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My Sister's Tears

Erika Dawn Whitfield

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MY SISTER'S TEARS

Erika Dawn Whitfield, B.S.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in
Creative Writing

2007

ABSTRACT

One of the most influential writers I studied in the Advanced Creative Writing cluster was Amiri Baraka. His style of writing distinguishes him from his peers, but the journey he took to get the caliber of writing he's at now excites me as a writer. From the Beat Period (1957-1962), The Transitional Period (1963-1965), The Black Nationalist Period (1965-1974), to the Third World Marxist Period (1974-) (Beat Reader). Each period signified growth in his writing, but his way of thinking changed. He grew as a person. His transitions as a writer forced me to examine my own. My writing has grown from this journalistic style which included hard news and feature to leisurely writing poetry to short fiction. Although a short journey, it is a journey nonetheless. From my foundation as a fact finding, inverted pyramid structured style to more creative imaginative pieces. From a writing standpoint, it's quite a change.

"My Sister's Tears," the novella presented as my culminating project, is a short fiction piece. My goal was to create a fiction piece that presented characters and scenarios that were realistic. It was important to me that the reactions of the characters were sincere. The plot contains situations that tie characters together with background information on how those relationships were formed. Chloe and Toni are primary characters in this story. The dynamic between them is that of two sisters, one who has a successful career but a failed relationship. The other has a failed career but a fulfilling relationship. Both want what the other has, but only one is willing to sabotage a friendship to get it.

The story is told mainly through two characters. One of which is Toni, but the most important characters is the voice of the grandmother. She is the voice of reason for

Toni. She was an advisor in life and her lessons prove true in her death. Her lessons are always timely from her appearance in Toni's dreams to childhood lessons of wounds healing over time that can be applied to adult situations. The grandmother was an intricate part of pushing the story forward in time. The use of the grandmother helped to create scenes for the reader. Her voice also aided in ending the story which was one of the most difficult portions of the story to complete.

Completing this piece was one of my greatest challenges. I hope that readers feel satisfied once they've completed it. I hope they feel that each character's scenario has closure, but I hope readers are surprised at the outcome. I didn't want the story to be predictable. I wanted there to be surprises that the reader had no idea were coming.

Works Cited

1. Charters, Ann. The Portable Beat Reader. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
2. "The Official Amiri Baraka Website." 24 Feb 2007.

MY SISTER'S TEARS

Erika Dawn Whitfield, B.S.

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

2007

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Chapter 1

Things Fall Apart

I met Jesse at the Club Formula in downtown St. Louis two years ago. He caught my eye because he was standing at the bar looking relaxed as if he owned the place. He was extremely clean cut. His hair freshly lined as if he'd gone to the barbershop earlier that day. He was wearing a pair of dark blue Cavalli jeans, a dark brown dress shirt with some sort of brown leather sandals. His feet were clean, and it looked like he could have had a pedicure some time that week. Needless to say, he looked like he took good care of himself.

I ordered my drink from the bartender, and shortly after, the same bartender handed me another Malibu Rum with pineapple juice and said, "This is from the gentleman at the end of the bar." He sounded like someone in a Humphrey Bogart movie.

I tried to pretend like I wasn't surprised that an attractive man bought me a drink. To be honest, I was so overjoyed that someone had noticed I'd put so much effort into making myself look good tonight having Terri meet me at house early to help me pick out something sexy but not too seductive to wear, put on my make-up, and help me do my hair. I thought all of our hard work was in vain up until that moment.

"Oh shit. It looks like you threw the line out and caught a fish," Terri said laughing. "He's kind of cute. He's dressed nice. Why don't you go over and talk to him?"

"I don't know. Maybe I should wait for him to come over to me."

With a look of disappointment on her face, Terri said, "He made the first move buying you the drink. If you're interested, let him know. Stop being such a chicken shit, and say something to the man like thanks for the drink."

Terri and I both looked at each other and laughed aloud. We both had the funny thing that good friends have. We didn't have to say the joke aloud to know it was funny. We both knew that if a guy bought her a drink, she'd been over there already making small talk, putting his phone number in her cell phone, assigning it a ring tone, and they'd be on the dance floor grinding and winding their pelvises against each other.

I walked over to him slowly trying not to make it too obvious that I was headed his way.

"Hi. Thanks for the drink."

"No problem. I had to do something to get your attention," he said in deep distinguished voice. "What's your name?"

"Chloe. And yours?"

"I'm Jesse. I saw you when you walked in door, and I was watching your girlfriend with the long hair."

"You're stalking me," Chloe said jokingly.

"Not stalking you. More like observing you contemplating how I'd make my move."

"You're making moves to get the ladies."

"Nope. Making moves to get a lady."

I enjoyed his charming ways all ready. More so, I was flattered that he'd noticed me from the moment I'd entered the club. He'd even noticed me with Terri. That's sort of a surprise. Not that I'm not attractive, but you can tell that Terri takes a lot of time to make herself beautiful. Her make-up is always applied flawlessly with precision. Every strand of her hair is always perfectly in place. She's thin, model thin and very charismatic.

He hands me his business card and says, "Call me sometime."

I walked away reading it like it was the Gospel. Jesse Pearson, architect for Lakely, Morse, and Smitz Design Company. He sounds wealthy. Stuffing the card into my Louie Vutton backpack purse, I couldn't wait to give him a call later on that week.

"Well, was he cool?"

"Yeah he was all right."

"I see you got his card. What's this fool do, sell prepaid legal?"

"He's an architect."

"Shit. I don't think we've had an architect in the circle of trust, making reference to their favorite Robert Deniro comedy, Meet the Fockers. A doctor and a lawyer even a registered nurse but never an architect."

"Chloe's on the prowl. You see anybody else in this joint you want?"

"Shut up, Toni. You're crazy."

Two years, I can't believe it's been that long. Since then and I've gotten extremely close to his 7-year-old son but grown distant toward him.

Yesterday, a woman name Shirley called my house to let me know that my relationship wasn't what I thought it was, and she felt it was her duty to tell me that she was in love with Jesse. In love with my man, the man who moved in with me just months after we met. He'd fallen deeply and madly in love with me, he said, and I believed him. I wouldn't have questioned him, but she knew so much about me. She knew what kind of car I drove, my home address, and the addresses of some commercial property I'd purchased across town, but anyone can find out information about anyone on the internet, right?

"Hey babe. What's going on?" I asked inquisitively not for the sake of conversation.

"Nothing just tired from work. My newest clients want the Sears Tower for the price of a single family home in the worst neighborhood in town. And yours?" he asked.

"Mine was good, until."

"Until what?"

"I got a phone call."

"What kind of phone call."

"From an unexpected person I never thought I'd ever hear from."

"Well, who was it?"

"Shirley. Who is that?"

"You don't know who she is?"

"No I'm asking."

"She says she knows you."

"Oh Shirley," he says trying not to act surprised that I mentioned her name. "That's just some crazy chick I used to date back in the day. How'd she get your number?"

"You tell me."

"Babe, I don't know. She lost it when I tried to break up with her like two and a half years ago, right before we met. I'll call her and get her straight. You know I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize us. I'm trying to make it work."

"Jesse, she knew so much about me. She knows what kind of car I drive and where I work..."

"Don't worry about it. I'll set her straight. You know I love you, don't you?"

"Yeah, but..."

"But nothing. You love me, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You trust me?"

"Yes."

"Well let me handle this."

Chapter 2

Deep In Dreams

I'm inside what appears to be a Barnes and Noble, and I'm greeting fans as they approach the table where I'm signing copies of my first published book, Lustful Thoughts, a romance novel. A former lover, Harold, approaches the table. I knew it was him before he even spoke. I could tell it was him by his hair, thick long flowing dreadlocks, rarely cared for but still beautiful and free nonetheless.

"Long time no see," he says smiling that infectious smile that makes me grin like a little school girl and look away with embarrassment.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"Toni, you think I'd miss your first book signing? I was after all the inspiration behind this masterpiece."

"Are you staying for the reading?"

"I wouldn't miss hearing you say my name one last time."

"Silly, I didn't use your name."

"Yeah, I know that, but I know when you say Larry, you're really talking about me."

The conversation is suddenly terminated, and I'm standing in front of a podium with a large crowd of strangers, family, and friends who are applauding and screaming my name in unison. The applause fades like it does on T.V. game shows when the sign stops flashing red.

"I want to thank everyone for being such an inspiration on this piece. This novel is based on real people in real situations. Before I begin reading I want to

thank a few people. Terri is always honest. She always said exactly how she felt and she never held back anything. Micah always put things in perspective for me when I couldn't see that thing whatever it was for what it was. She helped me see things clearly. And Chloe my best friend of 15 years who...she gave...she...I can't say..."

The phone rings loudly interrupting my moment of greatness. I look over at the alarm clock. It's 3:36 a.m.

Devon mumbles, "It's got to be one of your friends. My friends know better."

"Hello," I say agitated placing emphasis on the hell.

"He won't open the door."

"Chloe, is that you?"

"Toni, he's got another woman in his house, and he won't open the door," she cries. "Open the fuckin' door Jesse. No I'm not leaving because she's scared. Hell, I don't care about her. What about me?"

I couldn't hear what he was saying only what she was crying out to him.

"Chloe, what the fuck is going on?"

"I woke up out of my sleep feeling uneasy. I was so tired when I got home, but something told me to get up out of my bed, put some clothes on, and come over to his house. There was strange white car parked where I usually park, so I knocked on the door, and he's got another woman in his house. Toni, I don't know what to do." She screams at him, "I'm not leaving until you open the fuckin' door, Jesse. I don't care if she's scared. Open the damn door."

She suddenly hung up the phone. I try calling her back, but her cell phone went directly to voicemail. The door bell rings shortly after our conversation ended so abruptly. She has this look on her face like someone really close to her died like she'd been crying for days.

"It's gonna be okay," I say reassuring her she's not the only one who's gone through this.

"I can't believe he'd do this to me. I love him so much, Toni. I don't know what to do with myself. First the other woman is calling me, now he's got her shackled up in his house like we're not together."

