

PART I

THE UNVEILING

“There are three things that will endure—faith, hope and love—and the greatest of these is love.” 1 Corinthians 13:13 LASB NLT

TANGLED ROOTS

CHAPTER 1

Suddenly, howling wind disturbed the air outside. From out of nowhere, a woman with a coarse mop of silver hair appeared in the doorway of the funeral home. Her wrinkled skin was so dark that it gave tar a run for its money.

The room, which was abuzz with solemn conversation, quickly hushed to uneasy silence.

No one had seen her in years. Some thought that she had died joining the spirits that she was rumored to summon at will. Though they imagined her body rotting away in that little cabin of hers deep in the woods, they were all too afraid to investigate. Seeing her now, they concluded that this had to be some extra special occasion to drag her out of seclusion.

Looking at no one, Ivy Mae stooped over her walking stick, hobbling under the burden of her frail one hundred twenty year old body. The few times a decade that she graced the town with her presence someone would get up the nerve to challenge Ivy Mae about her age. “Ivy Mae, you’s been a hundred twenty for as long as I’ve known you and that’s been over seventy years. How long you planning on staying a hundred twenty?”

Her cackle always drew a squirm from her challenger. “Truth be told, I don’t rightly know how old I am. I couldn’t start counting from the day that I was born since I

was just a baby, now could I? My Mammy and Pappy couldn't read or write so they didn't leave no records. They wasn't much for talking neither. Hell, I didn't even think 'bout it 'til I was up in age and by then both Mammy and Pappy was long since dead. Ain't never had no sisters or brothers. Me and my Mammy and Pappy never ventured out much from the homestead so it wasn't nobody I could ask."

Ivy Mae pondered the thought more, "Heck, I don't even know when it was that I started counting. Sometimes I'd swear that I remember clean back to slavery times. Once I even found myself walking with a whole bunch of Cherokee Indians along mountain trails. Mean looking soldiers itching to kill was taking us to a place called Oklahoma Territory."

Ivy paused momentarily lost in another time. She shook off the weight of sad memories with a chuckle. "And then there's days I can't even remember my own name. But a hundred twenty sounds as good as anything else, don't you think?"

The response Ivy Mae got always drew a deep chuckle out of her. She had grown to delight in their confusion as they rushed away with undeniable fright written all over their faces.

This day was no different. At the sight of the old woman, everybody took a sudden interest in the shoes on their feet. With no time to waste on them, this suited Ivy Mae just fine. She passed them on her way down the aisle, focused only on the casket front and center. Reaching her destination, she studied the lifeless body with fiery intensity.

Unsure of what she would do next, everyone in the room shifted nervously. Some were filled with the dreadful thought that she was enticing Edna to return to the land of

the living. Knowing how willful Edna could be, they braced themselves expecting her to jump out of her casket at any moment.

With uncanny speed, Ivy Mae spun on her heels. It was unsettling to watch each one of her eyes frantically search a different part of the room.

The room became an excited frenzy of fear. A spontaneous chorus of prayers drifted towards the heavens. A passer-by would have sworn that the entire bee kingdom was making a delivery of honey to a giant hive in the funeral home. The resounding whispers of “Oh Lord, please don’t let me be the one” filled the room before drifting out to the street.

To everyone’s relief, Ivy Mae fixed her eyes on Edna’s beautiful daughters. She moved so close that the smell of mothballs and Ben Gay tickled their noses. In blunt reassurance of the elderly, Ivy Mae dropped the bomb. “Y’all was your mama’s pride and joy. It’s a damn shame that you ain’t never gonna’ keep a man’s love. Y’all is just like your mama, your grandmamma, her mama and her mama before her. Ain’t never gonna’ find love until that curse is broken.”

Nadine, Dora and Charlene gasped. This was the last thing they had expected to hear at their mother’s wake. They had to admit that the thought did intrigue them. Maybe that explained why they had spent their entire lives desperately trying to hold onto love that always slipped out of the port of their hearts never to return.

Now the unimaginable stared them in the face igniting a glimmer of hope in their eyes. Just as quickly, common sense came crashing down upon them. They sighed dismissing the news as the idle rambling of a senile old woman.

“I might be old but I swear on a stack of Bibles that I ain’t senile!” The cantankerous Ivy Mae pulled out tattered Bible after tattered Bible from somewhere underneath the flowered apron tied around her waist and raised her right hand in oath. Edna’s daughters’ eyes fixated on thick lips the color of grape bubble gum circling around in one wide pout after another. It reminded them of a cow chewing on her cud.

The three women quickly came to their senses and flinched. “Did she just read my mind?” Each thought.

Nadine, with the authority of her position as the oldest, took it upon herself to speak up. “Now Cousin Ivy Mae, no one called you senile. Don’t get your dandruff up.”

The chiding did not sit well with Ivy Mae. Every ounce of the boldness that made Nadine a star on Broadway melted from her body under Ivy Mae’s stare.

“Nadine Louise Early, don’t you use that condescending tone with me!”

Hating for anyone to use her middle name, Nadine cringed.

Ivy Mae, satisfied that she had hit a nerve, dug deeper. “You might be Miss “All That” to these folks around here but I done glared into that heart of yours, if you can call it that. I knew you before you knew yourself. Better yet, I done got you out of some messes that you don’t want me to talk about, now do you?”

Nadine shifted uneasily under the threat. But she was not about to let rumors run rampant in this little town only to show up in the tabloids before night’s end. She batted her baby browns at her cousin. “Why Cousin Ivy Mae, whatever do you mean?”

“Child, you remember that time in Jamaica…”

Nadine cut her off immediately. The mention of Jamaica sent shivers down her spine. Her brow wrinkled in confusion. She had never mentioned what had happened in

Jamaica to anyone. And from what she could tell Ivy Mae had never ventured more than a few miles from the borders of Wallace, North Carolina. “How could she know?” The mere thought made Nadine clam up.

Still standing, her perfectly shaped legs trembled causing her to tilt forward unsteadily. She glanced down helplessly trying to control her wobbling ankles under the height of her colorful Jimmy Choo stiletto heels.

CHAPTER 2

Looking at her feet, Nadine was reminded of the heated exchange she had shared earlier with Dora over those very shoes. At the last second she had kicked off the Manolo Blanik's in favor of the Jimmy Choo's. "These are a lot more fun." She delighted in how the strappy fuchsia colored shoes lengthened her legs. "What a Las Vegas showgirl wouldn't give for these stems!" She admired her shapely calves in the mirror.

As usual, Dora's nagging over correct protocol pulled Nadine away from herself. "Nadine, tell me you're not going to wear those 'CFM's' to Mama's wake." Dora made no attempt to hide her displeasure at her sister's attire.

"Stop being such a prude, Dora!" Nadine slowly examined Dora from head to toe in obvious disapproval.

