irritated with Simon.

“You know why I’m asking,” said Simon. “She looks just like my cousin—”

“Look—” I cut him off because there was no way I was related to anyone who looked like him.

“Wait a minute, Keysha, let me look at you one more time,” Simon said, studying the details of my every feature.

“Take a picture, it lasts longer,” I said and rushed away from them.

“Keysha, wait a minute.” My mother chased after me.

“What? I’m heading off to register for school,” I said.

“Hold on a minute.” She grabbed my arm and forced me to stop.

“Why are you just now getting home?” I asked with an authoritative tone. “And why did you bring him with you, and why is he acting like he knows something about me?”

“Who the hell are you snapping at? I don’t have to answer to you,” she quickly reminded me. At that moment I noticed the unpleasant smell of alcohol and cigarette smoke that was pasted to her skin and clothing. The odor was choking the air between us.

“You need to start acting your own age and not like some teenager who can’t control their hormones.” I don’t know why I said that; it just flew out of my mouth.

“Excuse you!” she barked at me. “Don’t mess around and get a beat down in the middle of the street,” she threatened me. I didn’t say any more because my mother was crazy enough to knuckle-up her fists and fight me right where I stood.

“Why does he think I look like someone he knows? Why does he even think he knows who my father is?”

“Simon doesn’t know what he’s talking about, baby. He’s just talking out of the side of his head. Don’t pay him any attention.”

“I’ll be back later,” I said, not wanting to speak with her anymore.

“Hold on a minute.” She wiggled her fingers into her front pocket and pulled out a crumpled-up five-dollar bill. “Get yourself something to eat while you’re out. I probably won’t be home when you get back.”

“Why?” I questioned her again. I’d gotten so tired of her being gone all of the time.

“Because I’ve got things to do. If things work out, I may be able to make a little money today.”

“Doing what?” I asked suspiciously.

“I don’t know. That’s why Simon has come over. He’s going to tell me about his business.”

I didn’t like her answer, and before I could stop my words I found myself interrogating her once again.

“Is it a legitimate job?” She didn’t answer me. “Why don’t you look for a real job, Mom?” I asked in a softer tone of voice.

“Because I don’t have to. That’s why I have you, so I can collect a check.” She quickly turned icy on me. Her comment made me feel as if I had no emotional value to her. I was just a person she could get a welfare check for.

“You know that the back rent is due, and if you don’t pay we could be put out again. I don’t think the landlord is playing around.”

“I’m not worried about it,” she said and didn’t offer up any type of comfort to assure me that everything would be okay. I wanted to scream and yell at her. I wanted to explode, but instead I just built a wall around my emotions for her. At the moment I refused to allow her to cripple me emotionally. If she didn’t care, then I didn’t, either.

“Have fun with your friend Simon,” I said as I walked off.

“I will!” she yelled back at me as I rushed off down the street.

* * *

I thought for sure the lines for registration would be long, but they weren’t. I was able to go through the process fairly quickly. One of the school administrative staff printed out my class schedule and handed it to me. I glanced down at it and noticed that I had math first thing in the morning.

“Nine o’clock in the morning is too early to have a math class. Can you switch it for me?” I asked the lady who’d printed out my schedule. She looked at me for a long moment, as if I’d lost my mind.

“I guess that means no,” I said sarcastically.

She frowned and yelled out, “Next.”

My biggest concern now was school supplies or my lack of them. I hated being unprepared but I really didn’t have a choice in the matter. I’d have to recycle the folders that I had from last year and latch on to someone when I needed additional supplies. It was an embarrassment I’d have to contend with.

By twelve-thirty that afternoon I’d arrived back home. As I came up the block I saw Toya still hanging around the front of the building toying around with her deck of cards.

“What’s up, girl?” I asked as I took a seat on a kitchen chair that Toya had placed on the stoop.

“How are you just going to walk up and take my seat?” Toya tried to sound angry, but I didn’t take her seriously.

“My feet hurt from walking in these cheap shoes,” I explained as I allowed my fingertips to massage my scalp, which had suddenly started itching. It was a telltale sign that I needed to wash my hair and oil my scalp.

“Do you want me to braid your hair for you?” Toya asked.

“No, I need to wash it before I do anything with it.”

“So, how did registration go?” Toya asked.

“It went okay. It went quickly. I have to figure out how I’m going to get my school supplies because my mother—well, you know that I can’t depend on her.” A mischievous expression formed on Toya’s face at that moment.

"You're right, Keysha. We can't depend on our parents because they aren't cut out for the job. What we need to do is look out for each other. Don't you agree?"

"Yeah, I can agree with that," I said as I scratched the dry skin on my left leg.

"Listen, I've been thinking of a way that we can help each other." Toya stopped shuffling her cards and focused all of her attention on me.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Toya?" I asked, sensing she was calculating something in her mind.

"I've got a plan. Junior needs some new clothes and so do you and I. My baby would look so cute in some baby Nikes and some new gear from Sean John. I want some stuff from Phat Farm, and I know that you do, as well. So here is what I say we should do. Let's go down to the mall and get what we need."

"You must have come into some money," I said, joking. She didn't say a word; she just looked at me and forced me to read her thoughts. Toya had a very serious expression on her face.

"You want to go out boosting again, don't you?" I knew that's what she wanted to do, but I wanted to confirm it.

"Yeah I do." She paused in thought for a moment. "I have got the perfect plan that includes you, me and Junior."

"Toya, you know you're my girl, and I'm all for heading out to the mall for a five-finger discount deal, but why do we have to drag Junior into this? Last time we went out you and I both almost got busted."

"That's exactly why we're bringing Junior with us. He'll act as our decoy," Toya explained, completely convinced that bringing Junior along would work.

"I don't know, Toya." I had a very uneasy feeling about dragging her son along with us. Boosting is not as easy as it sounds. Whenever I go, I'm always on edge because I don't want to get caught.

"Keysha, you know we both need stuff. You need clothes just like I do, and you know that we can make money selling the stuff that we can't fit to the kids at school. You've done this before. Why are you acting as if it's a problem now?"

"I don't know," I answered her as I searched my mind for a reason as to why I was feeling the way I was.

"Listen, we'll put all of the stuff that we get in the bottom of Junior's stroller. If someone tries to stop us, I have a purse full of old receipts that we can use, okay? Trust me, it's going to work. This plan is foolproof."

"How in the world did you come up with that one?" I asked because Toya's mind was always working a mile a minute.

"I saw someone else do it like that," Toya said, going into more detail. "I went to the grocery store over the weekend for my grandmother. As I was walking past one of the aisles, I saw this woman tearing open a package and stuffing its contents into her baby's diaper bag. Once she was done, I watched her stroll right on out of the store without paying a damn dime. So I thought, Damn, that's slick, because no one would ever suspect a woman with a baby in a stroller to be out shoplifting. The security people aren't paying attention to people like her. She was dressed like someone's mother who was just out shopping. The security people are harassing the person who walks in the door looking like a thug. Do you see where I'm going?"

"Yeah," I answered as I began to understand her thinking a little better.

"So all I'm doing is improving on what I've seen. I'll take Junior with me and stuff merchandise into several diaper bags and the compartment at the bottom of the stroller. While I'm doing that, your job will be to distract the sales clerk. Of course, we're going to have to make a few trips to get everything we need, but hey, I think it's worth the effort. Don't you?"

"Yeah, it's worth it," I said even though I still wasn't comfortable with Toya involving Junior in all of this.

four

We decided to go to Evergreen Plaza, which was on the corner of 95th Street and Western Street. Toya wanted to hit a mall where she was least likely to run into someone she knew. We had to catch two buses and the El train to get there. We had to hop on the Laramie bus and take it to the Lake Street El. Then we took the El to 95th Street. Then we took the 95th Street bus all the way down to Western Avenue. The journey was long and boring until we got on the bus at 95th Street. The bus was very crowded, which meant that some of the passengers had to stand in the aisle. Just as Toya, Junior and I got situated some younger boy dressed like a thug reject tried to step to me. He wasn't cute at all. He had tight nappy hair that needed to be cut, and his breath was so funky I could see the words coming out of his mouth. He had on a dingy white shirt and some baggy shorts that were pulled down so that they could hang low.

"What's up, girl?" He tried to add some bass to his voice but it cracked on him, and Toya and I busted up laughing.

"What's up, boo?" Toya answered as she continued to laugh in his face and bounce Junior up and down on her lap to keep him amused.

"I wasn't talking you. I was talking to your girl, here," he said with a tone of arrogance.

"Oh, well I guess I'll keep my mouth shut, hint, hint..." Toya continued her snickering as she covered her nose with one hand.

"So what's up, girl? Why don't you roll with a baller like me?"

"Maybe if a baller had a breath mint, a hair cut and looked better than you." I laughed.

"Oh, snap!" Toya blurted out. "I think that's your cue to leave, boo."

"I've got a car. It's in the shop right now," he explained, but I didn't want to encourage him.

"Yeah, whatever. You don't even look old enough to drive," I said, thinking that my comment would make him shut up and move on.

"Girl, I just look young. I'm seventeen," he continued.

"Well, you look like you're twelve," I shot back.

"Oh, damn," Toya blurted out once again. "You need to work on your macking skills."

"You know, somebody needs to put that attitude of yours in check," he said as if he were the person who could do it.

"Well, until that person comes along, I would suggest that you leave."

He made a hissing sound and then moved toward the rear of the bus and away from us. "Your ass is ugly, anyway," I heard him mutter. I wanted to say something mean about his mother but decided to let it go. The last thing I wanted was to get into a battle of wits with him. I just wasn't in the mood for it.

"Damn, girl, he was kind of cute," Toya leaned into me and whispered.

"No, he wasn't. That boy looked whack and had breath that smelled like the Crypt Keeper from that show Tales From the Crypt. Hell, all he needed was a coffin to complete the look."

"Why are you so mean?" Toya asked as she repositioned Junior on her lap yet again.

"He was on my nerves," I answered as I tried to focus on how we were going to get the merchandise we wanted without getting busted. In the back of my mind, I understood that if I got caught, my mother wouldn't be able to get me out of jail, and I had no one else I could really depend on to rescue me.

* * *

"We shouldn't do this today, Toya." I tried to stop her before we entered the mall through the Carson Pirie Scott entrance. My thoughts had gotten the best of me during the remainder of the bus ride down 95th Street.

"No, we're here now, and I didn't sit on that long bus ride just to turn around and go home empty-handed." Toya was being stubborn, and I didn't know how to break through and make her think. I glanced down at Junior, who was strapped in his stroller fast asleep.

“Keysha, sometimes you have to live for the moment and do stuff. We can do this and walk out of here with bags filled with all types of designer clothes.” I released a big sigh as I held the door open for her.

When we entered Carson Pirie Scott, I stopped at the perfume counter and kept the saleswoman busy with questions while Toya walked around and removed several sample bottles from the display counter. Once she’d gotten what she wanted, she exited the store through the mall entrance. After I ditched the sales lady, I caught up with Toya inside the mall.

“Did you get some good stuff?” I asked.

“I got what I could,” she answered.

“I’m surprised Junior didn’t wake up,” I said as I glanced down at him.