"What are you gonna do?" I don't know why I asked. I knew the answer. I just hoped, wished, prayed she'd had enough. I knew it wasn't the end. I knew she was ready to endure more. Even though she'd seen it with her own eyes, it wasn't enough. She'd talk to him about tonight. He'd somehow turn it around and blame her for not calling before she came to his house or something stupid like that. Either way, he'd take the blame away from him and put it on her.

"I don't know. I love him. I guess I just need to talk to him. I'm sure this will blow over tomorrow, and we'll talk without all the crying..."

"Talk about what the other woman in the house. I don't get it Chloe. How much of this can you take? You know and I know that he's not the one for you. No matter how much you try to make it work. He's not the one."

"How can you say that? I've put a lot into him, this relationship. You don't understand."

“What the fuck do you mean I don’t understand? I’ve been cheated on before by someone I loved.”

“Yeah, I know, but now you have a good boyfriend.”

“Right, but before him, I went through more shit than any woman should’ve had to deal with. Don’t get it twisted Chloe, my relationship isn’t perfect, but it’s different when you’re in love with someone who wants to be in love with you. That’s what makes my relationship so different from the ones in the past.”

We sat there for a few hours talking about love, relationships, heartache, but I knew it was all pointless. I knew by the end of the week, she’d be content with her relationship as troubled as it was, but all I could do was try to be a good friend listen and help her rationalize how she was feeling even if it was all bullshit.

That night, after she left my house, I cried her tears as if I’d caught my own boyfriend with another woman. I knew how she was feeling. Whether she wanted to believe it or not, I’d been there. I’d been cheated on. I knew all about loving hard instead of loving smart.

Chapter 3

My Grandmother Spoke Truth

My grandmother was never one to bite her tongue. Anyone married for more than 30 years with nine children didn't stay married by holding in feelings and emotions. One thing she did make clear was if you're going to invest time into a man, I mean really invest your whole self into him, do so with a man who not only loves you but adores you. Find someone who inhales you and intoxicates himself. "Love someone who loves you just a little more," she'd say.

Looking back as a young woman, that is a young lady coming into her womanhood, I just didn't get it. I thought my grandmother was crazy. She's talking old folks talk, as if that was such a terrible thing, but now that I'm approaching 30, I get it. Now it makes sense. It's like the smoke has cleared, and I can see the ruins left behind after so many blazing fires. After all of the one sided relationships where I loved and gave away all of me to men who gave me nothing in return but emotional baggage that I carried on to the next relationship.

I remember during my second year of college, Richie, my handsome, athletic boyfriend, was my reason for existing. I mean every decision I made in my life during that time, I consulted him like we were married. Considering he was an athlete who couldn't work and wasn't providing for me financially, consulting him on how I was going to spend my money must have been quite an ego boost for him. Nonetheless, I'd give to him financially, emotionally and spiritually exhausting myself giving him all my energy.

Nearing the end of our relationship, his mother, who I loved, suddenly became sick, and her husband, who was not Richie's father, left her for another woman. It sounds like a soap opera. The situation seemed surreal. He'd come home for break while his mom was hospitalized, and his stepfather was home with his new girlfriend and her children running around the house like little untrained monkeys eating anything they could get their hands. Needless to say, it was a low point for their family. Every dime I had to spare, I gave to him to pay his rent, utilities, and whatever else he needed. I'd neglected my girlfriends to be there for him rubbing his back telling him everything would be okay. Instead of going home to see my own family on the weekends, I'd stay with him because he was too angry to be around his own. Everyone and everything I cherished, I placed on the back burner and made him, his life, his problems my priority.

Finally, my mother demanded I come home to see her. After all, I hadn't been home in months. Maybe this wouldn't have been such a big deal if I was thousands of miles away, but I was roughly 100 miles away from home, so it was no big deal for me to drive home to St. Louis on Friday and head back to Cape Girardeau on Sunday evening. That weekend dragged on for what felt like a week. I remember calling Richie numerous times throughout the day, but my phone calls went unanswered. I felt sad at the thought that he was at home hurting, dealing with his mother's illness, his stepfather's infidelity, not to mention his school work, basketball practice, his obligations to his fraternity. He had a full agenda and all he had was me to help him through it all. Sunday finally came, and I couldn't wait to get back to Cape. Leaving my mother early Sunday

morning, not in the evening like I normally would, I forfeited our traditional Sunday service where my mother introduced me to her church members as if I'd never met them before bragging, professing I was a future Speech Pathologist/Audiologist, one of my many majors that year. I even declined the hearty dinner she'd always cook when I came home for the weekend, greens, baked chicken, sweet potatoes, baked macaroni, and cornbread. Instead I'd be eating \$6 cheese pizza from Paglia's, a local pizza joint near campus.

A drive that usually took two hours only took 1 hour and 30 minutes. Once I'd arrived at his place, I'd noticed he wasn't as overjoyed to see me as I to see him. I forced myself through the front door of his apartment trying to figure out why he was acting so strange. He'd put his foot at the bottom of the door as if he didn't want to let me in. His small two bedroom apartment, which was usually spotless thanks to me, was a mess. Dishes were piled in sink. Pots with dried top ramen noodles sat on the stove. Used glasses stained the coffee table. Clothes were everywhere. There were empty Two Dogs beer bottles nearly covering the kitchen table my parents had given him after they remodeled their kitchen. Following closely by my side, he suddenly grabbed my arm as I approached his bedroom. Yanking away from him, I hurled myself through his bedroom door only to find some beautifully petite girl I'd passed on campus a few times. She's even taken time out to ask questions about my sorority during our celebration week. Here she lay in my spot in my boyfriend's bed on the sheets I'd recently washed in the apartment I helped pay for. I shouldn't been angry with her. She had no obligation to me. My anger should have been directed toward him for

compromising my sanity by sleeping with another woman. She stared blankly into my face like I'd done something wrong never budging from my spot in his bed, not even attempting to cover her half naked body. She didn't seem ashamed to be caught. Handling the situation as maturely as I was capable at 19 years old, I immediately headed for the girl, whose attempt to hide in the bathroom was successful thanks to Richie who grabbed me before I could get my hands on her.

I remember asking him, "How could you do this to me? Why? After everything I've done for you, you'd sleep with that little girl?"

His only response was, "I think we should start seeing other people. I'm sorry."

I recall leaving his place heading back to my dorm room that I hadn't seen in weeks feeling like someone flipped my body inside out, crying uncontrollably, wishing God would just put me out of my misery like an old useless dog. It sounds sort of over dramatized, but it felt so overwhelming. I'd lay in my single extra long twin bed missing classes while he pranced around campus with his newest conquest.

I would've done anything to get him back. In the midst of desperation, I called him stating that it was imperative I come and get my things from his house, a few pair of socks, hair supplies, and a few shirts, things I certainly could've lived without. It was my moment to get him back. I could show him what a big mistake he'd made. I took my time preparing for my trip to his house. My denim mini skirt and tank matched my orange, yellow, and red flip flop sandals perfectly. On my way to his place, it started to rain like it sometimes does in the

Midwest during hot fall months, but only a few minutes of showers. It was just enough to sabotage the sexy-ex-girlfriend-I know you want back look I was going for. When I arrived at his house my things were packed neatly in an old box near his front door. How dare he push me out of his door, his life, so easily? This was the perfect time to pick a fight.

“How could you do this to me?”

“Toni, I just need some space?”

“Space to do what, fuck other woman? After all we’ve been through you can just cut me off like that?”

I can’t believe I pled my case the way I did trying to convince him to take me back. I must have been delusional.

“Remember how good we used to make each other feel? We’d make love whenever it rained,” I cried.

I stood close to him with my breasts not quite touching his chest but close enough to arouse his senses. I’d made sure to wear his favorite perfume, Cool Water for Woman. He grabbed the back of my head raping my mouth with his tongue kissing me violently. I made sure not to wear any underwear giving him easy access. He forcefully put himself inside of me thrusting his pelvis against me, throwing my weak body on his living room floor. For a moment, I’d convinced myself it felt like my heart never had been broken, another woman had never stepped foot in this place let alone lay in his bed.

Afterwards, he got up immediately and went to the bathroom and then to his bedroom to get ready for practice. Quite different from the hours of cuddling

and spooning that took place after we made love. My mind knew that what just happened meant nothing to him, but my body and heart felt comforted. For a split second, I went back to my routine of being comfortable but was quickly snapped back into reality.

“What are you doing” he asked sharply.

“I’m watching TV until you get back from practice.”

“You can’t stay here while I’m gone.”

“What?”

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. That...what just happened doesn’t mean we’re...”

“...back together,” I finished his sentence. “I get it. I’m just another piece of ass to you now.”

“No, Toni it’s not like that.”

“Whatever.”

No matter what he said it was just fucking with no love involved which left me feeling empty and used like an old shoe.

I headed back to my room with my little box. Ironically, none of the stuff in the box was anything that he’d given me. Everything I’d left was things I’d purchased. The only thing he’d given me to carry was false hope, regret, and self-doubt all of which were things way too big to fit in such a small box. Instead I was a giant vessel transporting all of these emotions into new relationships. My grandmother would have been so disappointed in me. She told me exactly what

to do, how to love. I should've listened. I should have loved someone who loved me a little more.

I know what Chloe's going through. I just wish she didn't have to go through it. It always ends the same. She hurt and blames herself. It'll take time for it all to pass, and one day she'll wake up and she breath air differently and see things clearly, and everything will be okay, but everything she has to deal with to get to that point is painful. I hate to see her hurting.

Chapter 4

His True Self

"I didn't tell you what happened," Jesse yelled out.

"What did you do now?" Devon asked already aware of what occurred between him and Chloe thanks to his girlfriend, Toni, and their late night pillow talk sessions on how stupid they both were.

"Shirley called Chloe."

"How'd you get out of that?"