Nadine was irked at how anyone could look so stunning in such simple clothing. Every inch of Dora's ensemble was understated elegance. A hint of diamond and onyx cuff links on the ivory silk blouse peeked from underneath the sleeves of her black Armani suit. Nadine stared just long enough to make Dora uneasy.

"You think I should change into the black silk blouse?" Dora pondered out loud. "The ivory might be a little much. What do you think, Nadine?" Departure from her

normal monochromatic style of dressing was making Dora uncomfortable. Under anxiety Dora was prone to break out in hives. She groaned as she felt the first welt pop out on her tummy. She scratched it and reached for her Benadryl. “Oh, please God, not now!” She whispered.

“Suit yourself.” Nadine offered Dora no help. “Both are BORING! Child, you take that businesswoman thing a little too seriously.”

It annoyed Nadine to no end how Dora did her best to downplay her God-given beauty. All of Nadine’s beauty advice fell on unhearing ears when it came Dora’s way. “And to think I give to her free what other women pay big bucks for. What an ingrate!”

“The corporate world is different.” Dora would always say. “I need people to focus on my abilities not my looks.” Nadine knew she would just scream if she heard that statement one more time.

Nadine had mumbled under her breath, “Child please, who cares about your abilities with looks like that.” After years of hounding, Nadine was finally able to convince Dora to wear a little lipstick and mascara from her “Shockolate Diva” label.

Dora’s classical style was a true source of irritation to her big sister. Nadine shook her head in amazement. The harder Dora tried to hide her beauty the more it shined through. It had taken years for Nadine to realize that none of it mattered to Dora.

Nadine often wondered why God had gypped her and wasted such beauty and elegance on Dora who would never use them. Its irony was a source of contention for Nadine.

Nadine struggled every day fighting off things that Dora never worried about: weight, pimples and “foot in mouth” disease. But what Nadine lacked in beauty, she

made up for in talent second to none on stage or in front of a movie camera. When seen through the eyes of her mesmerizing performances, Nadine transformed into the dazzling creature of her dreams.

Even so, envy reared its ugly head whenever Nadine saw Dora. “If I had those looks with my talent and ambition, I’d rule Hollywood. No, I’d rule the world.” Nadine thought.

From her repertoire of insults, she carefully selected one for Dora. “All that beauty and no imagination. What a waste!”

Seeing Dora flinch was quite satisfying. Nadine quickly turned her attention away from her sister and back to herself. She pushed her generous bosom up making sure just the right amount of cleavage topped off her lacy camisole. “Mama would want us to wear something fun and bright. Pink was Mama’s favorite color.”

Nadine carefully inspected herself from head to toe in the full-length mirror. The roaring Atlantic Ocean provided the perfect frame. She twirled around pleasuring in the swishing of her skirt as it grazed her legs. The soft silk made her feel ultra sexy. She purred and pawed at herself in the mirror like a kitten.

Suddenly, the gentlest of sea breezes blew the sheer silk curtains from the window into a veil covering Nadine’s head. For a second, she pictured herself as the bride she longed to be. She pouted her lips in her legendary million-dollar smile. Signature chocolaty-cherry lips were left behind on the giant antique looking glass.

CHAPTER 3

Dora was proud of her self-control. Cool-headed calmness served her well in the boardroom but had proven disastrous in the bedroom. Unfortunately she had met only one man who had turned her coolness to extreme hot in a matter of seconds. In the end, she had lost him. With him went a part of her that she had never been able to recapture. God knows she had tried to find someone else. No one had managed to get her past lukewarm—a poor substitute for the heat she had found with Jacoby. After him, all of her other relationships had left her feeling downright incomplete.

Not one of her lovers, not even her ex-husband Paul, had been able to reach beyond her cool exterior and tap into that fiery hot furnace that smoldered underneath. Since Jacoby, no one else had figured out the key to the puzzle of turning the heat on in the furnace. Though Dora knew something was out of kilter in her life, it never occurred to her that Jacoby was the missing piece to her puzzle. Without him, her life made no sense.

Dora threw herself into her work rising quickly to the top of AT&T. But no matter how long or how hard she worked, aching loneliness persisted. When work failed, she desperately searched for relief elsewhere.

Her search had led her through a failed marriage and untold relationships. So on the eve before her mother's funeral, she was filled with grief and a hideous case of discouragement.

As a young girl, Dora had sworn that her life would be different from her mother's. She would have the perfect husband in a perfect house with the perfect kids. After years of trying, she stood before her dead mother empty-handed and empty-hearted.

Every time Dora started a new relationship, her heart had leapt with hope that he was the one. Disappointment set in months and sometimes years later. Each relationship left her feeling emptier than when she had started. Dora bore it all with graceful restraint.

Regardless of the many breathing techniques Dora tried around her big sister, Nadine was the only person who could send her reeling out of control. The slightest look or one simple word easily sent Dora into a kamikaze tailspin. With that came the loss of the self-control that she so carefully protected.

Nadine's conceit was so inbred that it rarely fazed Dora. Her sluttish tendencies were a different matter altogether. There was no stoop too low for Nadine to bend to get an attractive man into bed. Even so, Dora usually turned a blind eye no matter how disgraceful Nadine chose to be. Coupled with the stress of the occasion, today it was the straw that broke the camel's back. Angry thoughts crowded her mind. "At best, Nadine is being disrespectful to Mama's memory. At worse, she's using Mama's funeral to entice every man in this country so that she can satisfy that insatiable sexual appetite of hers."

Finally Dora reeled at her older sister. "Nadine, Mama's favorite color was pale pink! Not yoo-hoo look at my boobs here I am Hot as Hades pink! And since you

brought up the subject of waste! I'll tell you what waste is! It's spending all that money on those silly shoes and clothes when Mama was down here living in a shack. I'd rather be a prude any day than a self-absorbed floozy like you!"

Blinded with fury, Dora rubbed her pounding temples. Her viciousness took Nadine by surprise.

"Dora, that's not fair." Nadine defended herself. "You know how hard I tried get Mama to move."

"Evidently, not hard enough."

Dora did not care about fair or unfair at that moment. She needed an outlet for her anger. Nadine just happened to be handy.

Both women instantly reverted back to children, clenched fists raised in the air ready to pound the other in the ground.

CHAPTER 4

Hearing angry yelling from the other room, Charlene blew her breath out in frustration. “Not again. They’re supposed to be older and wiser. I’m sick and tired of pulling them apart. I should just let them kill each other and be done with it. And they say I’m irresponsible.”

She shook her head as she wandered aimlessly into the room. Ignoring the tension in the air and with puppy dog eyes she asked, “What’s CFM?”

Sometimes her sisters found Charlene’s naiveté refreshing. This was not one of those times. Dora and Nadine dropped their fists thinking, “Surely she can’t be serious.”

The look on Charlene’s face told them otherwise. They simultaneously shouted, “Come fuck me!”

The words echoing in the room made them stop dead in their tracks. They anxiously looked around expecting Edna to burst into the room at any second with a bar of Ivory soap in hand to wash out their mouths.