“That’s why I was playing with him on the bus, to make him sleep,” Toya said. “I told you. I’ve thought about every aspect of my plan. I’m about to go into that designer store right over there.” Toya pointed to where she was going. I turned in the direction that she pointed.

“Do you see the cashier standing behind the counter reading a book?”

“Yeah, I see. She’s reading *The Coldest Winter Ever*,” I answered.

“Did you read it?” Toya asked. Toya didn’t like reading nearly as much as I did. At times, especially when I’m feeling depressed, I’ll go on a reading binge to escape from my reality. *The Coldest Winter* was read during my last escape from my reality.

“Yeah, I read it.”

“I knew your ass was a closet geek.”

“Shut up. That book was real good,” I said.

“Really?” Toya smiled.

“Yeah, I mean, it was good from start to end.” I was about to go on and tell her more but she cut me off.

“You can keep her busy talking about the book, while I go in there and rob her blind.”

“You just make sure you get me some jeans,” I said.

“I got you.” Toya winked at me. “Now go in there so that she doesn’t think we’re together.”

I walked into the store and pretended to be shopping for something. The salesgirl didn’t even look up at me. I could tell she was lost inside the world the author had created. At that moment, I felt bad that I was about to take advantage of her because I identified with her. I began to think that if she’s anything like me, a good book will have her in a daydreamlike state for hours. Sometimes when I read, an entire day can go by without me knowing it. I didn’t want to interrupt her reading because when I read, I hate to be interrupted. I glanced back outside toward the mall and saw Toya giving me a strange glare. I could read the expression on her face. She wanted to know why I wasn’t talking to the girl. I wanted to tell Toya to hit another store, but I knew she’d have a fit if I suggested it because the setup at this store was too perfect.

“That was a really good book,” I mentioned to the salesgirl as I approached the counter. “They should make that book into a movie.”

“This would be such a good movie if they made it,” said the salesgirl as she glanced up from the page.

“Who do you think could play the roll of Winter?” I asked her. She appeared to be distracted for a moment as she looked past my shoulder toward the front door.

“I’m sorry, I thought that lady over there with the baby needed help.”

I turned and looked at Toya, who was reaching down for her diaper bag.

“Are you sure she doesn’t need help? I could wait until you’re done,” I said, taking a huge gamble.

“No, that’s okay. She’ll probably just look at a few things and leave. That’s what most of the young girls pushing a baby do.”

“Okay, so if they turned the book into a movie, I think that girl from the television show *The Parkers* should play Winter.” I paused as I tried to think of the actress’s name. “You know that one that plays Kim Parker, oh, what is her name?”

“Wait a minute, it’s coming to me,” said the salesgirl. “She has a weird name, like, Count something.” I immediately snapped my fingers.

“Countess Vaughn. That’s her name,” I finally said.

“I don’t know if she could pull it off,” said the salesgirl.

“You don’t think she could play the part of Winter from the book?” I said, surprised.

“I think you need someone who looks a little harder and rougher. I think Vivica Foxx could play the part.”

“She’s too old,” I quickly pointed out.

“I know, but she could probably pull it off,” the salesgirl countered. For the next half hour, the salesgirl and I discussed and debated the character and situations within the novel. I’d gotten so caught up with talking about the book with someone who’d actually read it that I forgot all about meeting back up with Toya. When I finally realized how much time had gone by, I said thank you to the salesgirl and rushed out of the store.

“Hey, what’s your name?” she asked before I got out the door.

“Keysha,” I said and rushed down the hall before I heard her tell me what her name was. When I caught up with Toya, she had an attitude.

“Dang, Keysha, I just said talk to the girl about the book not have a damn study lecture on it. You’d better watch yourself with all that geek nonsense. You and that girl were talking like the people in that book were real or something.”

I wanted to defend myself and tell Toya I really enjoyed reading and it was cool to actually talk to another reader, but she wouldn’t have understood. Toya and books just didn’t mix on any level.

“Come on, nerd girl. Let’s hit another store.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped at her.

“All right, bookworm, don’t go and get all sensitive on me.” I wanted to scream at her for calling me names but instead I kept my mouth shut and followed her down the corridor to the next store. Toya and I hit three more stores and by that time the stroller was loaded down and Junior had awakened and was fighting to be set free from his stroller.

“I think we should head back now,” I suggested as we approached the food court.

“Damn, I wanted to hit at least one more store. I haven’t gotten Junior anything yet.”

“Well, let me go to the bathroom first,” I said. We walked into the food court, and Toya took a seat at one of the tables so that she could release Junior from his stroller before he started shouting.

* * *

I was about to exit the bathroom but needed to wash my hands first. As I placed my hands under the warm running water, two restaurant employees walked into the restroom laughing and talking loudly.

“Can you believe that dumb girl is down here stealing clothes with her baby?” I overheard one of them say.

“Then she pulled out a bogus receipt talking about how she’d paid for everything.” The two girls started laughing uncontrollably. I rushed out of the bathroom and saw that three Chicago Police officers and mall security guards had handcuffed Toya to restrain her.

“Oh, damn,” I said as I began to panic. I didn’t know what to do. I was frozen with fear. Toya was yelling at one of the officers to put Junior down before she filed a lawsuit against them. Toya caught my gaze for a minute and motioned with her head for me to come over to where she was at. I started to take a step towards her but I stopped. I suddenly wanted no part of any of the drama that was going down. To my right there was an exit. Toya must have sensed what I was thinking and so she called out my name.

“Keysha!” she shouted at the top of her voice. As calmly as I could, I turned my back on her and walked hastily toward the exit.

five

My stomach was doing flips during the entire journey back home. I was nervous, afraid and confused. I placed my elbows on my knees and my face in my hands and tried to think. I wanted to cry but I didn’t. I was trying to figure out how Toya got caught. Everything was going so well. We’d moved in and out of stores without any problems. No merchandise alarms went off, and I know Toya was extra careful by making sure she was out of the sight range of the video cameras.

When I arrived home I found a big red notice stuck to our front door. It was an eviction notice. My mom and I had three days to either pay the rent or be set outdoors. Oh, God, not again, I thought to myself as I entered the apartment. I walked directly over to my sofa, rested my head on one of the cushions and went to sleep. I woke up in the middle of the night. My mother still hadn’t come home, and I needed someone to talk to. The first person who came to mind was my ex-boyfriend, Ronnie. Even though I hadn’t spoken to him in a while, I decided to call him hoping he’d be nice to me and listen to my problems. I gathered up some spare change and walked out of the apartment and onto the stoop. When I stepped out into the darkness I noticed that there were people just hanging out. Across the street, there was a group of kids I didn’t know listening to music and dancing. To my right, there was a gathering of men sitting on makeshift crates drinking alcohol and talking loudly. To my left, I saw a woman wearing coochie cutter shorts, leaned over into the passenger window of a car talking with two men. Other men who were passing by her on the sidewalk stopped to ogle her behind. At that moment everything in my life seemed to be going wrong. Everyone around me seemed to be crazy, and they were making me crazy just by being around them. I calmed myself down as best as I could and walked up the street to the payphone. I called up Ronnie.

“Yeah,” he said as he answered the phone.

“Hey, Ronnie, it’s me, Keysha. What are you doing?” I asked.

“Why?” he shot back at me.

“Um...” I lost my nerve for a minute. “Do you really not love me anymore?” I don’t know why I asked that question. I suppose in some sort of way I just wanted someone to care about me.

“You know I don’t,” he answered coldly.

“Do you want to come over? My mother isn’t home. We could talk and stuff.”

“Naw, I’m not even going to get down with you like that, Keysha. It’s over. A baller like me has got to move on.”

“You know what, Ronnie, I should come—hello, hello?” Ronnie had hung up on me. I slammed the phone against its cradle and started crying. I let go of my tears for a minute before I got myself together and headed back home.

* * *

The following morning, I got up and headed to my first day of school completely unprepared. I walked through the halls dazed and spaced out because I had so much on my mind. I was worried about Toya and Junior and didn’t know what to do. I was worried about my mother and how she was going to deal with the eviction notice. I was worried about school because, even though it wasn’t socially acceptable to say I enjoyed school on any level other than to socialize, I actually really enjoyed my literature class.

I had no idea of how I was going to make it through school, and the person I depended on would most certainly leave me hanging, just as she’d done so many times in the past.

I just entered my history class and took a seat at the back of the room. I was hoping the teacher, and everyone else, for that matter, wouldn’t notice me. Once the roll call was completed, the course syllabus was handed out. Just as we were about to go over it, the principal and two police officers entered the classroom.

“Oh, shit,” I whispered loudly. Toya must have tricked on me, and now the police were there to arrest me. I wanted to run out of the room but I couldn’t because there was only one way in and one way out. The principal began searching the room, and I scrunched down in my seat as far as I could without actually going up under my desk. I was doing the best that I could to hide in plain sight. The principal finally found the student the police were searching for and I was thankful that it wasn’t me.

“Dang, girl, you were trying to get up under the floor,” said Lynn Jones, who was one weird girl.

“Yeah, whatever,” I said to her.

“What did you do that has you afraid of the police?” she wanted to know.

“None of your damn business,” I snapped at her for being nosy.

“Well, forget you, too. The next time the police come into this class I’m just going to start pointing my finger at you so they’ll see you.”

I leaned over in my seat and looked directly at her. “If you do that I’ll put superglue on all of your clothes during gym.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” she said, not believing me.

“Try me,” I said, unafraid of her. She didn’t say anything else to me so I dropped our conversation.

* * *

When I arrived home, I saw Toya’s grandmother standing outside the building. She was wearing a one-size-fits-all flower-print dress, some run-over and worn-out looking brown sandals, her black sunglasses for the blind, and she had her white walking stick with the red tip. When I approached her I spoke.

“Hello, Ms. Maze.” She turned to the direction of my voice.

“Who is that?”

“It’s me, Keysha. Toya’s friend,” I answered her.

“Oh, how are you doing, baby?” she inquired.

“I’m okay. I’m just coming home from school.”

“That’s good, honey. I wish Toya was more like you and stayed in school.” Ms. Maze hung her head low for a moment. “Oh, I don’t know what I’m going to do with that girl.”

“Um, where is she at?” I asked because I hadn’t heard from or seen Toya.

“She’s gotten herself and the baby into some trouble. I’m going to see what I can do about getting her out of jail.”

“Oh,” I said. I wanted to tell her everything but I couldn’t. I just didn’t have the courage. “Is she okay?”

“As well as to be expected,” she answered me.

“Do you think she’ll be getting out today?” I asked.

“I’m going to do my best to get her out,” she said.

“Um, where is Junior?” I asked as I shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

“Oh, baby, I don’t know.” Ms. Maze got choked up and couldn’t speak for a long moment.

“Keysha, are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Do me a favor, and stand here with me until the cab I called comes along. I’d like for you to help me get in the car.”

“Okay,” I said, feeling very bad about her having to go down to the police station to see about Toya. What made me feel even worse was the fact that she didn’t know what had happened to her great-grandson, Junior.

* * *

When the cab arrived I made sure that she got in without any problem. I then turned to head inside. I was hoping that my mother had come home. When I walked up to our apartment I saw there

was another eviction notice posted to the door. I snatched it down and walked inside. The notice said that we now had two days to either pay the rent or be put out.