"Shirley was mad because I wouldn't help her paint her living room. When I went to Chloe's after work last Thursday, Shirley called the house telling her everything. At first I tried to pretend I didn't have a clue who she was talking about, but I cleaned it up telling her that Shirley was just some crazy chick I used to date before her, and she was just jealous of our situation."

"Dawg, one day all of this lying and shit is going to catch up with your ass. So, are you with Shirley or Chloe?"

"Both nigga. I'm not trying to let either one of them go. If it wasn't for Shirley, I wouldn't ever have any gas in my truck. And if it wasn't for Chloe's good credit, I wouldn't have the rental property on the north side."

"Both of these chicks are like your petty cash stash."

"Damn right. That's a nice name for them. My petty cash bitches."

"You ain't shit."

"Whatchu mean, dawg? I can't believe you only got one."

"I only need one. The one I got takes care of all of my needs. Toni's a complete package."

"What happened to the old Devon who said he'd never get out the game, the Devon who dated two girls on the track team in college, and played them both so flawlessly, neither one of them had a clue about the other? Or what about the married chick who was about to leave her husband or the mother daughter combo?"

"All of that shit is old. I guess I grew out of all that. I want to be with someone who just gets it. She gets it without question. She understands where I'm coming from. I don't have to lie or pretend to be something that I'm not. With all those other women, I was acting like I was something that I know I wasn't."

"Whatever. Since you're out the game that just leaves more women on the market for a player like me."

Devon and Toni met courtesy of Chloe's matchmaking persistence. While shopping at the mall late in the evening, Chloe pressed the issue of Toni's not so active social life.

"How are things with Jesse?"

"Girl, I couldn't ask for a better man. Last night he gave me a back massage that landed us on the kitchen table."

"Tell me no more. My ears are burning. Remind me not to eat there ever again."

"Your ears wouldn't be burning if you were getting some of your own."

"Chloe, I'm so over men right now."

"Are you on women? You know that's the new trend?"

"Naw."

"You should let me hook you up with Jesse's friend Devon."

"No thanks."

"At least let me describe him to you. He's got a good job."

"That's enough. I'm not interested."

"Toni, you might like him."

"I like my little battery operated toy. It doesn't talk back."

"Yeah and it doesn't keep you warm at night either."

"Keep me warm with my air not working...girl, it is so damn hot in my house."

"Why didn't you tell me? I have this guy who can fix anything. He works on some of my commercial property on the eastside."

"Really, can you have him come to my house Saturday between 8-10am?"

"Toni, I'll have him there at 8am sharp."

As Chloe promised, Mr. Fix It arrived promptly at 8am with a box of tools and a beautiful smile, very well groomed even in work clothes.

"Hey, Chloe sent me over to look at your air conditioner. What's it doing?"

"What's it not doing? It blows air, but it's not cold."

"It sounds like you might need a little freon, but let me take a look at it."

Totally taken aback by how attractive he was, Toni slyly watched his movements paying careful attention to how his right biceps flexed when he'd pick up a tool from his box, or how every time he took even a small step, his calf muscles glistened from a combination of the sweat and the sunlight.

"I'm sorry I didn't catch your name."

"I'm sorry. I should've introduced myself before I stepped foot into your nice house. I'm Devon."

"The infamous Devon. I've heard a lot about you from Chloe."

"I hope it was good."

"It was all good. As a matter of fact better than expected," she said flirtatiously.

"What's up for tonight," Devon asked inquisitively not just for the sake of conversation.

"I'm probably staying in."

"You shouldn't."

"Why?"

"You should get something to eat."

"I plan to eat" she said sarcastically.

"You should plan to eat with me."

"Why should I do that?"

"Rumor has it I'm good company."

"Who spread that rumor? All of the woman you date?"

"What? I'm not a playa if that's what you're getting at."

“How do I know that?”

“You’ll learn all about me at dinner.”

Toni wanted to go. She needed to go. She hadn’t been on a date since she stopped hanging out with Harold. That is if you’d consider getting drunk while watching the “Last Dragon,” then engaging in hot unemotional sex right when the antagonist of the movie, Shonuff, tells Leroy, the protagonist, to kiss his Converse tennis shoes, a date. She’d made it up in her mind that she was going to say yes, but she just needed him to work for it before she officially accepted his offer.

“I’ll go out to dinner with you under one condition.”

“What’s that” he asked smiling at her.

“I’ll go out with you if you fix my air.”

“So what if I can’t do it today.”

“Then we can’t eat dinner today.”

“Go stand by the vent.”

“It’s coming out cold,” she yelled with excitement.

“Meet me at the Culpepper’s in the Central West End at 7pm. Don’t be late.” He looks at his watch, an old Seiko, “You only have a couple of hours to get ready.”

It kind of hard to believe that it was Jesse, the womanizer, who befriended Devon, the gentleman, who in turn charmed his way into the life of Chloe the smart business executive who introduced Toni, the artsy rebel, to Devon the gentleman.

“What’s up with you this weekend,” Devon asked hoping to invite Jesse and Chloe to a game at Busch Stadium.

“I got this bitch flying in from Michigan, so Chloe thinks I’ll be out of town.”

“Something’s gonna slow your ass down sooner than you think.”

“Ain’t shit gon slow me down. I’m a pimp.”

“More like a simp.”

Chapter 5

Mama's Always Right

Part 1

The drive to prison is long. I have to find some way to amuse myself during the trip.

The drive to Marion, Illinois is boring. Illinois is so flat. There are no hills just farm land, cows, and horses. I drive to see Clarence twice a month. Coming from my house, the Marion Federal Prison Camp is almost 150 miles. I pack my CD case with tons of CD's from gospel to gansta rap. It makes the drive quite a bit more interesting. I always have a slow start. I find so many things to do before I get on the highway good. I stop at McDonalds for a Mac stomachache for breakfast, Quicktrip for a French vanilla cappuccino, and eventually I make another stop for gas. Sounds ridiculous I know, but finding the gas station with the cheapest gas before the gas light dings and flashes yellow on the dashboard for the third time is quite a challenge. I guess that's why the drive seems so long. Our conversation before I'm on my way is always the same.

"You have a collect call from a correctional facility from inmate, Clarence Grant. Will you accept the charges?"

"Yes," I reply.

"Hey Terri, you coming to see me."

"Don't I always come see you?"

"I miss you."

"I miss you, too."

"I can't wait to see you. Wear something short."

"I can't. They won't let me in with anything short on."

"Honey, I'm in prison for Christ's sake. I need to see something feminine. I'm about the prettiest thing going on in this place until you come on visitor's day."

Even in prison he was his same old arrogant, comedic self.

"You've got issues."

"Yeah, I know. I'm in prison."

Laughing, I say, "I'll see you when I get there. I love you."

"I love you, too, and don't be too late. I want to see you for the entire time."

"Bye."

"Bye, honey."

The speed limit is 70 miles per hour, so I see it fitting to do 80. It's faster, but other speed demons are passing me in the left lane of the two lane highway. Hopefully, the highway patrol will see them before they even consider pulling me over. Besides, a dusty black 2000 Ford Focus LX isn't a symbol for speed. That's why in the commercials Ford always plays up the low gas mileage or how affordable it is. Speed was not a factor in its design.

I sing to the tunes on the radio screaming to the top of my lungs until my urban stations become country, Christian and political talk. The Midwest is so uninteresting and so disgraceful sometimes. Can you believe Rush Limbaugh is a product of the Midwest? Cape Girardeau, Missouri to be exact. We have nothing

to be proud of I say. He must get good ratings because his show is syndicated even in small town Illinois.

When I get tired of singing, I start making my morning calls. Since I've hit the road on a Saturday morning at 8:00 a.m. it's only fitting to call one of my best friends to wake 'em up. The highway is still empty, only big semi tractor trailers and little old me, so I have to keep myself awake. They each hang up on me a few times which makes me want to increase my call volume like a bill collector on bonus day. We play this game all the time. They do the same to me when I have to go in the work late during the week, and I try to sleep until noon. Chloe gives in and talks to me

"Who else did you call?"

"Mica, Toni. Then you twice."

"I feel like you wake me up every time. You on your way to see that loser?"

"Why he gotta be a loser?"

"He's in prison."

"Just because he's in prison doesn't mean he's a bad person."

"He sold drugs. That certainly doesn't make him a winner."

"Clarence did what he had to do out here in these streets. Everybody can't be a successful architect."

"Terri, I'm not saying he should be anything like Jesse, but is it really that serious for you to put all of those miles on your car to go see this fool? Besides,

ya'll shit wasn't good when he was out, so I just feel like you're wasting your time."

She was right, but I just had to give it another try to see if our relationship was worth fighting for. Besides, since he's been in prison, we haven't fought once.

"Things are going really good right now. We've been getting along just fine."

"When's he coming home?"

"May."

"So next year you'll know if this was worth all the trouble."

"No. May 2004."

"Damn. Two years. You better get to know somebody on the outside to keep you company while he's serving time."

"I can't do him like that."

"Yes you can. He'd do it to you. Hell, he did it to you when he was out."

"Well girl, we'll have to continue this conversation on the way back. My phone is starting to go out."

"Bye. Be careful."

"Bye."

When I reach the women's federal prison I know I have about 45 minutes until I get there. I don't know what it's called, but I always pass it when the women are in the yard. They almost look like they could be men playing basketball, lifting weights, standing around talking with their hands in their

pockets and their shoulders slumped over. Everyone is wearing navy blue or black. I wonder how many of them have children or what the hell they're in prison for in the first place. I wonder if they're mostly murderers or drug offenders. I have a hard time being confined to my desk at work everyday. I'm having a hard time being in this car for two hours. Being in prison must be...like being in prison. I can't think of anything that's equivalent to it.

As I pass the huge Walgreen's truck, I signal for him to pull his horn. The burly old truck driver heeds my request and pulls the horn. I honk my puny horn and speed past. If I were in the car with one of my girlfriends, days like today would be ideal for flashing, but since it's just me I'll settle for horn honking. It's funny that this amuses me for almost the rest of the drive.