CHAPTER 5

Had it already been over twenty plus years ago that, as young girls, Dora and Nadine had admired the melodious sound of the unusual words gliding off the tongues of the Smith kids? In private, the two girls had practiced the words until they could use them with equal ease. As soon as they were fluent, they proudly mimicked the words as they played with their dolls.

“Where you going you motha’ fucka’?” Nadine moved her doll’s head up and down in a talking motion.

“You stinking bitch that ain’t none of your business.” Dora had replied for her doll.

Edna had been passing by the room when she heard foul words in what sounded like her children’s voices. She stopped and stood at the door listening. She asked them, “Sugar, where did y’all hear those words?”

They happily volunteered that they had learned “pretty talk” from the Smith kids. Edna explained to them in no uncertain terms that those words were off limits. Just to make sure they understood the seriousness of using “cuss words” she had washed their mouths out with a bar of Ivory soap.

Even now, with just the thought, the taste of soap was strong in their mouths. They giggled over the incident. Soon giggles turned into laughter. Their minds drifted to

how funny Edna would have found this. Before long they were engulfed in tears as they ached for the comfort only their mother could give. She had only been gone a few days and they missed her already. No doubt there were times when weeks would go by without them talking to her. Not once had they missed her then. Now they found themselves imprisoned in their loneliness for her. Each second ticking away heightened their despair.

CHAPTER 6

A prickle on the back of Nadine's neck brought her back to the present. She turned on her heels to face the intense stares of Ivy Mae. Now every hair on Nadine's body stood out stiff. Her once satiny mane that flowed around her shoulders spiked out like porcupine quills. Nadine, with trembling legs, turned to face her cousin. The rustling of silky hose on her thighs could be heard throughout the chapel of the funeral home. Reaching out for something to steady herself, one of her flawlessly manicured nails hit the chair and broke.

"Damn you, old coot, look at what you made me do!" The words dare not depart her lips though she did brave casting an accusing eye at the old woman.

Ivy Mae had just raised her cane to clobber Nadine over the head when Dora graciously inserted herself between them. Her hug wrapped Ivy Mae in the warm reverence that she justly deserved. "Cousin Ivy Mae, thank you for coming. Come, sit here with us."

Ivy Mae sneered at Nadine squinting her eyes into angry slits. She lingered long enough to make sure her evil eye hit its target. Satisfied that it had, the sweetest of smiles graced her face as Dora ushered her away. She plopped down in a seat between Dora and Charlene.

Dora squeezed the old woman's hand for comfort. Ivy Mae gently pushed Dora's head down until it rested on her stooped shoulder. The smell of mothballs and sadness made it impossible for Dora's tears to stay put. They slowly dripped down her face forming a puddle on Ivy Mae's ancient black shawl.

Feeling the moisture, Ivy Mae smiled and snapped her fingers in glee. "Hot damn! Got what I came for and in record time." Excited thoughts moved her to her feet with an abrupt announcement. "Ain't nothing I can do here! Edna's spirit done moved on and I ain't got no time to spare if I'm going to make this work. I'll be on my way now."

Realizing that she had said too much, her stoop disappeared as she sped to the door. No one heard or saw the door open but in an instant Ivy Mae was gone. She had vanished so quickly that everyone scratched their heads wondering if she had been there at all. The room finally settled back down in the somberness of the occasion.

CHAPTER 7

In blue jeans and tee-shirt, Charlene slouched in her chair staring ahead seemingly bored out of her mind. She hated death and everything that went with it. Mouth stretched open in a wide yawn, Charlene lazily offered her opinion. “That old lady’s right. Edna ain’t coming back. Let’s get on with it.”

“Charlene, Mama deserves more respect than that. Now sit there and at least pretend to care.” Nadine whispered between clenched teeth.

Dora could not believe her ears. Her face clouded in disgust. “How dare Nadine talk about respect in that get-up! If anyone has reason not to be here, it’s Charlene.

“Furthermore, where was “Miss High and Mighty Nadine” when Mama was dying? Too busy with her hit Broadway play as usual. I’m sure she wouldn’t be here now if she thought it wouldn’t cause negative publicity. God help me not to give her a piece of my mind!”

She imagined the scuffle between the two of them only this time she would be the victor.

Edna’s tired voice quietly invaded the space between her ears. “Can’t you children even let me have a little peace at my own wake?”

Dora unclenched her fist and bit her tongue like she usually did when it came to Nadine.

CHAPTER 8

The ceremony that had begun with loud wailing and pitiful weeping traditional to Black southern wakes and funerals was quickly coming to an end. Dora gazed curiously around the room. As expected, family, friends and the usual array of characters had shown up.

Some came to gawk at the three sisters, especially Nadine, a famous actress and the town's most celebrated citizen. Unbeknownst to them, she had changed her citizenship from the moment she had left there.

Others had come because they desperately needed to cry over the misery that tormented them day and night. Ceremonies of the dead were the perfect places to let loose without arousing suspicion that something was terribly wrong in the dreadful lives that they were living.

Then there were those few who attended wakes and funerals as a profession. Miss Annie Pearl fell into that category. She barreled through the door and thrashed about wildly wailing out what great friends she and Edna had been.

She babbled on incoherently for a while and then pointed to the front of the room. Soon afterward to no one's surprise, she fainted. Friend or foe, she never missed a wake or a funeral in town and never, ever failed to faint.

Quiet snickering broke out in the otherwise solemn atmosphere. No one could remember them speaking for close to fifty years. That's when Edna had discovered that Johnny, her husband, had been sleeping around with Annie Pearl. Everyone in the room was quite sure the two hated each other's guts. But Annie Pearl knew different.

She and Edna had long since made peace, though for the most part, they still maintained their distance. The tears that fell from Annie Pearl's eyes were unlike those cried at other funerals she had attended. These were as real as the dollars Edna had slipped into her hands to feed her children after Johnny got himself killed over a bottle of moonshine.

Annie Pearl sucked her breath in with a deep snuffle. "Broke bastard didn't leave me nothing but ten snotty-nose, hungry-ass childrens. Lord knows we would have starved to death if it hadn't been for Edna."

Though Johnny had been dead for untold years, it still enraged Annie Pearl to think about it. "Ass-hole never bothered to marry me so I couldn't get one red cent of his VA money or social security--sorry-ass bastard that he was!" The look of peace and forgiveness she had seen in Edna's eyes still haunted her to this very day. She shivered as chill bumps ran up and down her fleshy arms.

Annie Pearl's eyes were drawn across the room to the casket. She could not tear her eyes away. She blinked and then rubbed her eyes with thick hands. Now that all eyes in the chapel were glued on Annie Pearl, Edna turned her head stiffly, opened her eyes

and winked at her archrival. The sly grin on Edna's face sent Annie Pearl into hysterics. She pointed to the casket babbling something no one could understand. Everyone followed the pointing finger to Edna's dead body that lay peacefully in the coffin. When they turned back around, Annie Pearl was out cold, lost in times long since past.