“Mama!” I called out even though I knew she wasn’t home. The Murphy bed was still inside the wall and hadn’t been used.

“Damn!” I shouted because I didn’t know what to do. I paced back and forth across the floor trying to figure out where she’d gone and where she could be. It wasn’t uncommon for my mother to disappear for several days at a time. Especially when we lived with my Grandmother Rubylee and my Aunt Estelle. I really didn’t care about her disappearing then because I knew that either Aunt Estelle or Grandmother Rubylee would be around if I needed them. Now our lives were much different, and I had no choice but to worry about where Justine was. I was driving myself crazy trying to figure out what I should do. I finally decided that there wasn’t anything I could do. I could only hope that in my hour of need, my mother wouldn’t leave me hanging. I could only hope that by some miracle she’d manage to keep a roof over our heads.

six

When I woke up the following day, I was hoping to discover Justine had come home during the night. To my horror, she hadn’t. I swallowed hard and tried not to panic. It was clear that she wasn’t going to make it back home. I held on to hope that she’d be home by the time I returned from school, but in the back of my mind and deep in my heart I knew the chances of her returning were slim to none.

I walked over to the bed and got down on my knees. I peeked beneath the mattress and removed a small box filled with photographs. I opened the box and pulled out the first one, which was taken when I was about six years old. My Aunt Estelle took the photo. In the picture I was wearing my favorite blue dress. My hair was combed and braided beautifully. It was Easter Sunday and I was holding a stuffed bunny rabbit and smiling as hard as I could. I remember being so happy that day. It was one of the rare times that everyone was happy. I pulled out another photo of my Grandmother Rubylee and me. I was nine years old in this photo, which was taken at Rainbow Beach. My skin was so brown because I’d been out in the sun all day, and I had brown sand on my legs up to my knees. I was always pretending that my daddy lived in a real castle somewhere very far away and he was waiting for me to come and visit him. When my mother came over to see it, I told her that I thought my daddy lived in a castle like the one I was building. She laughed and said that I had been out in the sun too long and was becoming delusional. She didn’t like to talk about anyone being my father. She always told me that she was both my mother and my father.

The final photo was taken at my eighth-grade graduation. I was standing in my blue and silver cap and gown. I’d graduated at the top of the class. I was a straight 4.0 student. I never missed a day of school, did all of my homework and studied hard because I wanted to prove to everyone that I was worth something. I wanted to feel validated in some way. I was so happy that day because I’d made everyone proud of me. It was one of the few times that I can remember where I felt good about myself. That day was perfect, well, at least as perfect as it could have been. Rubylee and my Aunt Estelle were there, but my mother wasn’t. Rubylee insisted that she not show up and ruin my day. At the time of my graduation, my mother was in rehab for drug addiction. I remember wanting to do everything that I could to help her stay healthy, but my mother just kept getting into trouble. It was like trouble followed her as if it were a gray storm cloud on a mission to make her as miserable as possible. I didn’t work nearly as hard back then. I thought good grades would somehow not only validate me but also motivate my mother to be more supportive and proud of me, but she didn’t care at all. I figured, if she didn’t care then why should I?

I put the box away because it was depressing me to look through it. I placed it in a bag with my other belongings and left everything sitting on my sofa. I got dressed and headed off to school, even though I really didn’t want to be there. But in my mind, it was better than sitting around the apartment worrying myself into sickness. In many ways, school was where I escaped from my reality.

I didn't go directly home after school because I was afraid to. I spent an hour hanging around the basketball court at the park watching shirtless boys shoot baskets. It was cool for a while, but then a gang of girls who were there started making fun of me because of my bad skin and damaged hair, so I left. As I walked home I began to think. If my mother hadn't come home to pay the rent then I knew I'd have to leave, but I didn't know where I'd go. As I approached my building, I saw Toya sitting on the stoop with Junior's father. I was happy to see her, so I rushed up the street calling her name.

"Toya!" I shouted out. Toya gave me a nasty look that made me drop the smile from my face.

"What's going on, wench?"

"Excuse you?" I snapped at her.

"Give me a minute to deal with her," she said to her boyfriend. He glanced at me with judgmental eyes before stepping away to sit in his car, which was parked in the vacant lot near the building.

"Why did you leave me hanging like that?" Toya asked. Her voice was edgy and full of confrontation.

"Toya, I got scared. I didn't know what to do. The police were arresting you. You were yelling and hollering at them. What was I supposed to do?"

"You were supposed to have my back!" Toya pushed my shoulder and I backed up. She wanted to fight me. I could see it in her eyes.

"Toya, look. We just have a big misunderstanding here," I said, trying to calm her down. Other people who were just hanging out on the block started paying attention to our conflict. If we kept up our loud argument, it wouldn't be long before a crowd would form and encourage us to knuckle-up our fists and beat each other senseless for their entertainment.

"No, there is no misunderstanding. All I know is that I should kick your ass for what you did. Because of you, the department of family services took Junior away from me."

"They took Junior from you?" I was surprised by that.

"Yeah, and it's your entire fault," she said, absolutely convinced of her reasoning.

"How is that my fault? I told you not to bring that boy in the first place."

"I called you, Keysha, because I wanted you to come and get him for me. I didn't care about going to jail because I knew I'd get out. But I didn't want Junior to go with me. Instead of helping me, you ran your scary ass out the door."

"You know what—" I stopped backing away from her and stood my ground "—that is not my fault. I told you that if something went down and we needed to get away, Junior would be a problem. You should have thought about the consequences before taking him along with us. Plus, why are you always blaming other people when things don't go right for you?"

"No. That's not the way I see it." Toya pushed me hard and I pushed her hard back. "Everything that went wrong is your fault. We would have gotten out of there quicker had you not been lollygagging for thirty minutes with that salesgirl."

"Fight!" I heard someone on the street yell out. Before I knew it there were people gathering to watch the outcome of our conflict.

"Toya, let's not do this," I pleaded with her. "We've been friends far too long."

"No, I'm about to open up a can of whup ass on you." Toya reached into a back pocket and pulled out the straight razor she'd shown me a few days earlier. I quickly backed up because I didn't want to end up with a facial scar like my mother's friend Simon. She opened it up and swung it at me but I was too far away from her.

"It wasn't my fault!" I shouted at her, hoping to get her to see my point of view. "Why are you always starting fights?" I asked but didn't get a response. I quickly scanned the ground in search of a weapon of my own but didn't find one.

“Come on, Keysha, you can’t run. It’s about to go down,” she taunted me. I was a nervous wreck. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t turn and run because there was a crowd of people surrounding us; I certainly didn’t want to step forward and risk getting split open by a razor.

“Toya, please,” I pleaded with her, but she swung at me again. This time she aimed for my face.

“Somebody help me!” I shouted out, but someone from the crowd answered back.

“Help yourself!”

“Toya, how was I supposed to know that was going to happen, huh?” I asked. I figured that if I kept talking I might get through to her. “I mean, why would I want to see them take your baby from you?”

“Because you wanted a baby with Ronnie but you couldn’t get pregnant,” she snarled back at me.

“That’s not true and you know it,” I shouted back to her as she swung at me again. That time she almost got me on the neck. The circle of people surrounding us was getting tighter, and I had absolutely nowhere to go.

“If you want to fight then fight me fairly,” I said, wanting her to put the razor down. She didn’t answer me. We just kept circling each other cautiously, like two angry lions looking for the right moment to strike. She was much closer to me now and swung at me again. I held my hand up to protect my face. The flesh between my thumb and first finger got nicked by the edge of the razor.

“Damn it!” I shouted out as I made a fist to apply pressure in hopes of stopping the bleeding.

“Toya, this is crazy,” I said. My voice was shaking with fear. “You’ve got drama in your life and so do I. I don’t have a place to live. The landlord put an eviction notice on my door and today was the last day to pay rent or be put out.” Toya suddenly stopped.

“Is that the reason why a strange woman is around asking all types of questions about you and is in your house going through your stuff?” I’d finally gotten through to her.

“What are you talking about? What woman?”

“It serves you right to be put out of the building, because your mother isn’t anything but a whore, anyway. She hasn’t paid rent because she’s in jail. I saw her locked up when I was in jail last night.”

“I’m going to give you a pass on that comment about my mother being a whore.”

“Y’all are out here faking,” I heard someone from the crowd say. It wasn’t long before people started moving away from us.

“Well, it’s true. That’s why you haven’t seen her.” I didn’t want to believe Toya. I didn’t want to believe that my mother had gotten into trouble yet again and left me out in the world to make it on my own. Now that the crowd was gone, I rushed past Toya and into the building. I walked down to the apartment door and found it open. I stepped inside and saw a woman dressed in a black business suit.

“Are you Keysha?” the woman asked but then noticed my bleeding hand. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Who are you and how did you get in here?”

“My name is Maggie. The landlord let me in. I work with the Department of Children and Family Services.” There was a long pause as I tried to understand what was going on.

“Your hand is bleeding pretty badly. You should let me take a look at it.”

“I’m okay,” I said. “Why are you here?”

“Your mother has run into some legal problems and she knew you’d need help. So that’s why I’m here, to help.”

“Help me do what?” I asked.

“Find a home,” she said. I suddenly felt dizzy and light-headed.

“Find a home? It’s true, I’m homeless now?” I asked, feeling anxiety, fear and emotional stress attack me all at once.

“There is a group home for teens in your situation that I can place you in.”

“A group home.” I repeated what she’d said as my vision became gray and blurry. I felt as if my legs could no longer support my weight. I felt them buckling beneath me.

“Sweetie, you’re wobbling. Let me take a look at the cut on your hand.” I tried to move away from her. I wanted to turn and run out the door, but I fainted instead.

seven

When I regained consciousness, I felt someone placing a cold washcloth around my face and neck.

“Mom, what happened?” I asked.

“You fainted. Your mom isn’t here,” said Maggie. “And your hand has been cut pretty badly. I called for an ambulance.”

“I don’t need an ambulance,” I said as I tried to sit up, but Maggie placed her hands on my shoulders and held me down. She was a short, bony woman but strong enough to hold me down.

“You need to relax,” Maggie reiterated. I didn’t feel like struggling with her so I relaxed. I studied her features. She had caramel skin with dark brown freckles around her nose and cheekbones. She was attractive but I could tell by the deep lines beneath her eyes that she’d seen her fair share of heartache, drama and pain.

“Why is everything falling apart?” I started crying uncontrollably. I wanted Maggie to embrace me and tell me that it was going to be okay but she didn’t. I wanted to feel safe, loved and wanted, but all I felt was alone.

When the paramedics arrived, they stitched up the deep cut on my hand and offered to take me to the hospital.

“I don’t want to go to the hospital,” I said.

“Honey, you really need to have a doctor look at your hand,” said Maggie, who seemed to be concerned about me.

“I’m fine,” I said as I looked at the bandage on my hand. “See, the bleeding has stopped.”

“Will the stitches hold until I can get her to a private doctor?” Maggie asked one of the paramedics.

“Yes,” answered one of the men as he began putting away his medical supplies. “But make sure she sees a doctor soon. Don’t wait more than one or two days.”

“Okay,” said Maggie. She thanked them as they walked out of the apartment and down the hall.

Once the paramedics left, Maggie once again asked me how I got cut.

“What do you care?” I snapped at her.