It has to be some sort of irony that the street that I turn on has a church right on the corner. They always have a little message on the marquee. The messages are always very Christian friendly, "Hell is no laughing matter," "If you died today, where would you go," and my favorite "Got God." How creative. I can imagine their services are full of gospel singing from a choir of robed community members who sing from hymnals on Sunday morning and burn crosses on Sunday evening.

The narrow rocky road is a short distance from the actual gated entrance. Surprisingly, there aren't barbed wired gates surrounding the exterior of the joint. It's surrounded by small frame houses, huge trees, and colorful flowers. It looks like it could be any rural, suburban community in America only the grounds are maintained by convicts.

When I get to the front gate, the armed guard hands me the usual form to complete. I have all of this information committed to memory including Clarence's inmate number, 24685-044. The guard examines my driver's license as if he's seeing me for the first time, compares my information to the visitor book he has in his little office, and returns my ID and, says those famous words, "Enjoy your visit."

I park my car on the jammed packed lot. I can't believe how crowded it is. People are in this place like there's something on sale. As I walk up the walkway which feel like miles, I'm greeted by intense piercing eyes. Men are licking their lips as they look at me. I try to make myself seem invisible by putting my head down, but all of the khaki dressed deviants' glares seem to be following me wherever I go in this place. I must be the most beautiful woman they've ever seen. At least this hour anyway.

Part 2

After coming back from a two year vacation in Marion, Illinois, Clarence was a wee bit upset with me for dating. The nerve of this dude. If the tables were turned he would have done the same thing. There's no way he'd been monogamously, committed to me if I were locked up for selling drugs no less. Easy money equals time served. Somehow the brand new Ford Mustang, the wardrobe of Banana Republic and J. Crew coordinates means nothing when you're wearing Illinois State of Corrections issued khaki colored Dickies with nowhere to go but to work out, the library, or your cell.

As usual, I was just trying to play house which my mother disapproved of openly in front of me and whoever else was around. During our family reunion, right before Clarence got home, I was talking to my cousin about Clarence staying with me when he got home. My mother all the way on the other side of the pavilion yells, "I keep trying to tell Terri, the shit ain't gonna work. A niggas got stand on his own two feet before he's worth living with. Shit, at least wait til the nigga gets a job first." I was humiliated in front of my entire family.

Anyway, he came home in such a foul mood like I'd done something wrong. There's no way I was arguing with him. Since he'd come home, he just wasn't himself. He rarely laughed and joked like he used to. Now, he always wanted to argue, very confrontational. He sure wasn't arguing when I was putting 150 miles on my beat up old Ford Focus to see him. He certainly wasn't spewing obscenities at me when I was putting \$20 on his books every week while he was in the joint.

After he left to go to his friend, Rob's crib to cool off, I thought we'd be okay, but instead of giving him rational, logical feedback, Rob must have encouraged his stupidity because he was angrier when he came home than when he first left. Who was Rob to give advice? He and his wife were on their second separation, and he had a new baby on the way. And by the way, Rob's wife isn't pregnant.

"So what, are you putting me out of your house?"

"Clarence, I just think it'd be best if we didn't live together."

"You're gonna put me out because you fucked other people while I was gone."

"First of all, you don't know what I did because I didn't tell you. You're just assuming."

"I know you. Terri, I know you weren't faithful."

"You were locked up for two years. Do you think you would have not dated anyone if I was in jail?"

"I would have at least been honest with you, Terri. You ain't shit, but a ho."

"Now, I'm a ho. I wasn't a ho when you were buying cans of mackerel and peanut butter and toilet paper and t-shirts off the money I put on your books."

"You think a little money on my books is going to make up for you sleeping with niggas in these streets?"

"For the last time, you don't know what I did."

"I know you weren't who you pretended to be on Saturday's in Marion, IL. I don't know who was writing those letters, but it wasn't you."

"Don't be so fuckin' dramatic."

We'd been through too much together for him to concern himself with such nonsense. We'd experience the best of the worst kind of love. We'd seen each other in handcuffs for Christ's sake. And not the fuzzy ones with which people have so much fun. I mean the steel ones that belong to ATF and the FBI. I was with him at his lowest point. When the sting took place. I was the one who helped him clean up his place after the Feds went through all of his shit. I'm sure

he'd forgotten all about that now that he's out and the friends who didn't visit him or send him money are taking him out for drinks. They should have advised him to come and live with one of them instead of me. Besides, what difference did it really make what I did while he was away. Two years is a long time to be away from someone. He's lucky I didn't get married, have kids, and get divorced while he was away.

Anyway, I guess the signal that I no longer wished to have a roommate must have been made clear since all of his things were folded neatly in baskets near the front door. The tears streamed down my face.

"You're nothing but a whore...a trifling nasty whore. You ain't shit. I fuckin' hate you. I hope you die. You ain't gone say nothing. You nappy headed bitch!"

I couldn't let it ride. I let the "I hate you" and the "You're nothing but a whore," comments slide, but there was no way I was going to allow a felony convicted, no good, former drug selling, mama's boy call me a nappy head bitch.

I wasn't my normal rational self all of a sudden. I felt like I was in kickboxing class at the gym and the instructor yelled, "Right punch, left punch." I let him have it. I had to let him know he'd taken it too far, so I served him two broken blood vessels in both eyes. I should have listened to my damn mama. She said the shit wasn't going to work. She was right. She usually is.

Chapter 6

Playing It Safe

Part 1

I thought he was absolutely gorgeous when I saw him in the lobby of the hotel talking to some strange looking tourists. They almost looked like fans surrounding him asking for an autograph. Little did I know that everyone knew he was the Carolina Panther's Jacob Piper. My best friend Terri and I walked passed him as if there was nothing special about him, but I could see him watching me out of the corner of my imitation Dior sunglasses. Terri and I checked in at the front desk giggling like little school girls about how attractive he was.

"Micah, girrrrrl, did you see what I just saw?"

"Oh my God, he was so fine."

"Yes, big and strong," she replied.

"Yes Lord, this weekend is definitely going to be blessed," Imitating Pastor Lee during Sunday service. "With fine men. Amen," Toni said jokingly folding her hands as if she was praying.

There we were. Two city girls from St. Louis relaxing like elite superstars in the Virgin Islands. We were excited. So excited we'd shopped for months prior to the trip to make sure we looked hot during every moment. Almost everything in our suitcases still had the price tags attached. If it hadn't been for my good friend Derrick's wedding to his two-year girlfriend, we wouldn't have had a reason to take the trip, but already it felt like the wedding

was getting in the way of our vacation. As soon as we arrived in our room Derrick called my cell phone to ask Terri and me to go with him to pick up flowers.

This wedding to April had truly turned into a bigger nuisance than I could have ever imagined. I never really liked the girl. She never really liked me. Frankly, I never thought she was good enough for Derrick, but Derrick begged, "Micah, please just give her a chance. You'll like her once you get to know her." I'd gotten to know the bitch and come to the conclusion that she was too insecure for him copping an attitude every time he and I made plans. You'd think we were hanging out to have fun together, but I was always helping him pick out things for her, plan vacations for the both of them, but I agreed to ride along with him only if we could go to the beach first. Terri and I laid out our bathing suits trying to figure out which one of the three to put on. I'd been working out for six months to prepare for this moment. Terri had a brown suit. The top tied around the neck and the bottoms were boy cut shorts. It was cute on her. She's got a ghetto booty so the shorts really accentuated that. The one I chose was turquoise. It also tied around the neck with a bikini bottom. The color was intense against my fair skin. We greased each other down with sunscreen and headed to the beach with our towels around our waists.

We admired our new shapely figures in the mirror of the elevator paying homage to Weight Watchers and New Lady Fitness. All of those kickboxing classes with my girlfriend Terri paid off. My quads were looking simply

scrumptious. We looked better than when we were in high school. We stepped out of the elevator ready to turn heads switching our hips.

The fine specimen who'd caught my attention when we first arrived at the hotel was sitting out in the sun. I couldn't resist. The boyfriend I had back home didn't cross my mind at the time. I guess technically he's not my boyfriend.

We're just dating. Besides I was in a different area code. When I walked up to him, he was taking off his shirt. Damn. His stomach had more than six packs.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Jacob. And yours?"

His arms were huge. He stood to shake my hand towering over me like a giant. He was at least six foot five inches tall, 250 pounds of solid steel covered with skin with tons of tattoos. They don't make men like that in St. Louis. He took good care of his body. I sized him up from head to toe.

"Micah."

"That's an interesting name."

We engaged in the small talk that people engage in when they first meet. He spoke with sort of a southern accent not heavy like someone from Mississippi just a little twang at the ends of his words. He was from Charlotte, North Carolina. Toni was busy talking to his not so attractive friends, but I didn't care. Besides, she and Devon lived together like an old married couple so his friends were wasting their time trying to get any play from Toni. For a moment, I forgot Toni and I were together. Jacob had all of my attention. He invited me to come to his room and watch a movie later on in the evening. Usually meeting strange

men and hanging out with them in an intimate setting like a hotel room was not my thing. I was usually really cautious, but this was St. Thomas. When would I ever come in contact with a man like this? I agreed without hesitation.

Toni and I left my future husband and his groomsmen by the pool and headed to the room to get ready to go with Derrick. Thank goodness Derrick left a message on my voicemail saying he'd found some flowers indigenous to the island, and we didn't need to come with him. There was a God.

The hotel phone rang. Toni answered it. She handed it to me. It was Jacob asking me to come to his room if I wasn't busy. I told him I needed to change. He told me there was no need to change into anything fancy. I agreed and hung up the phone. I screamed like I'd won the lottery. Toni couldn't believe I was going to allow myself to be alone with a man I'd just met.

"What do I have to lose?" I asked.

"Your panties," she replied. "Don't you have sex with him. He probably thinks you're going to give it up. We're not like that."

"I'm not mama, I mean Toni."

"Just be careful. You know the room number just in case you need to call me, and we have to kick his ass."

"Yeah."

"You're coming back tonight, right?"

"I'm not crazy. I'm not spending a night with him."