CHAPTER 9

It had been one hundred ten degrees in the shade, one of the hottest days ever recorded in Wallace. Edna had strolled into the Back Street Café. The sizzle and smell of fish bubbling in a skillet full of hot grease lingered heavily in the air.

Edna's mouth was parched almost white. She was desperate for an ice-cold coca-cola to quench her thirst. "Water won't do at a time like this!" She declared to herself.

She swore that the stubby six-ounce bottle carried a lot more punch than its taller counterpart. There was something about that smaller bottle that reminded Edna of herself: "Short and full of punch," she reasoned with a chuckle.

Annie Pearl, loaded with white lightning, had perched her whiskey-riddled body on a red stool at the bar. With every ounce of her ninety pounds, she pounced at what she thought was the perfect opportunity to pick on Edna.

Words slurred as Annie Pearl spat them out of her snaggle-toothed mouth. “Look at what we got ourselves here—a high yellow bitch just back from the city. Hell, she might have Johnny’s name but I got the rest of him--got his babies to prove it. This here sorry-ass-bitch can’t have no babies. That’s why Johnny came to me.”

A giggle had formed in Edna’s throat as she realized that even her short body towered over that of Annie Pearl’s. The droplet of spit that had paused in the air from Annie Pearl’s mouth finally landed on Edna’s nose. The giggle stuck in Edna’s throat forming a lump of uncontainable rage, “Oh no that good-for-nothing tar ass bitch didn’t!” Vengeance blinded her.

Annie Pearl rubbed her big belly and glared daringly at Edna. The baby growing inside her womb pushed and stretched as if it was trying to claw its way out.

With lightning speed, Edna grabbed Annie Pearl by the neck yanking her off the barstool. From out of nowhere, Edna’s switchblade, Ethel Mae, gleamed in the light. The sharp edge of cold steel drew a line of blood across Annie Pearl’s pitched black throat.

Threatening jeers turned to outright fear as a flashback of Annie Pearl’s miserable life fast-forwarded before her bulging eyes. Petroleum jelly, from the Blue Magic Hair Dressing used to keep her naps under control, now dripped down with the sweat on her face. Besides moonshine and a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes, Blue Magic was the only luxury that Annie Pearl demanded from Johnny.

With the sting of Ethel Mae on her throat, letting Johnny into her life didn’t seem like such a great idea to Annie Pearl now. After all, she knew that he was married. But

she was desperate for a shot of liquor, Johnny was desperate for a drinking partner and Edna was hundreds of miles away in New York City.

Back then, Annie Pearl had reasoned to herself, “Edna ain’t had no business leaving a fine catch like Johnny down here all by hisself. That girl had to know she was asking for trouble. Besides if I don’t snatch his ass up somebody else will. I can help him spend his disability check just as good as any of these other ho’s ‘round here.”

As if by magic, a familiar scarred hand gripped Edna’s wrist so tightly that she could not move her hand. Blinded by rage, she did not recognize the man’s face staring at her with a gentle “no” in his eyes. His firm grasp stopped her from cutting clean through to the other side of Annie Pearl’s scraggly neck.

Edna howled, “Let me go! I’m gonna’ rip that bitch’s head right off of that low life body of hers.” She had every intention of delivering Annie Pearl’s head to Johnny that very afternoon.

At times like these, Edna wanted to kick her own self in the butt. “Why in the world did I ever listen to Poppa and marry that son-of-a-bitch? I should have known that money grubbing Tom Newkirk wasn’t after nothing but Johnny’s VA check.” Edna scanned the dark recesses of her mind trying to figure out how she had come to such a downward spiral. What she found made her hand slip just a bit. She was drawn back to a few years earlier.

CHAPTER 10

The day after Edna had graduated from high school, she had boarded a Greyhound bus heading to Philadelphia. It would be the first time she would spend time with a man she barely knew. Though Tom Newkirk had raised her as if she was his own child, Edna still longed to know her real father.

In a matter of months, Edna had grown to love the City of Brotherly Love and had no intention of returning to Wallace until two unplanned events occurred. Her fiancé, Mumbles, was killed in a jailhouse brawl. Grief stricken, Edna had gone to claim his body only to discover that he had a wife and three children. Thinking things couldn't get worse, she returned to her studio apartment to the news that Poppa had had a stroke and a heart attack. He wasn't expected to live.

Edna had climbed onto a Greyhound heading south unsure if she would ever return. She arrived in Wallace numb with heartbreak and determined for someone to pay for her suffering. When Johnny came along, he was the perfect target.

Instead of Tom Newkirk dying as expected, he lived and came home from the hospital meaner and more ornery than when he had left. He was determined to get what he was due in life and he didn't care who he had to use. Not even his precious granddaughter was off limits to his conniving schemes. When the time was right, Tom convinced Edna that their only hope from starving to death was for her to marry Johnny.

As soon as she had said, "I do," Edna knew that she had made a terrible mistake. It was confirmed minutes later when Johnny pulled out his bottle of bootleg and took a large gulp right there on the church altar. He pushed the bottle to her mouth cutting her lip. She took an obligatory swig just to make him go away. With Johnny's laugh, out came a vulgar belch. The stench of the moonshine on his breath filled the room. Edna wasn't sure if it was the smell of his rancid breath, the reality of being married to Johnny or the feeling of being trapped that made her stomach turn upside down and inside out.

The next few months Edna had done all she could to get Johnny to stop drinking. She soon gave up and gave in and started drinking herself. The morning she woke up in the middle of Mr. Blanchard's strawberry field with no idea of how she had gotten there had been the final straw for her. From that day, she and Johnny had begun drifting apart.

CHAPTER 11

Lonnie Mack loosened Edna's grip enough for Annie Pearl to escape. She ran out the door leaving behind a steaming puddle of pee. From that day, Annie Pearl never again approached Edna.

With Edna dead now, Annie Pearl figured it was finally safe to come into close proximity without an invitation. Willie Bryan, the funeral director, and several other men rushed to Annie Pearl's side shortly after she fainted. They were wrestling to keep her three hundred pound mass from blocking the only way in or out.

Weighed down by heavy hearts, family and friends ignored the men at Annie Pearl's side and proceeded to the front of the room. They formed the mournful procession to view their beloved's body for the first time since she had died days earlier. Every corner of the grungy chapel was filled with grief.

On the way out, no one even bothered to wait for Annie Pearl to be moved. The ones that could just jumped over her. The ones that couldn't jump that far walked right across the front of her blubbery body. Annie Pearl never knew the difference. She was still out cold.

CHAPTER 12

Nadine, Dora and Charlene were relieved that the wake was finally over. A stretch limo stood out from the horde of vehicles parked alongside the street and in the parking lot. Gravel crunched underneath their feet. Nadine grimaced. “If the heels of these shoes get scraped up, so help me God!”