“Okay, I’m just trying to help.”

“You don’t really want to help me. You’re just doing a job,” I said as I inspected the bandage around my thumb. She then showed me all of her credentials to prove who she was.

“You can’t stay here,” Maggie informed me.

“No shit, Sherlock,” I said. “I suppose this means you want me to gather up my bags and go with you.” Maggie didn’t say anything; she just looked at me. I read her facial expression and deduced that was exactly what she wanted me to do. I walked around the room and gathered up my belongings. I took one last look around the apartment to make sure that I hadn’t forgotten anything I wanted.

“What about the television?” Maggie asked. “Do you want to take it?”

“No, it barely works,” I answered as I walked out the door. When I stepped out onto the stoop of the building, I thought for sure someone would approach me and ask if I was okay. I mean, I figured that they had to have seen the ambulance and should’ve known that it was for me. No one looked in my direction or even thought enough about my well-being to ask me what was going on. Toya wasn’t around, and I assumed that after she’d cut me, she got in the car with her boyfriend and drove away in case the police were called.

“That’s my car over there.” Maggie pointed to an emerald-green Oldsmobile. She hit the remote locks and the trunk of the car opened up.

“You can place your bags in the trunk,” she said as she moved past me. I took a deep breath and then headed toward her car and my unknown future.

* * *

As I drove away with Maggie, I just stared out the car window and didn't say a word. I was angry at everything and with everyone. I was already making plans to run away from the group home. I'd rather take my chances living on the street as opposed to being forced to go into some home with a bunch of people I didn't know. I thought perhaps I could go back and talk with Ms. Maze, Toya's grandmother, and ask her if I could stay with her for a little while. I know the plan sounds crazy after Toya cut me with a straight razor, but I figured we were even now and we could move past that.

"I'm taking you to a facility for distressed teens that is on 114th and Western Avenue," Maggie said, interrupting my thoughts. I didn't want to say anything to her because I didn't like her.

"Has anyone explained to you what has happened?" she asked. I wanted to answer her by saying, "Duh, no one has said a damn word to me," but I didn't. I just gave her the silent treatment.

"Okay, I'll take that as a no answer." She made a right turn and then continued. "There is no easy way to put it so I'm just going to tell you like it is. A few days ago, your mother was arrested as part of a police sting to clean up prostitution in poor neighborhoods. When she was picked up, she had illegal drugs in her possession." I could feel her looking at me, but I continued to look out the window at people who were waiting on the bus. For a brief moment I wondered where they were going, but Maggie continued talking.

"When Justine realized that she wouldn't be getting out anytime soon, she notified the officials at the jailhouse and informed them of you and your situation. Once it was determined that she was telling the truth, your case was assigned to me. If you allow me to help, we can work together on finding you a good foster home."

I felt as if I'd been kicked in the chest by a horse when she said the words, foster home. I never thought I'd end up living in a foster or group home for teens at risk.

"The group home I'm taking you to can be as comforting as you make it. You'll be staying with other teenage girls in a dorm-room setting. You'll be under constant supervision by the adult staff members. The facility works on trying to create an atmosphere of family so that everyone feels comfortable."

"How long do I have to stay there?" I asked with a nasty attitude. I didn't like the sound of the place she was taking me to one bit.

"Well, I'm not sure. I still have to speak with your mother about contacting your father."

"She doesn't know who he is," I said to her. "It could be any one. I could pass him on the street every day and never know it." I paused in thought. "You know her dumb ass is pregnant, don't you?" I tossed out the question because I wanted her to know that my mother suddenly meant very little to me. I had a very low opinion of her. If I saw her on the street, I'd turn and walk the other way. I wouldn't even acknowledge her.

"Yes. I am aware of the pregnancy. That case has been assigned to me, as well." I didn't say anything else because I was attempting to calm my nerves. I couldn't stop my hand from slapping my knee like a superball bouncing around recklessly. Maggie made a left turn and I noticed that we were going past a bookstore. I would have loved to stop so that I could get a few books to get lost in but I knew that wasn't an option.

"I'm going to be reaching out to a man who may be your biological father," Maggie continued. "She's given me the name of a man who she thinks is your dad."

"Well, how come she's never told me who he is?" I asked.

"Well, according to her, she didn't have a strong sense of who he was until recently. Her friend Simon helped her to narrow down the possibilities."

"Oh, God, please don't tell me I'm related to him."

"I don't know. We'll have to see if this man is willing to be tested. He may refuse testing or deny any type of relationship with your mother." I got so angry that I started slapping the dashboard

of the car like I'd gone mad. My emotions were out of control. Maggie didn't say anything. I suppose she was used to sudden emotional outbursts.

"So if this dude takes the test and realizes he's my father then what?" I asked. "Do I get to go live in his castle and live happily ever after?"

"If he does agree to be tested and he learns that you're his child, I'm sure it would have an impact on his life," Maggie said.

"What if I don't want to go with him? What if he's some creep who's just as messed up as my mother? Then what?"

"Well, we'd never put you in a situation where you're in danger of being harmed. If your biological father has a criminal record or is unable to care for you, then you'd be able to remain at the group home until you turn eighteen years old. At that point, you'd be free to go forward and live your life."

"It sounds like a real jacked-up deal," I said as I wiped a tear from my eye. I was trying not to cry.

Maggie pulled into a gas station and turned off the car. She repositioned herself to look directly at me. I refused to make eye contact with her. I continued to look out the window at people who were walking by.

"If you're thinking about running away from the group home let me give you a few things to consider. The streets are very cold at night. You wouldn't know where you'd be sleeping or where your next meal would come from. You run the risk of being attacked or taken advantage of by people who don't have your best interests in mind. All I'm trying to do is help you. If the situation with your biological father doesn't end with 'happily ever after' then you still have the option of finishing your education and even going to college. Hang in there, get your education so that you can locate a good job and support yourself. You seem like a very nice girl who has been dealt a very bad hand, and I'd hate to see you crumble apart. Your situation is bad but I've seen worse," Maggie explained. I still didn't say anything to her.

"Look. All I'm asking is that you stay at the group home if things don't work out for the best."

"It doesn't matter. If this guy is anything like my mother, he doesn't give a rat's ass about me," I said sarcastically. "I don't care what happens to me anymore."

"Be positive, Keysha. Perhaps he will care once he's made aware of your situation." I finally turned and looked her directly in the eyes.

"No one has ever cared about me or loved me, with the exception of my Grandmother Rubylee, who is in jail. I might as well step in front of a bus and kill myself."

"Well, since you feel that way, maybe I shouldn't bother trying to contact this man," Maggie said as she started the motor back up and continued on.

We finally stopped in front of the group home, which was a brown brick bungalow-style structure. The screen door had black burglar bars on it, and the wooden banisters on the front porch needed to be repainted. The bushes around the property were overgrown, and the grass had been completely neglected. All the way at the top of the structure I noticed three small windows, which I assumed was the attic.

Maggie pressed the latch for the trunk and was about to get out of the car when I stopped her by speaking up.

"Contact him," I said. "Maybe fairy tales do come true."

"Okay," said Maggie.

eight

Maggie took me inside the group home and up to the attic, which had been converted to office space for the adult supervisors. I sat in a chair beside a desk and awaited further instructions. There was one girl who was about my age who was standing at the file cabinet filing. When she saw me she stopped working and glared at me.

“Why don’t you take a picture, it lasts longer,” I snapped at her. She continued to study me for a moment longer before continuing on with her work. It was noisy in the office. Old-fashioned typewriters were dingy, drawers were constantly being opened and closed and the phone rang constantly. The desks and equipment up there were very old and appeared to be secondhand. The metal desks and filing cabinets were all pea green. The setup reminded me of a police station. The floor plan was wide open, and you could see exactly what everyone was doing.

“Come sit over here,” Maggie said, directing me to another desk. “Once I get you processed, we’ll go over some general rules and then I’ll give you a tour of the place.”

“Rules?” I said. “I’m not following any rules.”

“The rules are for your safety. If you break the rules there will be consequences.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I said, completely unafraid of consequences.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Maggie gave me some basic rules for living in the group home.

“Boys are not allowed in this facility. There is a curfew of 6:00 p.m. on school nights and 7:00 p.m. on Saturday night. If you violate the curfew rule you will be placed in a secured facility. You must treat the staff here with respect. They’re here to help and listen to you, as well as help you work through any problems you may be having or going through. Stealing will not be tolerated. Drug usage will not be tolerated. Fighting, inappropriate language or dress will not be tolerated.”

“What can you do up in here?” I asked.

“Better yourself,” Maggie said. I didn’t respond to her comment because I wasn’t sure exactly how I was supposed to do that.

“It will take me a day or two to get your school records and have them transferred to the high school in this area.”

“What? I can’t go to my old high school?”

“No. Each morning everyone will get on our school bus, and you’ll be driven to school as well as be picked up.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No. I’m not,” answered Maggie. “Come on. Let me give you a tour of the place and show you where you’ll be sleeping.”

The basement of the home had a small cafeteria and a common area with one television, a pool table, a combination bookshelf and magazine rack and three large tables, which were used for studying and doing homework. The main floor was where the sleeping quarters were. Everyone got a thin mattress and one small dresser with two drawers, and that was it. The main floor was also where the showers and bathrooms were located. After Maggie showed me the shower facilities, I followed her to another area where there was a group of lockers.

“This one is yours,” she said as she handed me my combination lock. “Don’t give your combination to anyone. You can keep your personal hygiene products and any other valuables you may have in here.” I opened up the small, rusty locker and was immediately assaulted by an odor.

“Whew,” I said aloud as I closed the door.

“I’m sorry about that. I’ll have one of the janitors spray some disinfectant in there for you,” Maggie said as I followed her back to the sleeping area. “Here is your cot,” she said. “I’ll let you get settled in. I’m sure the other girls will be along shortly to meet you.”

“When are you going to make the phone call to that dude?” I asked. All I had was hope that my biological father was a decent man who wanted a troubled girl like me. I didn’t want to stay in here any longer than I had to. In my mind, anyplace was better than where I was.

“I’ll do it first thing in the morning,” Maggie said.

“Why can’t we do it now?” I asked. “I mean, can’t you just call him up and say, ‘Hey, did you ever have a sexual relationship with a woman named Justine from Chicago?’”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. You’re in the state system now and certain protocols have to be followed. It’s going to take a little time.”

“I don’t have much time. I want to leave here.” I was feeling crazy.

“I’ll do everything that I can,” Maggie said with a smile and then left.

* * *

I plopped down on my cot and placed my face in my hands. Everything seemed so unreal. I just couldn’t believe this was happening to me. A short time later, I felt someone nudge the back of my shoulder with their fingertips. I glanced over my shoulder and saw a massive girl towering over me. She had to be at least six foot two and was very heavysset.

“What do you want?” I asked her.

“To look through your bags,” she said.

“For what?” I asked, placing a very mean expression on my face.

“To see if you have anything that I want.” I laughed.

“Honey, if you want to go through my rags to see if anything I have can fit you, then knock yourself out.” I stood up and was about to walk away.

“Drugs,” she whispered. “Do you have any?”

“No.” I glared at her as if she’d lost her mind. Drugs just weren’t my thing, especially after watching my mother struggle with addiction.