He said to just come as I was, but there was no way I was going up there looking like shit. I had to get myself together. I had a white tank top with pink

short shorts and some floral flip flops cute but simple. I put on a little mascara, eye shadow and lip gloss, pinned my hair in a tight bun and headed to the 16th floor to room 1610. On the way up on the elevator, I looked at myself in the mirror to make sure I looked okay. It was that final moment you have right before you see someone that truly matters.

The doors looked different on this floor. They were spaced further apart. I took a deep breath and knocked on his door. It seemed like it took him five minutes to come to the door, five long minutes. His room was immaculate. Terri and I had a single room with two queen-sized beds overlooking the beach. Jacob had a full kitchen with a living room, spiral staircase leading to a bedroom, and a bathroom big enough to host a cocktail party for 40 people standing.

There I was, the girl who always played it safe, the designated driver during girl's night out, the woman who would not allow her phone number to be published in the white pages because I didn't want strange people trying to contact me. The good girl who always played it safe was alone in a hotel room with a gorgeous NFL player in St. Thomas with her inhibitions in St. Louis.

Part 2

We approached it. It was nothing special. It wasn't any sort of architectural masterpiece. At first glance it looked like an old abandoned cabana on the beach aside from the wall to wall people spilling out of it.

It was a warm summer's evening. The sky was clear and there was a cool breeze blowing off the ocean. So this is paradise, I thought.

After two bushwhackers at the family owned restaurant Cuzzins, Toni, and I had no worries, so we decided to head to a popular night spot, Sugar's Spot.

Toni and I are fans of reggae music. We frequent a local spot in the Central West End, but it was nothing like Sugar's. Sugar's was the real deal. Crowded with locals, we stood out mainly because we were overdressed like most tourists, short skirts, high heeled shoes, full faced make up, and heavy accenting jewelry.

It was a grimy small club with old hardwood floors, one bar, two bartenders, and a dance floor big enough to accommodate everyone, a little intimidating for Yankee girls from the States. We decided to just have a shot of Patron tequila to loosen up because the buzz from the bushwhackers was wearing off. One shot turned into four with the help of a local named Javier. Our conversation seemed long and intense although I wasn't sure what he was saying because of his thick, heavy Jamaican accent. The only things I could focus on were his tight fitting T-shirt hugging his biceps and the bulge in the front of his pants. He wasn't Jacob, but he was attractive nonetheless. Sure makes me wonder...I thought, but he immediately pulled me to the dance floor not asking for a dance but aggressively grabbing me by my waist taking me where he wanted me to go.

For some reason the music was louder than when we first entered the club. Lady Saw, the dancehall queen, made the crowd roar with excitement as her raunchy lyrics penetrated everyone's ears. We hit the dance floor, dreadlocks swinging wall to wall. We danced closely although this wasn't a slow song.

Grinding our pelvises close together as we faced one another doing what's commonly known as winding below the waistline, sensually moving only the lower halves of our bodies.

It was so hot inside the windowless night club. I think the walls began to sweat. The Patron was seeping through my pores every time a new song began. Sean Paul began to play, and Sugars morphed into what seemed like a scene from a movie. Locals began to do what appeared to be choreographed routines that everyone seemed too familiar with except for us, the Yankee girls from the states.

Javier disappeared into the crowd.

I stood like a lost child searching for Toni who I spotted standing off to the side talking with some Rastafarians smoking huge, tightly rolled joints. I'm not saying that stereotypically. They were really Rastafarians. Heads heavily dreading, no cares, no worries, no pork just momentary lapses of sobriety throughout the day.

A new dance partner approached me, but this time I didn't ask his name. I didn't want to feel any connection with him. I just wanted to wind below the waistline, sweat out the old shots of Patron to replace it with a little Red Stripe beer and dance the night away. He asked my name. I simply replied, "The girl who likes to dance." He whispered in my ear trying to make sure I could hear him over the dee jays loud reggae mix, "...the brownin' Yankee gurl who likes to dance," in his Jamaican accent.

Part 3

My fear of flying didn't hinder me from getting on this flight. Traveling to another state to visit a man I barely knew wasn't something I did. So going to North Carolina to see Jacob was totally out of character. All I could think about was laying in his big strong arms after making love to him in St. Thomas and waking up to an unforgettable tropical sunrise over crystal blue water.

I didn't know anything about him just that he played for the Carolina Panthers and during his collegiate career he was one of the most sought after draft picks thanks to Google. During our phone conversations, I never let on that him being a professional athlete was so exciting. As far as he was concerned, I treated him like I'd treated almost every other man I'd ever dated except I'd traveled more than 2,000 miles on my own dime to visit.

I'd just returned from St. Thomas two weeks earlier and now I was traveling to Charlotte to see a man I'd met in St. Thomas. To my surprise, Jacob asked that I come see him. It was Friday and I was returning on Sunday. The trip was short, so I packed light. I didn't bring anything too revealing. I boarded the plane wearing a pair of dark blue, tight fitting jeans, a pair of thong sandals, and a clinging white T-shirt. I figured if he really liked me, he'd still find me attractive without all the bells and whistles.

Arriving in Charlotte, I started to feel a bit nervous because everything was so unfamiliar. The airport was like a city. I walked what seemed like two miles to passenger pickup. I immediately called Jacob, but he didn't answer his

phone. I left a message to let him know that I'd arrived and was eager to see him. I'd hoped he'd pick me up from the airport, but I hailed a cab to the hotel.

The cab driver and I made conversation on our way to the hotel. He was from India. He was well versed in hip-hop culture and shared every bit of knowledge he knew about Nelly. He dropped me off at the Omni Hotel downtown. I paid him \$20 and headed to the front desk.

To my surprise the room was immaculate. A king sized bed, with a big screened television, and an awesome view of the city. Not bad for one of those last minute online deals. I freshened up and took a nap. It was a carefree nap. I didn't have to wake up to do anything or go anywhere. I was in a city where I only knew one person, and I wasn't obligated to do anything. It was an awesome feeling. I awoke feeling refreshed, but after seeing no missed calls on my cell phone, the nervousness began to settle in my mind again, so I gave him a call again. There was no answer. Again I left another message.

There was no way I was going to sit in a hotel room all night long. It's not safe for a woman to travel alone, but I just couldn't live with myself knowing that I traveled to a new city and didn't have a good time. I'd allowed myself to be open and free in St. Thomas, so why couldn't I do it in Charlotte?

I dressed myself up in a brand new pair of brown Nine West stiletto heels, a pair of light blue jeans, and a brown tank top. I made up my face heavy with make-up and let my hair down. I made my way to the bar downstairs near the restaurant in the hotel and ordered myself dinner and drinks. Not long after, I was accompanied by a Belgian pharmacist who insisted on putting everything on his

bill. Who was I to say no? He asked if he could accompany me in my room for the evening, but even in my drunken state, I declined the offer. After all, I was there solely to see Jacob, this man who'd clouded my mind taking my focus off of work. Jacob the towering, muscular athlete who'd consumed my dreams forcing me to wake up out of breath with beads of sweat on my forehead. I couldn't wait to see him. Mica and Jacob sound really good together.

The next morning I woke up with a slight headache from the cosmopolitans, but they were worth it. I hoped during my drunken sleep, I would have missed his phone call, but the only call I missed was the one from Chloe who called with Micah and Terri screaming in the background. They knew I was okay, so I didn't worry about calling them back. This weekend was perfect to just relax and unwind. "*Drifting on a memory, there's no place I'd rather be than with you...*" began playing on my phone, a little Isley Brothers song. It was him. I had to contain myself and not sound too anxious."

"Hello."

"When'd you get here? He asked.

"Last night. I thought I told you I was coming Friday."

"I'm sorry baby. I forgot. Today was the last day of training camp until preseason, so I'm kind of out of it. I'll be by the hotel to see you in about an hour. We'll go get something to eat and hang out. How's that sound?"

"That sounds good, baby. I'll be ready."

I hurried to get dressed. I didn't put on anything too fancy just a pair of jeans, sandals, and another T-shirt. I didn't want him to think I was trying too hard to impress him.

He arrived at my room looking as gorgeous as the first day I saw him in the lobby of the hotel in St. Thomas. We greeted each other with hugs, and talked about what he did the previous day.

"The trainers are trying to kill me. I'm so sore, I can hardly walk."

"Would you like for me to give you a massage?"

Good thing I put the warming massage lotion in my bag. I started with his shoulders, rubbing his tight muscular back, made my way to his lower back, and then to his legs. His sore, tired muscles flexed each time I touched him. After about 15 minutes, Jacob fell asleep. I didn't disturb him. I left him alone and watched television until he awoke two hours later.

"Baby, I'm so sorry. I fell asleep on you."

"That's okay. I know you're tired."

"Dog tired." He kissed me on my neck with his soft, juicy lips. "Let's get a bite to eat. I know you're hungry."

As soon as I put on my shoes, his phone rang, and he answered it. I couldn't hear what the other person was saying."

"Whatsup? (Pause) Naw. (Pause) Okay. I'm on my way." Closing his flip phone, he looks at me and says, "Baby, I'm going to make a run, and I'll be right back in 30 minutes."

“Okay,” I said with hesitation fearing this would be the last time I’d see him today.

He kissed me on my forehead and left the room. While he was gone, I freshened up and waited for him to come back. After three hours, I got worried, so I gave him a call. There was no answer. Four hours passed, then six. The hotel phone rang. I hoped it was Jacob, but it wasn’t.

“Ms. Delaney this is Kelly at the front desk. There is a package for you.”

“I’m on my way. Thank you.”

I couldn’t help thinking; he must have sent me flowers for taking so long. How could I be mad? Something important must’ve come up. Approaching the desk, I felt uneasy like an anvil couldn’t have fallen out of the sky on top of my head.

Kelly handed me an envelope. There was a note inside that said, “Sorry for wasting your time. This shit felt too serious for me. Here’s something for your trouble,” with \$1,000 cash in 20-dollar bills.