The last rays of the setting sun glinted off the dark brown chariot that awaited them. The three sisters sat down with their bottoms sinking into buttery softness of the lavishly appointed Escalade. The rich smell of chocolate leather tantalized their nostrils.

The chrome front vanity plate on the vehicle put everyone on notice that the “Shockolate Diva” was on board. Nadine’s sponsor had spared no expense making sure the personalized limo met her at the Raleigh/Durham Executive Airport when her private jet touched down. Nadine had graciously agreed to wait for Dora’s commercial flight before heading south on Interstate 40 to the town once known as the World’s Largest Strawberry Exchange.

Now they settled back in heavy comfort. “Could you believe those flowers? Carnations and gladiolas of all things—how blasé can you get? I knew I should have put the word out that Mama only liked tropical flowers. Not one person sent her the Birds of Paradise that she loved so much.” Nadine fretted.

“Forget about the carnations and glads. At least they were live. I can’t get over those plastic things—what were they supposed to be—tulips, maybe? Yuck!” Dora shared her sister’s frustration.

“Isn’t it the thought that counts? I bet Edna liked all of the flowers.” Charlene was venturing into dangerous territory.

“Charlene, honey, those plastic flowers can’t be good for Feng Shui.” Nadine explained to her less than worldly sibling.

“Who the hell is Feng Shui and what does he have to do with Edna? He’s not my daddy is he?” The name sounded oriental to Charlene. Her almond shaped eyes and silky straight hair had always made her believe that she had Asian blood in her. It didn’t help that everyone told her that too. Her baffled look made the other two burst out laughing.

“Child, you really do need to get out more. Feng Shui is the art of directing chi. You do know what that is, don’t you?” Nadine looked down at the shrinking Charlene.

The confounded look on Charlene’s face said it all.

Dora took over. “Chi is the life force that connects us to all things. Feng Shui is the study of that force and how to direct the flow of energy around you. You know, the ying and the yang.”

The light bulb came on. Charlene’s face lit in a bright smile. “Oh, you mean the black and white circles with the dots in the middle.”

“That’s close enough.” They both cut Charlene off making her feel smaller than the ant that peered helplessly through the window. She shrank back in her seat determined to keep her lips “velcro’d” shut.

The three settled quietly back in the limo with closed eyes. Each sister was pulled into a sphere of thought totally unique from that of the other. Just like their thoughts, they were so un-alike that it was hard to believe their cells contained even a miniscule amount of the same DNA.

Edna had been the adhesive that kept them together. Now that she was dead, they had already begun to come unglued. The three things Edna had wanted most for her daughters were a deep relationship with God, a caring man that would love them forever and an unbreakable bond of sisterhood. For the most part, she had died with her desires for them unfulfilled.

CHAPTER 13

During Nadine's infrequent trips back to her impoverished hometown, she spared no expense to show off her glamorous lifestyle. It was what everyone expected and she could not bring herself to disappoint her fans. She waved back at the people lined up on the street to get a glimpse of her.

"It's fun seeing these country bumpkins ogle over me, especially the white folks. I remember when not one of them wanted to sit at the lunchroom table with me. Now look at them--lucky for them that I don't hold grudges. With the way they adore me now, it wouldn't be fair if I didn't give them a little taste of stardom, now would it?"

The limo rolled smoothly down Highway 117 heading south towards Wilmington. Nadine had secured several cottages on Carolina Beach for their stay. The ramshackle of a motel in town was out of the question as were the houses of friends and relatives. "Not enough privacy." Nadine had dismissed the invitations.

The encounter with Ivy Mae gnawed away at Charlene until she couldn't hold it any longer. "Aren't you all the least bit curious about what Cousin Ivy Mae meant when she said she didn't 'have much time to make this work'? Make what work? I think it's weird." The heavy silence in the car scurried away.

"You want to talk about weird. Weird is that mumbo-jumbo about that curse." Nadine faked skepticism.

Dora chucked her cool reserve to the side momentarily. “No, weird is if what she said is true. Think about it. Look at our lives. Look at Mama’s life. How many times have we thought ‘this is the one’ only to be left heartbroken, devastated and alone? I always thought it happened to me because I was just unlucky in love. But you two are no different.”

A delicious smile crossed Nadine’s face. She licked her lips sensually as she thought of Cameron. “Leave me out of it. My love life is just fine.”

CHAPTER 14

Nadine was quite smitten that she had at last found the love of her life. Cameron was everything she had ever dreamed of—handsome, talented, wealthy and well endowed. They starred together in a hit Broadway play and were the toast of the town.

Life could not have been better for Nadine. Every chance she got she rubbed her perfect relationship in Dora's face. Dora had just gone through a nasty divorce.

"Serves her right." Nadine thought upon hearing of Dora's unraveling marriage to Paul. Their relationship had seemed so solid. The demise of the "power couple from the South" had taken everyone by surprise.

"That ought to take her down a peg or two." As soon as the thought formed in her mind, Nadine squirmed in embarrassment. She was hit by a sudden pang of guilt for delighting in Dora's misery.

"And to think, Mama had severe misgivings about Cameron while she adored that rascal Paul. Mama was usually a lot more perceptive than that."

Nadine shuddered over the many times Edna's creepy predictions had come true. "Boy, was she off target this time." Years of abuse at the hands of Paul, not to mention the neglect and infidelity, had been exposed during Dora's divorce proceedings.

“And Mama was worried about Cameron?” Nadine shrugged her shoulders. For the first time, it dawned on her that she had mistaken her mother’s silence about Paul as adoration.

Suddenly Edna’s warning rang in Nadine’s ears. “Don’t let that Cameron drag you down, girl. I know you think I don’t know what I’m talking about but that man ain’t no good for you. Can’t put my finger on it but mark my words, if you keep hanging out with him, you’re going to regret it.”

An argument had ensued between them that Nadine would rather forget. “Mama, why can’t you just be happy for me? Cameron is not like my daddy and those other assholes that you let into your life; ready to leave me barefoot, pregnant and broke. And besides, I’m certainly not going to end up like you, drunk and stuck in this little hick town.”

It had come out of her mouth before she could stop it. She had watched her mother recoil from the stinging truth of her words.

What Edna could not put her finger on was Cameron’s drug habit. He had started using cocaine for fun but now needed it just to get through the day.

Nadine was rescued from worry by the same excuse that she had used for all of her beaux. “So he’s not perfect, but who is?” She quickly corrected herself with a light giggle. “Except me, that is.”

She reached for her fake Prada bag. “Regardless of what Dora thinks, I’m no fool. She’s like everybody else and thinks this purse is an original. Why spend money on something that nobody can tell the difference?” At times, Nadine took on the penny-pinching sensibilities of her Grandma Jenny. “Now if Prada wants to give me a few

handbags, I'll take them. But I'm not about to waste a dime on one of them. As far as I'm concerned, there are only two things that are worth spending my money on: sable and shoes." She thought of the full-length mink coat chilling in a storage unit back in the city. "If only Mama had waited a few more months, I could have worn that to her funeral. She would have liked that." Nadine assured herself.