“They didn’t give you any drugs for the cut on your hand? No painkillers or anything?”

“I have to wear the bandage to keep my hand from becoming infected. I don’t have any painkillers for it,” I said and headed down to the common area. When I got down there, some of the girls were watching an episode of Jerry Springer. I went over to the small bookshelf in search of something to read. I felt like escaping from the reality I was in. I didn’t want to make friends at that point. I only wanted to be left alone.

The selection of books was very small, and some of the authors I’d never heard of. I picked up three books I thought would be interesting. There was *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, and *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor. I picked *The Women of Brewster Place* and went back to my cot. I couldn’t wait to mentally check out of the group home by getting lost in a book.

nine

I didn’t sleep well at all my first night in the group home. I just couldn’t sleep around a bunch of strange people I didn’t know or in the strange surroundings. I stayed up most of the night reading. On top of that many of the girls snored loudly. The street lamppost provided just enough light for me to read by. I finally drifted off to sleep at around four o’clock in the morning. At seven o’clock I was awakened abruptly by the sound of someone screaming. When I sat upright, several of the supervisors were trying to restrain the oversize girl who’d asked me if I had any drugs.

“She’s coming off of another bad hangover,” I overheard one girl whisper to another one.

When they finally got her under control, they searched her belongings and found that she’d somehow gotten hold of some alcohol.

“That heifer is crazy,” I heard yet another girl in the room say.

Once the supervisors found what she’d taken, they escorted her out of the dorm room. The other girls just sat and watched the whole thing go down without saying much more. It was strange watching all of this unfold. It was like being in a movie for the mentally ill. I felt as if I was watching things happen but not actually a part of it. In some ways the dorm room filled with cots felt like a ward at an insane asylum. Perhaps we were all just too emotionally empty to react to the madness that was going on around us. Perhaps we just couldn’t cry or talk about our pain anymore. Whatever our reasons, none of us moved an inch as the girl was being removed.

* * *

Later, after everyone had gone to school, I took a long shower, got dressed and hung out in the common area. I was waiting on Maggie to arrive with my transcript so I could get registered at a new high school as well as take me to the doctor to have my hand examined. I picked up an old issue of Vibe magazine that was lying around and started reading an article on Usher. God, if I had a boyfriend as fine and as rich as him, I'd be set, I thought to myself. I'd just finished reading the article when I heard Maggie calling out my name.

"Oh, there you are," she said with a monotone voice. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, I suppose," I said as I stood up and followed her. Maggie got me registered and I started school on the same day. At least she thought enough to get me a book bag and plenty of supplies, I thought to myself. I didn't know what my future held but there was no sense in worrying about what I couldn't control.

* * *

Several weeks went by, and I hadn't seen or heard from Maggie. I thought she'd left me hanging just like everyone else. I didn't make any waves, nor did I consider any of the girls to be my friend. At this point they were only acquaintances. I had a few conversations with some of the girls, and we even shared a few laughs but nothing real meaningful developed after that.

The adult supervisors had therapy sessions that they encouraged everyone to participate in. A group of us would form a circle and openly talk about our problems. Sometimes I participated and other times I didn't. It was depressing to sit and hear details about the situations some of the other girls came out of. Some were drug users, some were homeless teens from different states and others were selling themselves on the streets in order to buy food or purchase a bus ticket to a new town. It was sad, and downright horrifying listening to stories of sleeping in abandoned warehouses with rats and begging for money on the street corner. One girl named Africa, who was the same age as I was, talked about how she'd stand on the street corner and sing for money to get food. Her parents came to the United States from Haiti, but they both died in a fire when she was twelve. She was placed in a foster home but was abused by her foster mother, so she ran away. While living on the streets she had to constantly fight off men who tried to attack her while she slept on a mattress with a sickly stray dog she was trying to take care of.

"I named my dog Port-Au-Prince, which is where my family is from. He protected me during those times. No matter how sick he was feeling, he wouldn't let anyone get too close to me. He would always bark, even when it hurt to do so."

"What happened to Port-Au-Prince?" I asked her. Before she could answer, she started crying. "I was singing on a corner one morning trying to get enough money to buy him some food. He was lying down beside me, and when I'd finally gotten enough money I called to him, but he didn't move. He died while I was singing."

"What song were you singing?" asked another girl.

"An old song by Sam Cooke called 'A Change Is Gonna Come.' My mother loved that song." Africa sang for the group, and by the time she was done I was in tears. One thing is for sure, I didn't want any part of what I heard had happened to her to happen to me.

* * *

Early one Saturday morning, the group was scheduled to go for a fall outing to a local theater to watch a stage play. I had just boarded the group van but was pulled off of it by Maggie. I hadn't seen her in weeks. I followed her back inside and upstairs to the office where we'd be able to speak privately.

"I really wanted to go see that stage play, Maggie," I said to her.

"Well, we have to do something else instead. I have to get you over to a doctor for a blood sample."

"Blood sample for what?" I asked.

"I got in contact with the man that your mother said might be your dad. At first he said that he didn't recall who your mother was and that there was a mix-up," she explained. "I didn't hear from him for a few weeks and then, out of the clear blue sky, he called me back."

"Well, what did he say?" I asked, holding my breath on her every word.

"Apparently he has a cousin named Simon."

"The man that my mother got caught up with?"

"Yes."

"Oh, great. If my biological father is related to Simon, you can forget it. I'll just stay here at the group home."

"Well, hang on before you say that. Simon and the man who may be your father are as different as night and day."

"Go on, I'm listening," I said.

"Simon got in contact with his cousin through another family member and reminded him about a particular house party they'd gone to years ago when they were both young men. An encounter occurred between Simon's cousin and your mother."

"But Justine doesn't remember this, right?" I asked.

"I don't know what your mom remembers. Anyway, I got a phone call back from Simon's cousin and he has agreed to be tested just to make sure he doesn't have any children out in the world he's not aware of." I swallowed hard. I felt my heart racing and I couldn't calm myself down.

"So, we're going to head over to the clinic for a blood sample and let science tell us if we've located your biological father." I exhaled loudly. My feelings were somewhere between happy and terrified.

"I know this isn't easy," Maggie said.

"I'm afraid," I admitted as I swallowed hard.

* * *

Several weeks after my blood sample was taken, Maggie resurfaced again. I was in the common area playing Monopoly with Africa and a few other girls when Maggie rushed in and called out my name, "Keysha." I could hear the excitement in her voice. I captured her gaze.

"Come on, let's go upstairs into the office." I excused myself from the table and followed her. The upstairs office was as busy as it always is. The phones were ringing, the typewriters were dinging and there was a continuous hum of several conversations taking place at the same time. I took a seat in front of the desk where Maggie sat.

"The test results came back."

"And?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"We've found him," she said with a smile. I couldn't believe it. I suppose I should have been happy but I was actually mortified by this new information.

"Well, aren't you happy?" she asked.

"I don't know. I mean, who is he? What is he like? Does he even care about me?"

"His name is Jordan, and he's doing very well. He's married and has a son who is a few years younger than you." She paused in thought for a moment. "He and his wife have agreed to come and meet you."

"Come and meet me?" I began to feel a panic attack setting in. "How about coming to get me the hell up out of here?"

"Keysha, don't get upset. I mean, your existence is very shocking and unnerving to him. This has changed everything for him. He never knew about you."

"Well, he does now, and I don't understand why he just doesn't come down here and pick me up so that I can go!" I was emotional and shouting at Maggie. I didn't mean to shout at her but my emotions weren't in full control.

“Keysha, you have to understand the situation he’s in, too. He had to explain you to his wife and the rest of his family. I mean, give him credit, he was man enough to admit he’d had an encounter with your mother. He and his family have yet to make a decision on what to do.”

“Well, I’m part of his family. What about what I have to say?”

“Calm down, okay?” Maggie said, trying to get me to relax.

“Okay, I’m cool. When will they be here?”

“In a few days. His mother is coming into town, and he wants to wait until she arrives before he comes because she wants to meet you, as well.”

“Well, what’s his name?” I asked again.

“His name is Jordan,” Maggie said. For a moment I felt good about knowing his name, but then random thoughts began dancing around in my head.

“What if they don’t like me? What if they don’t want me? What if—”

“Slow down, Keysha. Be patient. There are a lot of things that are still unclear, okay?”

“I can’t be calm,” I said, feeling my nerves buzzing.

“Keysha, whatever the outcome of all this is we’re going to do what is best for you.” Maggie smiled at me warmly. I didn’t say anything else. I just tried to maintain my composure and hope that my father was the type of man who would understand me as well as get along with me.

ten

On the day I was scheduled to meet my biological father for the first time I was a nervous wreck. I wanted to look my best for him. I wanted to look perfect for him, but the clothes I owned made it impossible to look perfect. My hair was in horrible shape, my skin was full of pimples and I just felt completely inadequate. I was all set to just forego the meeting, but Maggie insisted that I at least meet him.

By 11:30 a.m. I was sitting in the office on one of the chairs awaiting their arrival. Finally, after waiting what seemed like an eternity, Jordan, his wife and his mother finally entered the room, and I was stunned into silence. They all looked so well and healthy. Jordan was impeccably dressed. Everything about him looked expensive, and I began to think that there had to be some type of mistake because there is no way that a man who looked like him would ever be involved with my mother or Simon. He was very handsome; he had smooth brown skin and eyebrows shaped exactly like my own. He didn’t have any facial hair, and although his eyes appeared to be closed, I could tell that he was watching me and his vision was as sharp as a hawk’s. Sometimes I hated my ability to read a person’s thoughts through their facial expressions. My father did not look very enthused about being there. I stopped reading his mind and focused on his clothes again. He had on a gray pinstriped business suit with a very nice yellow satin shirt and matching tie. He had a gold watch on that was bling-bling all over the place and some very expensive-looking shoes. My other grandmother looked very regal. She was tall and full-figured and had on a beautiful dress that flowed well with her body. Her hair was styled nicely and had beautiful streaks of gray running through it. She looked as wise as she was beautiful. When I looked into her eyes I could see pain in them. As I studied the two of them, I saw another part of myself that I hadn’t known and for some reason I felt cheated. In my heart I knew we were connected, but in reality our relationship was estranged. Then there was Jordan’s wife, Barbara. She walked into the room with her nose wrinkled up as if she smelled a foul odor. Everything about her—from the way she was dressed to her demeanor—said uptight, confrontational and mean-spirited.

“Come here, baby.” My other grandmother summoned me to her once we made eye contact. I took a deep breath, stood up and walked over to her. She embraced me tightly and for a brief moment, the warmth of her hug felt beautiful and I got lost in the sweet scent of her perfume, but I didn’t hug her back. I didn’t know her like that.

“My name is Katie,” she said, smiling at me. “I’m your grandmother.” I looked into her eyes and somehow I felt as if she could see right through me. I wanted to say something but my words got

trapped in my throat. These new feelings were foreign to me. I was looking into her eyes and felt like I knew her, but I didn't. I looked over at Jordan, and my heart started beating so fast that I thought it was going to smash through my chest.

"Hello. My name is Jordan," he said with a very commanding voice that made me nervous. Just hearing such a strong and unyielding voice made me swallow hard. We stared at each other for a long moment. Then without even thinking about it we both said, "You're reading my thoughts through my facial expressions." It was the weirdest thing that has ever happened to me. We had never known each other, but we knew each other in this bizarre way.