Here I was a regular around-the-way girl from the Midwest, taking a chance to get to know someone new. How could I have been so stupid to think he’d want to get to know me? How could he have not wanted to get to know me? Giving me money didn’t make the situation any better. What did he think; I was some sort of gold digger? Did he think I was some kind of groupie girl who traveled around the world to visit professional athletes? Being the girl who played it safe all the time wasn’t such a bad idea after all. I felt humiliated like all of the

people in the hotel lobby read the note along with me. I flew all the way to Charlotte to feel like shit. I could have stayed in St. Louis this weekend.

Chapter 7

Weather The Storm

The tornados are coming, twisting madly approaching the house. Everyone around acts as if nothing is happening. My older cousins are all dressed in shiny bellbottom pants and tight fitting shirts like the Jackson Five performance on Soul Train, early Jackson Five when Michael's face still contained the right nose. They were playing in my grandmother's living room, jumping on the plastic covered couches, something that never happens at my grandparents place while I stood glaring out the window. "There are four or five headed this way," I scream, but no one acknowledges my concern. Everything's in black and white except the sky. It's contrasted by a hint of purple, similar to an old movie. My grandmother enters the room and yells to everyone, "It's time to eat."

I remember her so vividly, my grandmother. On the Lord's Day, we'd run up her stairs, both flights, like a herd of gazelles in an open field. We'd run up what seemed like hundreds of steps two by two to get to her. There she was in the kitchen in mid July. She looked like she'd just stepped in from a rain storm. Her clothes clung to her and her hair was sopping wet from sweat just as I remember from childhood. She laid a cool towel around her neck to soothe the summer's sweltering, slow suffocation with the sun blazing through the second floor window as she cooked dinner, a large pot of collard greens, cornbread, sweet potatoes, baked macaroni with the burnt cheese on top, baked chicken leg quarters, and sweet tea.

While all my cousins rush to the table waiting for their mothers to fix their plates, I follow her to her room just sitting next to her ignoring the incoming tornados knowing that whatever was headed our way was no match for her. We talk about all sorts of things like money, and she said, "You never tell anyone how much money you got. You always keep a little stash just in case times get hard." We discuss love, and she said, "I love your grandfather, and it's important that you love the person who loves you not the one you lust after." And we talked about our family, and she said to me, "Family is all you have. They may be mean at times, but in the end nothing else matters except family." She talked about troubles and reassured me that I'd be okay, "Weather that storm. Weather that storm. There's some rough times headed your way, but everything will be okay."

Such heavy topics for the young girl that sat in front of her who played basketball everyday during the week and loves cartoons, who thought boys were cute but stupid. I listen intently understanding every word she spoke. Everything she said was specifically for me. She loved her grandchildren, but she especially loves me. I sit next to her in the lounge chair next to her king sized brass bed until Devon calls my name.

"Toni, wake up! You're gonna be late for work," he said and kissed my forehead.

I opened my eyes filled with tears.

"What's wrong? You okay?"

"A storm is coming, but everything will be okay. My grandma said it would."

Chapter 8

Girl's Night Out

"Girls, it's so good to see ya'll. I feel like we haven't had a girl's night since before Clarence got sent back to prison," said Terri. "What we drinking, and who's paying cus I ain't got no money?"

"You ain't never got no money," said Chloe. "I got you tonight for dinner. Toni's buying your drinks while we're here. Micah you gotta pay for her drinks at the club."

"Why I gotta pay at the club? You know they don't have no drink specials since it's free to get in."

"Whatever ya'll decide," Terri laughed. "As long as I get my party on with my girls, it's cool."

Everybody knew times were a little hard for Terri since going back to school to get her Bachelors of Science in nursing. She decided after Clarence got caught a second time for selling drugs and sentenced to 10 years, it was best for her to explore her options. Her mother was a registered nurse for 30 years and Terri always enjoyed taking care of people. When we were in high school, Micah caught the chicken pocks volunteering at a children's home. Terri went to her house everyday after school to take her, her homework and take care of her while her mother was working nights at the hospital.

It was a cool fall day, so everyone sat outside of Culpepper's in the Central West End admiring the expensive cars as they passed the restaurant.

"I can't wait to get my BMW," said Terri. "After nursing school, I'm gonna be ballin' out of control."

"You're going to be too tired to drive the damn thing working those 12 hour shifts until the wee hours of the night," Toni countered.

"Right, we won't be able to get her out the house she's going to be so fuckin' tired from work," Micah said laughing, winking her right eye at Terri.

"I can hear it now, I can't make it to happy hour. I have to work a double in surgery," said Chloe.

"Fuck ya'll. At least I'll be doing something I love, and I'll be getting paid for it too."

"You're right about that," Toni said always the practical one. "You'll always have a job. Nurses are in high demand and there are plenty of hospitals, nursing homes, and clinics in St. Louis for you to work for."

The conversation shifted to Toni who rarely found herself out at night clubs and happy hours unless she was with her better half.

Terri laughed to herself before speaking aloud, "So your daddy let you out to play with your friends?" Speaking to Toni like a woman speaking to a small child.

"Fuck you, Terri," Toni laughed. "I know I've been a little hemmed up, but ya'll should be happy for me."

"We're happy for you, but damn we almost forgot what you looked like. Ain't nobody seen your ass in weeks," said Chloe.

"It's your fault. You hooked us up."

"I just thought he was going to lay a little pipe, and help you unwind a bit. I didn't think he was gonna move your ass in his house and make you his wife. Damn."

"Stop hating. Ya'll know I've been through a lot with men, so this one was long overdue for me."

"You don't know how lucky you are," Micah said. "I'm where you were right before you met Devon. Remember how you'd convince yourself that a vibrator is all you need. I can do without them right now. Men are so disappointing. I was kicking it with this guy a few weeks ago. His name is Rob. We all know him. He went to high school with us. He played baseball."

"Rob with the big head?" asked Terri putting both her hands four inches from the sides of her head demonstrating how big Rob's head truly was back then.

"Well he's got muscles like you wouldn't believe now, so his head doesn't seem so big. Anyway girls, I saw him at the open mic night at Legacy Books and Café. He did a poem that made my body shiver. It was so good. I gave him my number. We talked on the phone a few times, met for a few dinners. Well, he finally invited me to his house. When I pulled up, the house looked so familiar down on Chouteau by the hospitals."

"Yeah I remember. He had that graduation party that was off the chain our senior year," Toni said remembering the good old days.

"Well he still lives there," Micah continued.

"His parents let him have that big house?" Terri asked.

"Don't say it," Chloe screamed. "Say it ain't so."

“Yes girls,” Micah laughed, “He still lives there with his parents, and they remembered me his trophies and medals from high school are still in his room in the basement. Only now he’s got his son’s baby bed where the entertainment center used to be. There’s something wrong with all of them. Here he is working at the Post Office during the day, going to school at night, almost 30 years old and living at home with his parents. I thought I was going to die. Don’t get me wrong. It’s nice to meet a brother who’s working, trying to better himself by going to school, but what are we suppose to do, sit at my house all day and night. Then he had the nerve to ask me if I wanted to spend a night. I asked him, so me, you, your mom and dad can have coffee and donuts together in the morning?”

“His mama still wear that shiny wig?” Terri laughed.

“Naw, but she had on a black one on all cocked to the side of her head looking crazy like they was surprised he brought home company.”

“Chloe, is that Jesse across the street?” asked Toni. She always had a good eye for spotting things out of the ordinary.

“Where?” asked Chloe.

“Right across the street holding hands with that girl, they’re walking toward his truck,” said Toni reassuring her good friend that her boyfriend was with yet another woman.

“No this muthafucka didn’t just come hang all out in the open with this bitch. We ought to go bust his head open,” Terri said.

“Naw we gonna wait right here and don’t move,” said Toni. “Call him on your cell phone.”

Chloe called him. She watched him look at this cell phone and ignore her call.

“Wait a few minutes and call him on Micah’s phone. I’m sure he doesn’t have her number.”

Chloe did exactly as Toni told her following her instructions step by step as if she reading from the cheater’s handbook.

“Don’t sound upset Chloe. Just act like you haven’t seen him and ask him where he is, and who he’s with.”

“Hey babe...whatcha doing tonight? Really. Who you going with? Did you just leave the mall a few minutes ago? Oh you’re still there with Felix. Whatchu buy me? Nothing. Okay just call me later on. Bye.”

“So what does he have to do for you to let the shit go?” asked Toni.

“Ya’ll have to go. I need to be alone,” said Chloe as she grabbed her Gucci clutch bag, drank the last of her drink, jumped in her Jaguar, and drove away.

“Well so much for girl’s night out,” Terri said.

“He’s got a lot of nerve,” said Toni. “I can’t believe of all places he’d bring the other woman to the Central West End. You never know who you might see around here.”

“Or who might see you,” said Micah. “Last Friday I went to the Loft, and he was there with some girl all hugged up around him. I called Chloe and told her, but she said he told her he was going out with some friends from work, so that is probably who that was.”

"My hairstylist told me he's a fag," said Terri.

"What?" said Toni. "Don't say that word. The term is gay not fag.

Why'd he say that?"

Terri continued, "Bo and Tommy, who now calls himself Tomilia, saw him at the little spot on Manchester dancing with some man."

"No way. Did you tell her?" asked Toni.

"Hell yeah I told her," said Terri. "But she said it wasn't him. I don't know if she thought I was lying or she just didn't want to believe it was him. I don't think she even presented it to him. She just assumed he wouldn't do anything like that to her."

Micah asked, "You said he was dancing with him. We've danced with girls at clubs. Was he dancing with him or dancing with him?" She made sure to place emphasis on the last three words of her question.

"Now, you know men are nothing like us when it comes to dancing with the same sex. That shit's forbidden for straight men. Bo said he was dancing close, grinding ass to pelvis with a fine ass Italian guy."

"That girl needs to snap out of it before something crazy happens," said Toni. "She'd better protect herself in more ways than one."

Chapter 9

Winning The Jackpot

“How was your interview,” Devon asked as I struggled to get through the front door with my black leather portfolio in one hand and black wool sport coat in the other.