Sure her makeup needed touching up, Nadine fumbled through her purse for her compact. She achingly thought of the vial of cocaine in the bottom of her bag. Her nose dripped in anticipation. "A hit sure would do me good now. I dare not take it out anywhere near Dora. Turning my ass in to the cops would make 'Miss Goodie-Two-Shoes' day."

Nadine sat back and relaxed. Thoughts of Cameron lit a huge grin on her face. Before leaving New York, her eyes had popped out of her head when she saw the five-carat diamond engagement ring. She was doing her usual snooping through Cameron's personal things when she found it. She gloated certain that he was going to give it to her upon her return.

They would be official and she could start living the life of a respectable woman. Living with Cameron outside of marriage had struck her heart with guilt that she had not expected. Nadine was still haunted by the disappointment in her mother's eyes over her living in sin.

"Poor Mama. She was so old fashioned. She never could bring herself to live in the world she really deserved."

The faces of all the men, some wealthy and very powerful, who had fallen at Edna's feet only to be turned away, flittered through Nadine's mind. "For the life of me,

I never understood why Mama chose to stay stuck in this nothing of an excuse for a town. With her looks, she could have lived anywhere and done anything.”

Living with Cameron was bad enough. But finding out that Nadine used cocaine would have destroyed Edna. For as long as Nadine could remember, their mother had strictly forbidden them from using any drugs except for Bayer Aspirin, Robitussin Cough Syrup and Milk of Magnesia. Edna even questioned the doctor to make sure there were no harmful narcotics in the medicines he prescribed for them. The mere mention of something as harmless as marijuana sent Edna into a tizzy. She swore that it led to more dangerous stuff and drilled into their heads that all illegal drugs, and some legal ones, led to damnation and destruction.

Edna’s philosophy on drugs was a source of embarrassment for Nadine. “Cocaine is just as harmless as that moonshine Mama drinks. Probably better for you too.” There had been no place for her simple-minded mother in the sophisticated crowd that Nadine hung out with.

Now Nadine’s heart swelled with vindication. “Too bad Mama didn’t live to see that Cameron’s finally going to make an honest woman out of me.” She stared out the window busily planning how she and Cameron would celebrate their engagement.

CHAPTER 14

Meanwhile, Dora could not shake the foreboding tugging at her heart. She interrupted Nadine in the middle of an erotic daydream. “I can’t dismiss this curse as easily as you have. Look at Mama’s track record with men. God forbid, but what if it’s true? What if we really are cursed in love?” Dora shivered.

Though she could see how deeply disturbed Dora was, Nadine pounced on her. “My, oh, my, where’s all that logic now? I can’t believe you, of all people, would believe in curses.”

“For your information, the Bible is filled with curses. Maybe you should try reading it sometime. Oh yeah, I forgot! You’re too busy memorizing your lines to bother with something as humdrum as the Bible.” Quivering, Dora grew more serious, her voice fading to a whisper. “Some curses even go down to the third and fourth generations. If the Bible says it, why shouldn’t I believe?”

“Maybe because you’re a bright, intelligent woman who doesn’t believe in a superstitious notion made up by some crazy old lady.” Nadine’s words did not deter Dora one iota. Instead Dora’s chin turned in a stubborn tilt. Nadine could see that it was pointless to argue with her.

Charlene interrupted. “Don’t know why y’all are trying to hide behind some curse now. If you ask me, a curse ain’t got nothing to do with it. A blind man could see

that y'all ain't that different from Edna—always making it hard for a man to be a man around you.”

The looks on their faces alerted Charlene that she had crossed the line. She immediately clammed up.

“And you're different?” Nadine's voice dripped with sarcasm.

Now it was Dora's turn. She spurned at Charlene between clenched teeth.

“Mama just didn't believe in taking crap off no man. Maybe you could learn from that.”

They sat quietly whirring by pine tree after pine tree. Now Nadine's curiosity was getting the best of her. “You think Mama knew about the curse?”

“Don't be silly, Nadine. Mama would never keep something that important a secret.” Dora answered without even having to think about it.

“If you ask me, Edna was a master at keeping secrets.” Charlene muttered under her breath.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Dora and Nadine stared at her dumbfounded.

Charlene gave them that “you know what I mean” look. No words were needed.

“For heaven's sake, let's put this to rest once and for all. I can already see we're not going to get an ounce of sleep tonight and I, for one, am in desperate need of some shut eye.” Nadine tapped on the privacy glass and barked orders to their driver.

Clayton turned the limo in the direction of Highway 41 heading to the place of their ancestors. Tiny cubes of houses blurred between wide gaps of open fields and pastures.

CHAPTER 15

Charlene fought the temptation to beg Clayton to turn the car around. “I should have kept my big mouth shut.” She thought as a cold sweat broke out on her forehead.

They were heading to a place that she never wanted to see again for as long as she lived. She was ambushed by the recollection of her first and last encounter with Edna’s grandmother, Raleigh Boy.

Years earlier, she and Edna had been on their way out to the backcountry to visit the ailing octogenarian when Charlene had inquired, “Raleigh Boy’s such a strange name. How’d she get it?”

Edna chuckled but then unexpectedly withdrew into herself.

CHAPTER 16

In her mind, Edna was six years old all over again smack dab in the middle of the cornfield that surrounded the old shack she shared with her Mama and Papa.

Brisk rustling of the long blades of corn leaves on the stalks alerted Edna that someone was coming her way. Edna was glued to the spot. Her fascination in finding the perfect ear of corn to make a doll out of had completely vanished. The swooshing sound of the leaves parting grew closer and closer. At first, she saw only a head floating above the tall stalks. She was about to let out a serious yell when the body caught up to the floating head. Standing before Edna was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen in her life.

The woman puffed on a corncob pipe and intently studied the skinny little girl with two thick pigtails hanging down her back. “So you’re Edna?”

Edna stuck out her birdcage chest proudly proclaiming, “I sure am! Edna Early at your service, M’am.”

The royal gesture from the dirty-face girl drew laughter from the woman.

Edna scratched her head in puzzlement. She didn’t see what was so funny. Even between the dirt spots, Edna’s red fluster was evident. Her tiny hands balled into tight fists.

Unsure if she had hurt the child's feelings or just had plain made her angry, the woman stopped laughing and grew very serious. "Child, do you know who I am?"

The perturbed Edna replied, "How's I supposed to know who you is? I ain't never seent you before, now has I?"

Mame thought, "That girl's a feisty lil' something which is more than I can say about either one of her so called her mamas. I like that."

The two stared each other up and down for several moments. Mame motioned for Edna to come to her. Edna didn't budge. "Come here, child. I ain't gonna' hurt you none."

Reluctantly, Edna dragged her dusty feet along, kicking dry clumps of dirt between the rows of corn. She hung her head down as she walked over to the woman. Mame placed her hands on Edna's shoulders. Edna looked up with the undeniable golden brown eyes of Mame's youngest son.