"It's okay. We're going to get you out of here," said Grandmother Katie. I backed away from my father because I didn't fully trust him. He was a total stranger, and yet he wasn't.

"Hello," I finally greeted him begrudgingly. I don't know why I had an attitude toward him.

"Are you okay?" he asked, trying to sound concerned, but I didn't truly think that he was.

"Does it look like I'm okay?" My tone of voice was filled with snake venom. Our eyes locked on each other again; he was trying to understand me just as much as I was him.

"Keysha, come here." Grandmother Katie once again summoned me to her side. "I know how you must feel but things are going to change, I promise," she said. I was so nervous at that moment I felt the urge to pee. I took a deep breath and began biting my fingernails.

"Hello, I'm Maggie Russo. I'm Keysha's social worker," Maggie greeted Jordan's wife, who looked like someone had just stolen her million-dollar lottery ticket.

"How did this happen?" Barbara asked Maggie. "We never knew about her."

"Jordan, if you, your mother and your wife would come over here we can discuss this situation a little more privately. Keysha, would you please have a seat over there in the manager's office." Maggie directed me to a small office that was just on the other side of the wall. I exhaled loudly and stomped over to a seat and made more noise than I needed to. I didn't go inside of the office right away. I hovered near the door where I could still hear their conversation. I listened to them talk about my case.

"Jordan, you can't deny that girl if you wanted to. She looks just like you," I heard Grandmother Katie say. "I know that you didn't know about her, but now you do. You can't leave her in this situation. She's your flesh and blood."

"Mom, please." Jordan wanted his mother to be silent for a moment. "I have a family," I heard him say. "I can't just move her in and make everything work."

"Can't you find a nice foster home for her?" I heard Barbara ask.

"At her age, it would be difficult for us to place her in a foster home."

"She has problems, right?" I heard Barbara ask another question.

"Problems that are not her fault," I heard Grandmother Katie argue back.

"Let me interrupt you guys for a moment," said Maggie. "Right now, Keysha is hurting emotionally. She's been through a lot, but she's nowhere near as bad as some of the other cases I'm dealing with. She's not pregnant, she still enjoys going to school and she's drug free. I have kids younger than her who are pregnant, drug abusers and prostitutes. Many of them have been assaulted as young children and have self-esteem issues that you couldn't possibly imagine. In my heart, I know Keysha is a good kid. What she needs right now is a good, stable home with a lot of love and attention. Now, Jordan, biologically she is your daughter and responsibility. The state is overburdened, and a lot of kids fall through the cracks. However, it is understandable how this can be very disruptive to your current family. You have two options. You can agree to take your daughter with you, or you can sign over your parental rights and let her continue living here until she turns eighteen."

"What happens to her then?" Jordan asked.

"It's hard to tell. We do offer some assistance with college or job training, but it's a very hard road and only a small percentage of the kids actually make it. A lot of them end up falling into a life of crime or some sort of addiction."

"What about her mother? Did she sign over parental rights?" asked his wife.

“She automatically lost them once she was placed in jail,” Maggie answered her.

“Will she get her parental rights back once she gets out of jail?” I heard my father ask. I felt so worthless when I heard him ask that question. I felt like he didn’t see me as a part of him. I went into the office and sat down because I didn’t want to hear any more of what he had to say, because I knew that in the end he’d leave me hanging just like my mother had.

* * *

About an hour later, Grandmother Katie came over and sat next to me. She draped her arm over my shoulder and hugged me once again.

“This is all going to work out,” she reassured me but I didn’t believe her words. “We’re going to get you out of here. It’s just going to take a little time though.”

“You’re kidding me, right!” I blew up because I figured it was all just a big lie. “You know what. He doesn’t want me! You don’t want me! His wife doesn’t want me and neither does the state! Nobody wants me so I might as well just go and kill myself to make it easier on everyone!” I yelled at the top of my voice. When I quieted down, the entire staff was glaring at me through the office door, stunned into silence. I couldn’t take the pressure so I ran out of the office and back to the sleeping area. I lay facedown on the cot and cried out loud into my pillow.

eleven

The following day, Maggie told me she would be meeting with my mother to discuss what the best options would be for the unborn baby she was going to have while still in jail. I told her I wanted to go with her because I wanted to see her. I had questions I wanted to ask her. When we arrived at the jailhouse it was scary. There were metal detectors and armed guards everywhere. We had to take off anything metal that we had on before going through the detector. Even after going through the detector, I had to be patted down to make certain that I wasn’t sneaking in anything that I shouldn’t be.

I went into a room with Maggie and sat at a long table that had partitions on each side for privacy. In front of me was a thick sheet of bulletproof glass and a black telephone. On the other side of the glass was an empty chair with the same setup. I had to wait for a long time before the guard brought Justine out. When I saw her, I was actually happy to see her, even though the circumstances weren’t the best. I picked up the phone at the same time she did.

“Hey, Mommy,” I said, noticing how tightly her hair had been French braided. I couldn’t help the way I felt at that moment. My feelings were trapped somewhere between angry and uncertain.

“What’s going on?” Justine asked.

“Nothing. I mean, a lot. Things are so chaotic right now. I’m living in a group home for teens and the other kids in there seem real crazy.”

“Did that social worker get in touch with the man who might be your daddy?” Justine seemed to be indifferent about whether I found out the identity of my father. I think she was sensitive about the fact she really didn’t know who he was after all of these years.

“Yes,” I answered her.

“Did he come down to see about you?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered again.

“I didn’t think he’d really show up after all this time, but Simon said he would.” She paused in thought. “Well that’s the best that I can do for you right now. Hopefully he’ll take you in.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” I said, feeling my anger swelling up. “He doesn’t want me.”

“Well, neither did I, but you’re here.” Those words hit me like a wrecking ball slamming against a structure being demolished. I wanted to holler at her but I didn’t. My heart just iced over and I realized that coming to see her wasn’t such a good idea.

“You have to make it on your own,” she told me. “I can’t do anything more for you. You’re old enough now to make your own choices. Hopefully, you’ll make some good ones so that when I get out of here I can come and stay with you.” What was that supposed to mean? I mean, damn! I can hardly take care of myself, and she’s telling me to start preparing to take care of her. At that

moment, I wanted nothing more to do with her. At that moment, I heard a little voice in the back of my mind telling me I was worthless and should disappear off the face of the earth because no one cared about me.

“Well, that’s all I have to say,” she informed me and then hung up the phone. I looked at her one last time and tried to read her thoughts but I couldn’t. I got up and left the room. Maggie, who was waiting for her turn to speak with my mother, didn’t say anything to me. I suppose the look on my face said it all. She went into the bulletproof room to speak with my mother without saying a word to me.

* * *

Three weeks had gone by since I’d seen Grandmother Katie and my father, Jordan. Just like always, I figured they had left me hanging and had no intention of coming to my rescue. I didn’t expect them to return at all because, as I heard his wife put it, “I’ve got problems.” Hell, in my mind, we’ve all got problems.

I was having a very difficult time concentrating on my schoolwork. I couldn’t focus, especially after being rejected by my biological father and mother. I just didn’t care about much of anything anymore. I didn’t care about school, my grades, or the people at the group home or anyone, even myself. The only thing that kept me from going nuts was books.

One day when I was feeling particularly low and depressed, Africa came over to my bed and sat by me.

“You don’t look so hot,” she said.

“Things are just real jacked-up for me right now. My life isn’t worth living,” I said.

“Sure it is,” Africa said, trying to reassure me, but her words were of no comfort. “I know what it is like to feel the way you do.”

“No, you don’t,” I snapped at her.

“Yes, I do,” she snapped right back. “You look as if you want to just give up on everything.” I didn’t say anything.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. I’ve been there several times but I never had the nerve to go through with it. I guess I was too afraid to take my own life.”

“So what kept you going?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I just took one day at time. Some days were better than others, but I always knew that I’d find a way to make it through my problems.”

“Don’t you want to get out of this place? Don’t you want to live with a family again?” I asked.

“Listen, when I was fourteen I joined this all-girl gang. For a while they served as my family, but the things we were doing—well, let’s just say I have plenty of regrets about it. I barely made it out of the gang alive, but I did, and I’m thankful for that. Yes, I do want to get out of this place, but not right now. It’s safe for me here, and it’s much better than living on the street.” I didn’t say anything else.

“Hang in there. It will get better. It has to,” said Africa, who then got up and left. It was thoughtful of Africa to try and cheer me up, but it didn’t help because I still felt all alone. Maggie told me I should keep a diary of my feelings and share them in group, but I wasn’t really sure how to do that. All I knew was I was hurting really bad and I wanted my mother and father to know how much I hurt.

During our Saturday trip to the library I came across a book called *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. At first I didn’t think I’d like reading some white girl’s diary, but for some odd reason I sat down at a table with it. I opened the book and started reading it and got pulled into the story. I checked the book out and went back to the group home. I sat on my cot the rest of the day and read. I cared about Anne in a way that I have never cared before, and when I reached the end of the book, I cried for her. After reading what she’d gone through I decided that my life wasn’t as bad as it could be. I mean, at least I didn’t have to hide from soldiers inside a dark room and remain motionless and silent for hours on end just to save my life. I also didn’t have to live on the streets like Africa had to.

* * *

The following Saturday evening, I was sitting on my cot reading another copy of Vibe. This time I was reading an article about how Beyoncé Knowles got her start in show business. Just as the article was getting good, I heard Grandmother Katie call my name. I looked up and saw her approaching me, wheeling a small suitcase behind her. Jordan and Maggie were with her.

“Let’s start packing your things You’re not staying here another night,” said Grandmother Katie.

“What’s going on?” I asked, confused.

“You’re going to come live with me,” said Jordan.

“What if I don’t want to live with you?” I was being defiant.

“No, you’re coming to stay with me. You have no idea of what it took to make this happen.” Jordan spoke as if I had no real choice in the matter. He was serious, but I was suspicious. Inside I really wanted to be happy, but I wasn’t. Since I’d given up hope that anyone was coming for me, I’d gotten sort of comfortable living in the group home. Now I felt as if I were being uprooted once again and being carted off into the unknown.

“And you have no idea of what I had to go through just being here.” My words were full of pain and contempt for him. I felt like fighting him, but I didn’t know why.

“There is no need to be nasty with me. I’m your father and I want to help.”

“Oh, now you want to be my father.” Now I was really ready to fight. I’d shifted my body weight from one foot to the other and was about to unleash a verbal assault on him.

“Come on, now,” Grandmother Katie’s soothing voice cut the tension between us. “Now is not the time to have this conversation. Keysha, come with us. There is so much that needs to be said and understood. Now is the time for healing your bruised heart. It is not the time to create more wounds with angry words.”

Grandmother Katie was good. She was very skillful in the way she defused the tension between Jordan and me. For the moment, I decided not to fight with him.

“Come on, start packing your belongings,” Jordan said to me in a nicer tone of voice. Here I go again, I thought to myself. I wonder what my life is going to be like now.

twelve

I said goodbye to Africa and a few other girls that I’d gotten to know. We promised to keep in touch with each other, and I promised Africa that as soon as I got settled in I’d call her. We hugged each other for a long moment before I finally departed with Jordan.