Frustrated with the constant interviews day after day and Devon addressing me after a long day as I struggled to get through the narrow doorway with my hands full didn't make me feel any better.

“Well they didn't offer me the project right off the bat,” I said as I dropped everything in my hands onto the kitchen floor. “I should have majored in nursing something practical not fucking photography and art design.”

“Don't say shit like that. You'll find something soon.”

Devon was reassured me. He never gave up hope on my artistic abilities even when I doubted myself. The truth of the matter was that I'd been looking for freelance photography projects for almost four months and nothing worth discussing had been offered.

“Maybe I'm not as good as I think I am.”

“You're damn good, Toni. You gotta be patient.”

“I can be patient, but the bill collectors can't.”

“We'll be okay. I've got your back.”

“I know Devon, but it's hard for me to not contribute.”

“Honey, I want you to be happy. I want you to book projects you’ll enjoy and make good money. If doing weddings and portraits ain’t what you want, don’t do them. Photograph things that you make you happy.”

His intentions were good, but at times his patient, understanding nature was annoying. This constant search for the perfect projects wore on my self-esteem and forced me to question my abilities as an artist. I could work for some big corporate entity who views their many employees as a number in the PeopleSoft human resources database, or I could continue to take projects that suited my interest and allow me to work on my own terms, but that involve a great deal of waiting.

“I know honey. I’m just tired and frustrated.”

The truth was that I envied him. Devon worked hard everyday. He was a deputy juvenile officer for the city government. Basically, his job is to protect children from negligent parents. No matter what went on with management, government officials, changes in policies, he always remained focused on his primary goal, protecting children. He was passionate about his job, and most of all, when he awoke everyday, he truly and genuinely had a purpose in life which was a lot more than I could say for myself. I oftentimes, felt like I didn’t deserve such a man. Here he was this person with meaning in his life with a woman who can’t manage to have found a gig that she likes that pays the bills. Maybe I should just settle for whatever comes along, but I know that definitely won’t make me happy.

"I just can't stand sitting around the house waiting for people to call me back about jobs."

"So don't sit at home waiting on people to call. Get a part time gig, so you can help with the bills around the house. That way you'll feel like you're contributing, and you'll be doing something to occupy your time, and you might learn something new."

"What kind of part time job? Like waitressing or bartending or something like that."

"I can't see you waiting tables but maybe working at a specialty camera store."

"Oh yeah that would be great. I didn't think of that."

"You are a photographer remember; besides, think of the discount you could get working for that on camera store on Olive. You never know who you might meet while you're there."

He was always thought positive thoughts. Just think, before I met him, I wanted nothing more to do with men. I was at a crossroads. I'd recovered from a toxic, sexual relationship that hadn't developed into anything good with Harold who never in the least bit seemed concerned with my photography except when he wanted me to photograph some rinky dink singing group he claimed to manage which he compared to En Vogue, but unfortunately they couldn't spell harmony.

Devon sort of fell out of the sky right on top of me like an anvil in an old Road Runner cartoon. My grandmother used to tell me that not good things but the best things happen when you least expect it. When I was about 10-years-old,

my grandparents won the lottery. Long before that, before I was even born, my grandmother played the Missouri Powerball every Wednesday. She played the same set of numbers week after week but never won. Her losing streak never kept her from not heading to Mrs. Robinson's corner store to buy her ticket, but in the winter of '89, the McNair losing streak ended. My grandparents were lottery winners. Not like 26 million but more like \$10,000. The furnace in her house had gone out. The roof needed to be replaced. My grandfather's car was on bricks in the backyard, and the Christmas holiday was approaching. Suddenly, my grand parents were \$10,000 richer. I remember she said winning the lottery was good, but winning the lottery during such a hard time was the best. Devon was my winning lottery ticket.

"So you want to catch a movie tonight?" he asked.

"What time is it?"

He looked at his old Seiko watch. "It's only 6 o'clock."

"Why won't you wear the new watch? You always have that old Seiko on. You had it on when I met you."

"It was my father's watch."

His father who'd died of throat cancer four years before we met always wore the old watch. It was a gift from Devon's mother. She even had his favorite saying engraved on the back "Time waits for no man," something Devon often said. It's those intricate details people paid attention to back in the day.

Chapter 10

Long Time No See

“So why haven’t I heard from you in a month,” Toni said in her sister girl voice, rolling her neck as she towered over Chloe’s short stature.

“I’ve just been going through a lot.”

“Well, duh, but none of us have heard from you since that night a Culpepper’s in the Central West End, when we...”

“...I don’t want to talk about that.”

“What the fuck do you mean you don’t want to talk about that?”

“I mean I have bigger shit going on in my life, and I don’t want to talk about that night.”

“What’s with the attitude? I’ve been calling you like a crazy person, and here you are shopping in the mall all carefree and shit while people are sitting around trying to figure out if you’re dead or alive.”

Micah, Terri, and I had been calling for the entire month but phone messages had gone unanswered. I had resorted to email. When you live in the same city with people you see and talk to on a regular basis, emailing them seems like more of a chore than a method of communication, but Chloe stilled ignored my messages. Micah taught at school near Chloe’s house. After work a few times, she stopped by Chloe’s place, but she never came to the door. She could see the television on and Chloe’s car out front, but no one ever came to the door.

Terri even went by her job after her nursing clinical on Wednesday morning, but was told by one of Chloe's coworker's that she'd taken a leave of absence.

"We'll I'm alive, so now what?"

"So now what? What the fuck did I do to you? I'm not the one who's cheating on you, so don't take your anger out on me."

"Here you go. You're happy about all of this," she screamed with tear streaming down her face.

"Happy that you're unhappy. Are you crazy? You're my best friend. Why would I be happy that you're boyfriend is cheating on you?"

I look over at the Louis Vutton store clerk who was talking to security and pointing at us. I know exactly what they were thinking. Black folks act out every where even in overpriced, high class shopping malls in prominent areas.

Grabbing her arm like a child in trouble in church I say with a stern face, "Let's take this outside."

Snatching away deviance, she power walked beside me. Once we stepped outside the door, Chloe screamed, "I'm pregnant."

I couldn't believe what I heard. I wanted to smack her for being so stupid for allowing Jesse to put her in such a fucked up situation, but I grabbed her and held like a mother comforting her child.

"When did you find out? Does Jesse know?"

"Nobody knows."

"You've kept this to yourself? No wonder you're so fuckin' miserable."

“What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had an abortion. I don’t want to carry it full term and give it up for adoption. I don’t think I want to keep it.”

“Well, honey you’ve got to pick one before it’s too late.”

“I know, but it’s just emotionally draining. I made an appointment at the abortion clinic, but I don’t think I can go through with it.”

I never would have thought when we played on the school yard at Sacred Sacrament Catholic School that we’d be standing in front of east entrance of the Plaza Frontenac Shopping Mall crying over whether my best girl friend should keep her child or not. I remembered when I first met Chloe. I played in an intense game of kickball, girls versus boys. One of our best players, Shonda twisted her ankle coming around third base after Kiesha kicked the ball way over into left field near the steps. It was almost a homerun but it didn’t hit the steps or wall of the school. No girl had ever kicked a homerun, but we were fierce competitors nonetheless. Since I was captain, I had to call a time out after Shonda had gone to nurse Creighton’s office to ice and elevate her ankle. Chloe sat on the steps all alone. She was new to the school. As a matter of fact, I think that was her first day.

“Hey, what’s your name?”

“Chloe. What’s yours?”

“Tonique, but everyone calls me Toni. Wanna play kickball? We need somebody to take Shonda’s place.”

“Sure.”

“It’s our ball, and it’s your turn to kick.”

I yelled to everyone on the girl’s team, “Okay ya’ll we got a new player.”

Chloe lunged from left to right stretching her legs. Greg served the ball.

Chloe kicked that red rubber ball so hard. It was in slow motion like Sport’s Center’s play of the week. She kicked the ball to the wall, the first girl in the history of Sacred Sacrament Catholic School to kick a homerun. Since that kickball game we were inseparable.

Thinking back to that moment, the perfectionist who always did her best under stress was in a tight spot. Not only had she managed to get pregnant but pregnant by a man who didn’t respect her or their relationship.

“You should have called me or at least one of us. There’s no way you should be dealing with this all alone.”

“I just felt stupid. I’m almost 30-years-old, and I’m thinking about getting abortion.”

“Why can’t you keep it?”

I’ve always been pro-mind-your-own-fuckin’-business, but when you’re a successful, career minded adult, having a baby just doesn’t seem like the worse thing that could possibly happen.

“I just don’t want to be stuck with Jesse for the rest of my life because we have a child together. I know that seems so selfish, but I don’t think I can take it. I know he’s toxic for me. I know he cheated. I love him, but I know he’s with

other women. When I'm strong enough to walk away, I don't want to have any reason to have to deal with him, not even a baby."

We walked to her car. She looked almost relieved that she'd finally told someone.

"You know I'm here for you if you need me. If you decided to go along with the abortion, I'll go with you."

"I love you, Toni. I'm sorry for being such a bitch."

"Don't apologize. Just call me and let me know what you want me to do. I love you, sis."

"I love you, too."

Walking back to my car, I cried for her. I cried her tears. I cried because she was in love with a man who'd compromised her sanity. I cried because I can imagine she was tired of crying. I cried because I wished it was me dealing with the pregnancy and not her. I cried because I wanted more than anything for her to be in a relationship with someone who wanted to be in a relationship with her. I cried for her on the way home, in the shower, and I cried myself to sleep.

Finding the Balance

I never thought I'd be sitting in an abortion clinic. I thought Chloe would've decided to keep the baby, but after talking to Jesse, she decided it'd be best if they didn't have the common denominator of a child between them.