The words tumbled out of Mame's mouth before she could stop them. "Child, I'm your grandmamma. Your daddy, LL, is my baby boy." Tears glistened in Mame's eyes.

Edna thought to herself that there must be some mistake. She quickly explained to the woman, "My daddy's name is Tom Newkirk not no LL."

Mame was intent on setting the record straight once and for all. "No child. Tom Newkirk, the man you call Papa, ain't your daddy. He's your granddaddy. Miss Raleigh Boy, the woman you call Mama, ain't your Mama. She's your grandma. And Jenny, well I don't rightly know who you think she is, or for that matter, what you calls her. But she's Tom and Raleigh Boy's only child and she's your Mama. Gave birth to you out of

her very own womb, she did. I saw you pop out with these two eyes right here in the middle of this head of mine.”

Seeing the look of confusion on Edna’s face, Mame continued. “You see child, many years ago, my boy LL and Jenny fell in love and got married. LL loved himself some Jenny.” Mame paused reminiscing in the love she had felt in her son for the young woman across the woods.

Edna’s urgent tug pulled Mame out of the trance she had slipped into. She and Edna plopped down on the bank of the cornrow. They nestled underneath the shade of the corn leaves and made themselves comfortable.

Mame took a deep breath and began again. “Not long after they got married, Jenny got pregnant with you. LL couldn’t find no decent work for a man around here so he went to Philadelphia to join his oldest brother, Arthur, who promised to help find him a job. LL found a good paying job and tried to get Jenny to join him so that they could build a life together up North.

“Jenny just flat out refused. Said she couldn’t leave her mama. LL did everything he could short of kidnapping her. Nothing worked. So when you was born, Jenny gave you to Tom and Raleigh Boy to raise. They refused to even let my boy see you. It broke his heart. The times he tried to see you, that ornery-ass grandpa of yours ran him off with his sawed off shotgun. Threatened to kill him, which LL was willing to risk. But when he threatened to kill you and Jenny, LL just plain gave up. He went back to Philadelphia and swore never to return.”

Mame grew quiet. Her thoughts filled her eyes with tears. “It was there that he fell in love with another—a bottle filled with a lady called gin. Said that it made him

cool and hot at the same time. It lured him with the promise of purity as clean as the clearest water. Every swallow of gin that LL gulped made him thirsty for another. It was the only thing that numbed the pain of losing Jenny and his only child, Edna. Took to calling that bottle Ginny. Said if he couldn't have his Jenny, he'd settle for a 'Ginny' that would stay no matter what; that would always comfort him."

CHAPTER 17

The blast of the horn pulled Edna from the memories of her first meeting of her Grandma Mame. Edna looked up to see a deer staring through the windshield. Its big brown eyes looked at them for what seemed like forever. Then it turned on its heels and ran into the woods.

“Wow! That was close.” Charlene breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m sorry for stopping so quickly. I didn’t want to hit that buck and tear my car up. Are you okay?” She turned and looked at Edna.

Edna smiled. “Yes, child. I’m just fine. Now where was I?”

“You were getting ready to tell me how Raleigh Boy got her name.”

Edna snapped her fingers as she remembered what she had started to say before she got sidetracked. “When Mama was just a little girl, she stole snuff from her father’s tin. She got so drunk from it that she fell off of the porch. Her daddy nicknamed her Raleigh Boy after that snuff she had dipped.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Dark settled in around them. Soon they were turning off of Highway 41 onto a narrow dirt road. Edna gave orders to Charlene to park the old Chevy Malibu by a clump of trees. “Careful, child. Don’t want your car to slide down in that there ditch.”

They both climbed out of the car. Their feet squished down into the red clay dirt. Edna led Charlene down a path so narrow that the tall bushes from both sides kept

slapping them in the face. Moisture from the leaves cooled their faces with a refreshing tingle. Though it was dark, shadows of large oak and pine trees loomed over the bushes. Charlene could hear and feel water gushing underneath her feet as they crossed over wooden planks covering the brook that ran the length of the property. Charlene had never been this far out in the woods. She grabbed Edna's hand.

Edna easily navigated the course as she led Charlene up rickety steps. The screen door on the dilapidated house screeched out in anger at having been bothered. Edna quickly lit the kerosene lantern and took Charlene to the bedside of the woman they had come to see.

Charlene's first and only conversation, if it could be called that, with her ninety-year old great-grandmother had been in that shotgun shack hidden in the deep woods of Ironmine. Charlene had been surprised by the urgency in Raleigh Boy's actions. She obediently followed the crook of the wrinkled finger until she felt the old woman's parched lips on her ear. Charlene strained to hear the words that came out of Raleigh Boy's mouth. Those words mystified her even now. "Land where nothing is lacking. Land where iron is as common as stone." Scratchy words had flowed out on the rancid breath of death from its dementia-ravaged messenger. The indelible whisper of Raleigh Boy's very last breath on this earth was left in Charlene's ear. It replayed itself over and over again sometimes to the point of making her want to scream. Instead Charlene covered her ears with both hands until the whisper stopped.

The reflection of the headlights on the sign in the fork of the road pulled Charlene back to the present. She whispered the words on the sign, "Welcome to Ironmine,

Population 120.” Charlene shivered as Raleigh Boy’s words replayed in her head once again.

Her sisters rolled by the sign without even seeing it.

CHAPTER 18

On the drive out to the country, Dora relived her last moments with her dying mother. She had traded knowing glances with Charlene at the doorway. The two sisters embraced with tears of inevitable loss. Charlene gathered her things and left the two of them alone.

Dora stepped into the room finding Edna almost comatose. “Mama. It’s me.” She adjusted her eyes to see the little wave from the bed in the middle of the room. Dora squeezed the waving hand and was startled at how frail her mother had grown in a few short weeks.

Edna squeezed back feebly. The undeniable weakness of this once strong matriarch was heartbreaking.

Dora stood over her mother lovingly stroking her head. She smoothed Edna’s hair with her fingers so that she would always remember the softness of her short curls. Pushing back tears, she took a stab at a half-hearted joke. “Mama, what you won’t do to get me to come back out here?”

Edna squeezed her hand again ever so weakly. The corners of her mouth turned up in a weary smile.

The course of the week was a roller coaster ride for Dora. At times, she wanted to fight Edna to make her want to live. Then there were times when there was no doubt that her mother welcomed the rest that only death could bring.

Looking back over the past year, Dora could clearly see that Edna had been preparing her for this moment. She had whispered to Dora many times, “Do you know how it feels to fight for every breath you take?” Dora helplessly had shaken her head no.

Edna struggled to breathe even with oxygen being artificially pumped through a tube into her nostrils. “I’m tired, Dora Ann. So tired of fighting just to breathe.” She had gasped for air between words.