During the long drive to my father’s house, Grandmother Katie began asking me questions about my mother and our lifestyle.

“Has your mother ever held a job?” she asked.

“No, not one that I can think of.”

“Have you been in touch with your other grandmother?”

“No,” I answered her.

“What exactly happened to her? I know that she was mixed up in some type of mess with a bank, or at least that’s what I’ve been told.” I didn’t want to talk about my Grandmother Rubylee. I missed her, and it was still difficult for me to talk about it because it made me think about my Aunt Estelle and how she passed away.

“Can we not talk about this right now?” I asked.

“Okay,” said Grandmother Katie. “I understand. We can talk about it later.” I remained silent for a long while as we drove down the highway. My father didn’t say much but I could tell that he had a lot on his mind. I suppose we are alike in that sense. Whenever there is something eating away at us, we prefer to remain silent and think about the situation before talking about it. I know that my thoughts were all over the place. I was fearful, uncertain and confused. I felt like I was being forced on my father, and that made me feel as if I was some germ no one could get rid of.

“We have enough room for you,” said Jordan, who only began speaking after I saw Grandmother Katie nudge him. “You also have a brother. His name is Mike.”

"You'll be in the upstairs bedroom down the hall from him. He's a bit apprehensive about your coming to live with us. He's been the only kid in the house for a long time, and he now has to learn how to share." I didn't know what to say so I remained silent.

"I know you'll find living with me to be a lot different, but I know that it's for the best."

Whatever, I thought to myself. In the back of my mind, I was already thinking about running away. To where, I don't know. I just wanted to be alone and not be bothered.

* * *

We turned into this community where there was nothing but beautiful green grass and large homes. I took in everything. I saw both black and white people out mowing their lawns and planting flowers. A few younger kids were riding their bikes along the sidewalk. We finally turned into a driveway and I focused on the house.

"Here we are," said Jordan as he drove down a long driveway. My jaw dropped when I saw the home.

"This is where you live?" I wanted to be sure I wasn't dreaming.

"Yes, and now you'll be living here," said Jordan. The house was two stories tall. It was a soft shade of green with red roof shingles. The underground sprinklers were on. I noticed that there was a greenhouse attached to it that appeared to be filled with all types of flowers that were bursting with color. Once we reached the end of the driveway there was a large black iron gate. Jordan touched a remote that was in the car and the gates opened up. We drove in, and he parked the car in front of one of the doors of the five-car garage.

"Okay, we're here," Jordan said once again as he glanced into the rearview mirror to look at me.

"Do you like it?" he asked with a slight smile.

"It's all right," I said, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing that I was completely impressed.

"It's just all right?" he asked again.

"Yeah, it's just all right," I answered him back.

"Jordan, why don't you give her a tour. I'll take her things up to her room and meet you guys up there," said Grandmother Katie.

"Is it okay with you if we take a walk around the property, Keysha?" asked Jordan.

"I guess it's not like I have a choice," I answered sarcastically.

We got out of the car and stepped into the bright sunlight. I heard a chorus of birds singing, and for the first time noticed all of the trees that surrounded the house. I counted a total of eight.

"This is the garage," Jordan said as he opened one of the bay doors. We stepped inside. The garage was bigger than the apartment I lived in with my mother. Everything inside was organized and in its proper place. Items like bicycles, the lawn mower, leaf blower and hedge trimmer hung from hooks in the ceiling. There was plenty of shelf space and plastic color-coded and labeled containers on each shelf. To my right I noticed a car covered with a black cloth. Jordan noticed me staring at it.

"Do you want to see what kind of car it is?" he asked. Before I could answer he walked over to it and removed the covering. Beneath the cloth was a black sports car with an eagle painted on the hood.

"This is my 1979 Pontiac Trans Am," he said proudly. "I've spent a small fortune rebuilding it to its original condition."

"Do you ever drive it?" I asked. He looked at me strangely as if the thought of pulling it out of the safety of the garage would take an act of God.

"Rarely. This car is a classic. I drive it each year in the Memorial Day parade but that's about it." I looked around the garage a little more closely and saw that there was an additional door.

"What's in there?" I asked.

"Go ahead and take a look," he said. "I'll be along once I finish re-covering the car. I don't like dust getting on it." When he said that I quickly realized that his old car meant a great deal to him. I walked over to the other door and opened it up. Inside was a small workshop. It was tidy and well

organized. On the shelves were various containers of paint, wood stain, tools and other items used for building and repairing.

"This is my workshop," Jordan said as he entered the room.

"You build stuff?" I asked.

"I restore things," he said. "Have you ever heard of the phrase, 'one man's trash is another man's treasure'?"

"No, I've never heard of the expression," I lied to him. I don't know why I did. I just did.

"It means that what one person tosses away, another person may find value in."

"Was the old-time car someone's trash?" I asked.

"Yes, it was. The man who had it sold it to me for only a few hundred dollars. It was just sitting on his property rusting away. I had it towed here and over the course of about seven years I rebuilt it." I was impressed but I didn't let him know it.

"So what do you build in here?" I asked.

"I restore furniture that I buy at garage sales."

"You're basically like the junk man who rides around in a raggedy pickup truck picking up everyone's junk on the street," I said as I found a way to identify with what he did. I could tell that he didn't like my comparison because he didn't respond to my comment. I wanted to laugh at him for being so sensitive but I didn't. "Where do those stairs lead to?" I pointed toward the back of the room.

"Come on, I'll show you," he said. I followed him through the work area and up the back staircase. When we got upstairs I was speechless at what I saw.

"This is the apartment above the garage. I had it converted to a workout gym," Jordan said as he flipped a few light switches so that I could take a better look. There were a number of machines positioned all around the room. There was a flat-screen television mounted on the far wall, and two treadmills were situated in front of the television.

"Do you know who this is?" he asked pointing to a mural on the wall. The wall painting was a life-size portrayal of two boxers. One had knocked the other one down and appeared to be towering above him yelling down at the other man on his back.

"That's that boxer man," I said, not remembering his name.

"His name is Muhammad Ali. He's fighting a man by the name of Sonny Liston. In this scene, Ali has knocked Liston down. Liston was the heavyweight champion at the time. Ali is yelling 'get up' to him."

"Why is he yelling at him?" I asked.

"Because Liston knew that he couldn't beat Ali so he tried to cheat by placing an eye irritant on his boxing gloves. So every time he hit Ali near his eyes, the irritation prevented Ali from seeing clearly. Once Ali's trainers realized what was going on, they washed the irritant away and Ali went back out to whip Sonny's behind."

"Oh," I said as I walked up closer to the mural. "Who painted it?"

"Your uncle did," Jordan answered. I looked back at him and noticed that he was just watching my every movement. His sharp eyes made me nervous. He made me feel as if he was mall security or someone watching and waiting for me to steal something.

"Don't stand behind me like that," I said, snapping at him.

"Stand behind you like what?" he asked.

"Like you're waiting for me to break or steal something."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to make you feel that way," he said.

Next to the Muhammad Ali painting was a cabinet filled with track and field trophies.

"Did you win these?" I asked.

"No, actually most of them belong to my wife, Barbara. She was an exceptional high school and college track and field athlete. The three on the bottom shelf belong to your brother, Mike."

"Where is he?" I asked.

“He’s out with his mother. They’ll be home in a little while. You’ll see him then.”

I got tired of looking at the workout room and decided to walk back down the stairs.

“Come around this way,” Jordan said, and I followed him around the side of the garage down a short brick path, which was lined with thick, neatly trimmed bushes. Once we got around the bushes I saw the in-ground swimming pool.

“Do you know how to swim?” he asked.

“No,” I answered.

“Well, I can teach you how. It’s real easy once you get the hang of it.” I didn’t answer him, I just looked at how pretty the water was. “We’ll have to wait until next summer for swimming lessons though. I’m going to have to drain the pool for the winter next week.”

We walked back down the short brick path past the garage and to the door at the rear of the house. I stepped inside and held the door open for Jordan. Upon entering he began talking.

“We’ll start in the basement,” he said and I followed him down a few steps. To the right there was a door, which he opened. It was his office. His computer, desk and photos of various entertainers were hung on the wall. I walked in and looked at one photo of him and TuPac.

“You knew TuPac?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t say that I knew him but we’ve met before,” answered Jordan.

“So what is that you do?” I asked.

“I’m the executive vice president for Hot Jamz 104,” he answered.

“That’s, like, the hottest radio station in the city,” I said, sort of excited about the possibility of getting to meet a famous entertainer.

“Yeah, but our last rating has us as the number-three station in the city and I have to change that.”

“Oh,” I answered, not fully understanding what he meant. We came out of the office and went toward the rear of the basement. It was a typical basement. Gray concrete floor and walls. There was nothing exciting about looking at the laundry shoot or the washer and dryer.

“Over here, this is what I wanted to show you,” he said as he opened another door, which led to the greenhouse. I stepped inside and saw an array of potted flowers blooming along with another door which led inside.

“It’s pretty,” I admitted and then turned and exited the room. I could tell that Jordan wanted to explain all of the flowers but I didn’t care about that.

“I planted all of the flowers around the house,” he commented as we walked out of the basement. “Gardening is something I’ve always loved. Have you ever planted a seed and then nurtured it into a flower?”

“No, and I really don’t care to,” I said with honesty. However, I suppose that my tone of voice made me sound rather snotty.

“This is the family room,” he said as we walked out of the basement and up a few stairs. There was a large sectional brown leather sofa that looked huge enough to seat at least seven or eight people. At both ends of the sectional there were recliner seats. The oversize sofa even had cup holders and a compartment to keep ice cold. Another large flat-screen television was mounted on the wall along with a complete home theater system. He waited for a response from me, but I only nodded my head. From there we moved into the kitchen, which looked like it was out of a magazine. The refrigerator had a crushed icemaker, there was a center island where food could be prepared, and there was an abundance of cabinet and shelf space. From there it was on to the formal dining room. There was a beautiful wooden table large enough to seat eight people. The table was completely set but looked more like a display rather than a place to eat.

“Follow me and I’ll show you to your room,” he said as he opened yet another door, which I thought was a closet but it was actually a staircase that led to the upper level of the house.

“Damn, this is a big-ass house,” I blurted out my thoughts.

"I'd prefer that you not use foul language. It's not becoming of a lady," Jordan said, and I looked at him like he'd just lost his mind. I know that he didn't call himself putting me in check, I thought to myself. The last thing he has the right to do is discipline me.

"Whatever," I said as I walked up the stairs. In my mind I didn't see myself staying in this house for very long. I felt like I was intruding on his space anyway. When I reached the top landing there were three bedrooms and a bathroom up there. Grandmother Katie was coming out of the bathroom as we were about to turn and walk down the corridor toward the bedrooms.

"Well, I see you two have finally made it up here," she said with a smile.

"I'm about to show Keysha to her room," Jordan said. I followed him down to the last door, which was closed.

"I think you should open it," he said as he stepped aside. I placed my hand on the handle of the white door, gave it a twist and opened it up. I was completely taken aback by the size of the room. It was huge. There was a beautiful vanity dresser filled with all types of cosmetic products. There was a queen-size canopy bed with linen that matched the curtains, a desk and chair were near the window, as well as a stand that had a small television with a VCR and DVD player built into it.