I can't say I'd ever imagined what one would look like on the inside, an abortion clinic, but I'm surprised there aren't bars on the windows with all of the protesters outside. Because women are making such a difficult decision to abort their child, they could try to make the place look a little bit upbeat. There are no pictures on the walls just plain white concrete walls with white tiled floors. It's smelled and looked extremely sterile and impersonal. Not to mention the staff wasn't too pleasant. When we arrived, the lady at the front desk, chewing her gum like it was the last piece ever to be created, talking on the phone like the person on the other end would die without the continuance of their conversation. She handed us a small stack of paperwork under a clipboard with a pen attached without getting off the phone. You've thought the staff would be a little more compassionate and courteous.

After completing her paperwork, Chloe was taken to an undisclosed location inside the building. I can only imagine how she felt, but I wished I could be with her. She hadn't said much the entire day, so I wasn't sure what was going on in her head. She had this blank stare in her eyes like she'd seen a ghost, and whenever I asked her a question, she gave me answers in incomplete sentences.

That was unlike her. The Chloe I knew had it all together so she pretended. On the outside peering into her world, one would never have known she struggled so. She struggled to find the balance if there was such a thing. I hadn't even mastered the art of balance in life. That is, healthy stability in all facets of life. After years of heartache, lies, and deceit, finally, I had a man in my life who loved me in spite of myself, but at the same time, I struggled with my career, finding work that truly fulfilled me, if there is such a thing. And Chloe my best friend Chloe, who graduated valedictorian of my high school class in '95, summa cum laude of her graduating class of the College of Business at UCLA in '99, and completing an MBA at Webster University in '02, top sales account executive for State Farm Insurance Midwest Region from 2001-2003 getting an abortion because she hadn't found a way to love herself although her life lacked the balance.

Chapter 12

The Revelation

She slept for what seemed like days. I wanted to ask Chloe so many questions, but I knew she needed her rest. I turned the ringer off on her house phone because I didn't want to disturb her. If any of the girls needed me, they knew to call my cell phone, and I made certain to put it on vibrate. It had been two days since her abortion. My friend had an abortion. I still couldn't believe it. I was almost ashamed of her decision, but it wasn't my job to judge but support.

Who could be knocking at her door? "Who is it?"

"Jesse."

Opening the door with the chain still latched, I asked, "What do you want?"

"Is she okay?"

"You'd know how she was doing if you'd gone with her and decided to stay with her since it was after all your baby."

"Toni, I don't need a lecture from you. Tell her I'm here, and I want to talk to her."

"I'm sure you're used to telling women what to do, but I'm afraid I don't follow your orders. When she wakes up, I'll tell her you came by, and if she wants to talk, she'll call."

"Whatever."

I hated to watch him walk. He was so cocky. It made me sick. He was not even that attractive. I could never grasped why she's so hung up on him. Of

all the men in the world to date, this is the one she fell for. He should be here caring for her, waiting for her to wake up, cleaning up her place not knocking on her door. Besides, when did she have time to make such a mess? She worked longer hours than any person I knew. There were dirty clothes everywhere, dirty dishes on every flat surface, and empty bags of Cheetos on top of the refrigerator. Maybe if I'd started with a smaller room this cleaner process would be easier.

Toni walked to Chloe's quaint bathroom. She always thought it was so charming because it had the old fashioned bathtub with the feet. Chloe was usually particular about how she kept her house especially her bathroom. Toni placed her perfume bottles the way she remembered Chloe liked them with the tallest bottle, Donna Karen's Cashmere Mist to the teeny tiny bottle of Shesido.

"What the fuck was she doing with this?" Toni asked herself aloud as if she was holding a conversation with someone in the same room. "Chloe, wake up!" Toni, yelled.

"What. What's wrong?"

"What is Devon's watch doing here?"

"Huh?"

"Huh, why is my boyfriend's watch in your bathroom? You didn't have him do any work over here. What's going on?"

"It's not what you think."

"Right, so what do I think?"

"Devon came by..."

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t need to hear your explanation. I just need to know if you fucked my man.”

“Toni, I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“Was it his baby? Was it Devon’s baby?”

“...I don’t know. Don’t leave Toni, please.”

“Fuck you. You whore,” Toni screamed as she gathered her things and stormed out the door.”

My friend who I thought loved me valued our friendship. She fucked my boyfriend. The man I loved allowed himself to have sex with her. How could they do this to me? My blood boiled in my skin forcing my ears to become hot because I was so angry. I could have choked her. I could have put my hands around her neck and introduced her to death. It hurt to the core of me so far deep inside of me that my muscles ached so angry that I couldn’t cry tears. She couldn’t stand for me to be happy. She couldn’t stand for me to have something that she didn’t have. She had to have everything even Devon.

Chapter 13

You, Me, and She

“How could you do this?” Toni yelled as she rushed through the house to confront Devon. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“What are you talking about?”

Toni threw the vintage Seiko watch at Devon hitting him in the nose.

“How could you do this to me?”

“Toni, let me explain.”

“No don’t explain. You fucked my best friend. You fucked her.”

“Baby, I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“If you didn’t mean for it to happen, you shouldn’t have done it.”

“I just wanted to talk to her about some business and pick up some money...”

“I don’t care. I was such a fool caring for her, cleaning her place. I took her to get an abortion today. It was probably your baby.”

“You did what? I didn’t know...”

“I bet you didn’t know, but when you have sex with people without protection, they can get pregnant,” Toni said sarcastically.

“Oh my God...I had no clue.”

“Here’s your clue. It’s over.”

“Toni, wait...please. Let’s talk about this.”

“I don’t have shit to say to you or her. You two can fuck each other, again. Don’t worry about moving your things, I’ll have my brothers come get my shit this weekend.”

I had no clue where I was going, but I had to leave. There was no way I could have tolerated such disrespect. I didn’t care to hear his side of the story. It didn’t matter what happened or how it happened. It happened. I couldn’t very well stay with a man who cheated on me especially someone who pretended to love me in spite of my imperfections. Suddenly, I recalled every conversation Devon and I ever had. I played each scene over and over in my mind like a movie remembering all of the memorable times that he touched me either by words or his actions. For months I’d cried tears for my dearest friend, Chloe. Suddenly, I was forced to cry my own because of her.

Chapter 14
Give It A Little Time

When I was seven years old, one of my favorite things to do was roller skate. Every Thursday my older, cooler, more mature cousin would take me to Skate King, the local inner city rink. It was nothing like today's rink with their white concrete floor. Skate King had the old school hard wood floors that didn't bruise your ass as much when you fell. We'd go for lessons from 5:30 pm to 7:30 pm. Once I'd gotten the hang of skating without falling every five minutes, my grandmother bought me a \$3 pair of skates from the Goodwill to keep at her house when I visited on the weekends during the summer. I practiced what I'd learned at Skate King in the vacant lot next door to my grandparent's house.

I'd befriended my grandparent's new neighbor, Danielle, who lived next door. We were the same age. We were, as my grandmother would say, thick as thieves. My grandmother found an old pair of skates for her, too, so I had a skate partner every Saturday and Sunday. We'd skate all day even on those 100 degree, hot, humid, St. Louis, summer days. Danielle and I had a routine. We ate my grandmother's hearty breakfast, scrambled eggs with a slice of American cheese on top, two slices of country bacon with the hard gristle on the side of each piece, and homemade buttermilk biscuit with apple butter, and a small glass of orange juice. My grandmother would say, "Growing girls need a good breakfast, so they'll have energy to skate."

We'd rush outside after breakfast, put our tennis shoes on the front porch, change into our skates, and head to the vacant lot. We played a game of tag-you're-it, when I'd started to be chased by the most enormous bumblebee ever

created by God. With all of my practicing, I should have gotten away, but my frantic arm flailing through me off balance, and I fell and scraped my face pretty hard on the concrete. My hands burned as I tried to pull myself off the pavement.

“Grandma Celestine,” Danielle yelled. “Toni fell, and she’s bleeding.”

My grandmother came to my rescue before Danielle could yell for her a second time. She helped me off the pavement and wrapped her full figured, so smooth arm around me. She guided me into the house inside the bathroom. Danielle followed worried that we wouldn’t be able to skate for the rest of the day. My grandmother rinsed my face with warm water and a towel. She used a little peroxide to cleanse the scrape and put a little Vaseline on it. I looked in the mirror and started to cry.

“Grandma, my face. It’s ugly.”

“It’s not ugly,” she said.

“Yes, it is. It’ll never heal.”

“All wounds heal, honey even the ones you can’t see. Give it a little time and you’ll never know you were hurt, but you’ll skate better than before. Now ya’ll go back outside and play, and I’ll call you when it’s time for lunch.”

She was right. She was always right. My face healed just fine with no scarring. My skating skills improved, too. I was reminded of the skating accident when I fell and skinned my knee chasing my cousin, Dee, down the street. When I went upstairs to show my grandmother my wounded knee, again, I cried, “My knee will never heal.”

“Of course it’ll heal,” my grandmother reminded me. “your face is back to perfection after you fell last month isn’t it?”

“Well yeah.”

“So why wouldn’t your knee be the same way.”

“I don’t know,” I said shrugging my shoulders.

My face, knee, and the open wound in my heart healed fine over time. My grandmother was right. She was always right. Two years after leaving St. Louis, I finally found the balance I needed without Devon or Chloe. Finally, I felt like a whole person after moving to New York, finding my inspiration. It was the atmosphere of a city that was constantly moving no matter what else was going on with the rest of the world. I loved that about New York. There was this sense of urgency in the air that made me want to quit feeling sorry for myself and get off my ass and make a name for myself. Two years was enough time to build the clientele I’d dreamed of. I’d made enough money to support myself and had the opportunity to choose the type of work I wanted, not cheesy wedding photography.

When I arrived here, I’d come with basically nothing, empty emotionally and financially. But like my grandmother said, all wounds heal over time. Devon had cut me deep, but Chloe cut me deeper. They both attempted to make contact a few hundred times a piece, but after a new cell phone service provider and number and hardcore promises from Micah, Terri, and my mother not to give out the number under any circumstances, I hadn’t spoken to either of them since the

day I found out they'd slept together. The thought of talking to either of them disturbed my peace of mind, and there was no way, I could have allowed that.