"I hope you like the room," Jordan said.

"Of course she likes it," answered Grandmother Katie. To tell the truth I felt like I was more like an outsider than I'd ever felt before. It all seemed so fake to me, and I feared that at any moment someone would come and tell me that there was a big mistake and I wouldn't be able to stay. So, in my mind, there was no sense in getting too comfortable, because I knew that dreams didn't come true, and at some point either I'd run away or get mixed up in some juvenile-delinquent mess just like I was expected to.

"Um, can I be alone for a moment?" I asked, turning to face Grandmother Katie and Jordan. Both of them had goofy smiles plastered on their faces. At that moment I felt as if I was the charity case of the century, and I didn't like that feeling.

"Sure, you can have some privacy, honey," said Grandmother Katie.

"Your brother will be home in awhile," said Jordan. That was another thing that was peculiar to me. Jordan spoke so clearly and flawlessly. He didn't sound anything like the men who hung around the empty lot near my old apartment building. He actually spoke like Carlton Banks from the program *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. "Barbara will be home later. We're all going out for a nice family dinner tonight," he announced, and I cringed at the thought of sitting at a dinner table with them.

"I don't have anything to wear," I quickly said, confident that my excuse would get me out of having to go with them.

"Look in the closet over there, honey. Some nice clothes have been purchased for you," said Grandmother Katie, who still had a smile plastered on her face. I just knew that whatever they had purchased for me was all wrong. Old people have no sense of style, I thought to myself.

"If you need anything, we'll be down in the family room," Jordan said before he and his mother walked out of the room and shut the door behind them.

thirteen

I just stood in the center of my bedroom for the longest time, afraid to touch anything. Once I found the courage to move within the space, I went over to the vanity and looked at the products there. It was filled with Proactive Solution skin-care products, cotton balls, Q-tips and an assortment of nail polishes and other makeup items. I opened the top left drawer and discovered it contained feminine hygiene essentials, which I had to admit I was in desperate need of. I went over and sat down at the desk in the room and stared out the window. My view was of the backyard. There was a large tree directly outside of my window that blocked part of my view of the garage and swimming pool. I don't know how long I'd been sitting there but I was startled out of my trance by a knock at the door. I didn't say anything, so the person knocked again. This time a little louder. I got up, moved to the door and opened it.

“What’s up, son?” A young boy was at my door. He had caramel skin, a thin trace of hair on his upper lip and an athletic build.

“You’re Mike, right?” I asked, trying not to laugh as I studied his appearance more closely. He had a white scarf wrapped around his head, which I assumed was more for fashion than it was for hairstyle. He had a Band-Aid positioned under his left eye, which made him look like a Nelly wannabe. He contorted his face and puckered his lips into an expression he considered to be thuggish, but it only made him look as if he were sitting on the throne with a bad case of constipation. He had on an oversize Akademiks T-shirt with matching Akademiks Armor jeans and a pair of Akademiks gym shoes.

“What? You see something funny?” he asked as he crossed his arms across his chest and tucked his fingers in his armpits. He appeared to be attempting to flex his chest and arm muscles, but he didn’t have enough muscle to flex.

“Boy, you are not hard, so don’t even try to act like you are some thug with a reputation and a criminal record.”

“You don’t know me. You don’t know the things I’ve done. I’m a straight gangster. You’re in my world now.”

“Well, you’re the first thirteen-year-old hardened gangster I’ve seen,” I said, thinking he was joking.

“I’m going to be fourteen in a minute,” he said, making a gesture with his fingers. It was then that I realized he was serious about the charade he was putting on.

“Whatever, fool,” I said and was about to slam the door in his face.

“Girl, why are you hating on me? Is it because I’m so iced-out? Is it because of my grillz?” He smiled at me, and I peeked at his teeth.

“That is not a grillz in your mouth, those are braces,” I said. “Who do you think you’re trying to fool? Your money is not long, and you are certainly not a baller.” I’d suddenly become annoyed with him. I studied him closely for another moment and could tell he was up to no good by the way he shifted his eyes from left to right.

“Okay.” He lowered his voice to a loud whisper. “I may not be a baller or a thug but listen up, because I’m only going to say this once. If you want to get along up in here, all you need to do is stay out of my way, mind your own business and don’t be up in here trying to act like daddy’s little girl. Do you understand what I’m saying, son?” He stepped closer to me as if he wanted to knuckle-up and fight. I wasn’t afraid of his scrawny behind at all. I made a sudden move as if I were about to hit him and he flinched with fear.

“Yeah, just what I thought. You’re just a little spoiled-ass punk!” I said with a vicious tone in my voice.

“Well at least I don’t have a face that looks like pimple paradise. I mean, damn girl, did every zit in the nation take up space on your forehead?” Before I could stop myself, I swung at him. Mike saw the punch coming and quickly moved out of my reach.

“Hey, you don’t want to throw down with me. I may not look like it, but I know how to fight,” he said as he backed away. I could tell that I’d scared him because his voice trembled.

“You see that I’m not scared, don’t you?” I snarled at him, feeling a deep hate for him growing each second that ticked by. “Here is a word of advice for you, Chicken Little,” I called him out of his name. “You have to bring some ass in order to kick some ass. If you come at me sideways again, I will beat you down like a crackhead who stole my last two dollars.” I gave him the meanest, most threatening glare that my face could form. He didn’t say anything, only continued to back away. He went back to his room and shut his door. I went back inside my room and shut the door, as well. I didn’t feel good about being in this house at all, but until I could find a place to run away to, this would have to do.

I decided to just chill in the room and pass the time by watching television. I was watching a movie called *Save the Last Dance* starring Julia Stiles. It was about this rich girl who lost her mother and then had to go live in the hood with her father. I suppose I identified with the movie because my situation was reversed. I had to move from the hood with my mother and live like some stuck-up girl in the rich suburbs. The movie was excellent, and I enjoyed watching all the dance moves she and the other characters did in the movie. The movie was just about to reach its climax when I heard Jordan's voice.

"Keysha." I didn't answer him because I was trying to figure why it sounded as if he was in the room with me.

"There is an intercom on the wall next to your closet door. Go over to it and press the 'talk' button to answer me." I looked over at my closet door and noticed the intercom. I did as he instructed.

"We're going to be going to dinner in about a half hour, so start getting ready. We're going to the Outback Steakhouse so jeans will be the appropriate attire to wear."

Appropriate attire, I thought to myself. He sounds all nerdy.

"Okay," I answered him back and then sat back on the bed to continue watching my movie. I was dreading looking in the closet at the clothes my grandmother had picked out because I knew they'd be a throwback to the sixties or seventies. After the movie ended I opened the large walk-in closet and flipped the light switch.

"Damn," I spoke aloud. "This closet is big enough to put a bed in." There were two dressers inside the closet along with plenty of shelf space for shoes and other accessories. There was also a large dressing mirror inside. The other thing that freaked me out was each drawer had a small label on it indicating what item of clothing was on the inside. I opened the drawer that said "jeans." To my surprise, Grandmother Katie had pretty good taste. Inside were several pairs of Baby Phat blue jeans.

"This is all right," I said to myself as I opened up other drawers and located tops, underwear and other items. This entire change in my life was like magic. It was like living in a fairy tale, and it just seemed too good to be true. I matched up an outfit that was acceptable to me. I then went into the bathroom and got ready. About fifteen minutes later, I stood in front of my mirror fully dressed, fussing with my hair because I was trying to make myself perfect, but my hair wasn't cooperating. Months of neglect and bad styling decisions couldn't be erased in a matter of seconds. I decided to put on my night hair scarf to cover it up just like Toya was so fond of doing. It would just have to do for now until I could get something done with it. I had butterflies in my stomach because I was about to go down and really meet Barbara, my stepmother, who made me feel very uncomfortable. I decided if she was going to be mean to me, then I'd be just as mean to her. I finally got my nerves in order and walked downstairs and into the family room where everyone was sitting and waiting on me.

"It took you long enough, I started growing a gray hair waiting on you," Mike said sarcastically.

Grandmother Katie smacked him on the back of his head. "Watch your manners, Mike." I looked around at each of them and felt as if they were all judging me.

"Why does she have that head rag on, Jordan?" Barbara tried to whisper in my father's ear, but I heard her. She acted as if I wasn't there and couldn't hear her. I felt as if I wasn't good enough for them. I felt as if I just didn't measure up.

"Just forget it. Y'all go out by yourselves. That's what you want anyway," I said as I rushed back up to my room. I shut the door and began to pace the floor again. I tried to focus my thinking and determine what to do next. The only thing that came to mind was to pack my things, steal any money lying around and take my chances out on the streets.

"Baby, come on and go with us. She didn't mean anything by what she said." Grandmother Katie had just opened my door.

"She doesn't like me," I said. "It was written all over her face."

“Give it time, Keysha. Your existence is news to all of us. We all have to make some adjustments and make room in our lives for you.” I plopped down on the edge of the bed and placed my face in my hands.

“Keysha, I really want you to have dinner with us,” said Jordan, who was now in my bedroom, too. I looked up at him and saw a part of me in his eyes. For a brief moment I felt some sense of a connection and wanted to hug him but I didn’t. I just felt angry with everything and everyone.

“Can I sit down next to you?” he asked.

“It’s your house,” I answered.

“When I look at you, I see myself,” he said. “I see a part of me that I feel like I should know but I don’t, and that hurts. Perhaps I’m moving too fast, but I want to give you all of the things that you’ve never had. I want to make up for that. I can give you a decent place to live, nice clothes and some sense of stability. What I can’t give you is the time we’ve lost. There is so much to learn and understand, but we have to give things time.”

“He’s right, you know,” said Grandmother Katie. “There are so many things about me and our family that you need to know, learn and understand. I want you to have that sense of belonging, but I know it’s not going to happen overnight. A sense of belonging comes from within, and when you get that feeling hold on to it, because it also means that you’re beginning to feel loved.” It’s just downright frightening how Grandmother Katie could read me.

“Let me see your hair.” Grandmother Katie walked over to me, and I allowed her to remove my scarf.

“It’s not so bad, honey. We just have to let it grow out a little and take care of it better,” she said as she took a closer look at my hair. “We can just brush it back and you’ll be fine.” Grandmother Katie picked up the brush that was sitting atop the vanity. She sat down at the foot of my bed and asked me to sit on the floor between her thighs.

“I want you to know that I’m always here for you, Keysha. I want you to be able to come to me and confide in me. I want you to know about my history just as much as I want to know about yours. I don’t even know what your favorite color or food is. Just like you’ve missed out, so has this family,” Grandmother Katie explained as she continued working with my hair.

“She hates me, doesn’t she?” I asked, referring to Barbara.

“No, she doesn’t hate you at all. She just has to adjust to this change in her life,” said Grandmother Katie as she brushed the other side of my hair. Her brush strokes were soft and comforting.

“There is a lot that you have to understand. One of which is that we’ve always wanted two children, a boy and a girl. We were able to have a son together but medical complications have prevented us from having additional children,” said Jordan.

“Life is like that sometimes,” Grandmother Katie continued. “You can plan out the perfect life for yourself, but if your plans don’t match God’s plan, then I’m afraid that you’re setting yourself up to deal with a lot of heartache.”

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