Over the past two years, Edna had been on the brink of death more than a few times as emphysema ravaged her lungs. Dora had never before faced this struggle. Instead she had fought with her every breath and word to rescue her mother from death’s final clutches.

Dora instinctively knew that this time was different. Edna did not want to be brought back. So if Dora fought, it would be from her selfishness of not wanting to let her mother go. She could not fathom Edna not being there for her.

Worrisome questions flooded Dora’s mind: Who would know her heart and soul as her mother did? Who would love her for simply being herself? Who would tell her about the father she had never known? Who would erase the pain of losing someone so precious?

The answers to those questions and more eluded Dora at every turn. Yet she knew that her selfishness had to stop. She had to find the strength to let her mother go. Dora dropped to her knees by Edna’s bedside and prayed.

“Your will, Father, not my will. Strengthen, lead and guide me to do Your work to Your will and to Your greatest glory. You know the desires of my heart. More

importantly, You know the desires of my mother's heart. Take away my selfish motives. Strengthen me to aid my mother on whatever journey You choose for her. In the name of Jesus. Amen.”

Still on her knees, Dora grasped her mother's hands tightly and looked up at her. God how she loved her! What would she do without her?

Edna slept peacefully. Dora crawled into the twin-sized bed and lay beside her mother. With arms wrapped around Edna's waist, she rocked to comfort her mother or maybe to comfort herself. She fell asleep for the first time in days.

Dora awoke to Edna's staring eyes and peaceful smile. For a moment, her heart beat with hope that Edna was going to recover.

Edna whispered while stroking Dora's face. “Girl, you look just like your Grandma Mame. The older you get the more you look like her. She was a beautiful woman and so are you. I wish you could see just how beautiful you are.”

Lost in memories, Edna grew quiet. After a few moments, she pulled herself back from wherever she had gone. “Listen to me, Dora Ann. You won't understand this now but one day you will. I want you to remember what the Bible says. ‘God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose for them.’ Baby, I know that He's called you to a purpose that you won't fulfill as long as I'm here.”

Edna paused gasping for enough air to continue. “Now He needs you and I need you to go on and do what He's called you to do. Child, right now I'm your savior. Instead of turning to God in your troubles, you turn to me. I can't keep being your savior when God gave us His Son. He's waiting on you, Dora, to turn your whole heart over to

Him.” Out of breath again, with trembling hands Edna adjusted the tube that brought fresh oxygen to her worn out lungs.

Dora tried to quiet her but Edna was determined to say what was on her mind. “Dora Ann, I don’t want you trying to bring me back this time. I’m ready to go. Promise me, you’ll let me go in peace.”

“Oh God, how can I make such a promise?” Dora gasped for air under the weight of her mother’s request. It pressed down on her as if to smother the very life out of her. Suddenly Dora realized that this was her mother’s struggle every second of the day. A light whisper from her heart resonated throughout her body. “Peace be still.”

Tears welled up in her eyes as she nodded yes. With that promise, Edna drifted off in a peaceful sleep.

Dora walked outside breathing in the crisp spring air. Its refreshing smell was exhilarating. She was saddened when she thought of how Edna had been deprived of this simple pleasure for such a long time.

Filled with anguish, she returned to her mother’s room. She had paused in the doorway to gather her strength when she heard strange mutterings of despair. She leaned in closer to hear what Edna was saying.

“Get away!” Edna flailed her arms in the air. Her desperate whispers gripped at Dora’s heart. “Leave my children alone! Take me instead!” Edna frantically fought off someone or something that was invisible to the now frightened Dora. “Jesus! Save my children. Cover them, Father, with the blood of your Lamb.” Edna muttered repeatedly.

By now Dora was frightened out of her wits. “Mama!” Dora shook Edna until she was in a state between awake and sleep. “It’s okay. We’re all okay.”

Edna became agitated. “No you ain’t, Dora Ann! You just don’t understand! You can’t see what I see!”

Suddenly Edna went back to sleep. Her head twisted fitfully from side to side. Her mutters were so low that even when Dora put her ears close to her lips she still could not hear.

Edna spent the rest of the day and night alternating between sleep and bare consciousness. In both states, she continued muttering and flailing her arms. Without warning, Edna’s eyes popped wide open. She announced with certainty, “I’m going to hell!”

Dora was startled by Edna’s sudden consciousness and disturbing revelation. “What are you talking about, Mama?”

Edna repeated emphatically. “I’m going to hell!”

“Mama, why are you saying that?” Concern stretched across Dora’s face.

“Reverend Breedlove said so, that’s why!”

The conviction that her soul was damned to hell rang out loud and clear. Dora was the first person that she had dared tell.

“Mama, why would Reverend Breedlove say such a thing?”

“He told me that I was no good for running around with the likes of Lonnie Mack. I guess I was wrong to talk back to him. I asked him what gave him the right to judge me. Then I told him that no man of God would be running around with Patty Ann leaving his wife and her husband at home! That’s when he damned me straight to those hell fires with the devil looking on laughing at me. I told him that he and Patty Ann would be right there with me.”

Dora was tempted but managed not to laugh. She thanked God for letting her bask one more time in the feistiness that was so much a part of her mother. Dora held onto the moment before turning serious.

“Mama, who is Reverend Breedlove to make such a claim? It’s not his call to make.”

While Dora’s words were of some comfort, Edna still carried the look of a condemned woman on her face.

“Mama, do you want me to pray for you?” Dora gently wrapped her hands around Edna’s bony fingers.

Edna nodded yes.

Dora closed her eyes and first prayed silently to herself. “Father, strengthen me now. Put the words in my heart so that they depart from my lips. Move me Father to do Your work in this time of need.” She rested in silence for a moment and then prayed out loud for her mother.

“Father, here lies Edna, my mother and your child. Not a perfect child but your child just the same. Forgive her of all of her sins. She loves you, Father. Out of her love and faith, she has brought many lambs, including her children, to Your glorious flock. She lays here before You now offering her life and the lives of her children before Your throne. Father, take her into Your arms. Let her hear and feel the certainty of Your heart beating boldly. Let each beat bring her the comfort and peace that only You can deliver. Comfort her in her time of need. Guide her step by step to walk on the glorious path that You have set out only for her. Strengthen her for whatever battles lie ahead. Give her the peace that Your

Son, Jesus Christ, promised us on the cross. Breathe Your healing light into her body, soul and spirit. Just have Your way and Your will with her, not her will, not my will but Your will. We know You to be all knowing, all seeing and all powerful. We place our Trust in You alone. We step out in faith to follow joyfully wherever You lead. We humbly bow ourselves asking for that which is only yours to give. Thank You for all that You have done for us and all that You have yet to do. We accept your command for our lives now on this day and forevermore. We pray this in the all-sufficient name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

A smile escaped Edna’s lips. “Two down one to go.” She went back to sleep knowing that Dora would be okay. Edna was almost ready to finish her journey. She had one more thing to do.

“I ain’t going nowhere until I say good-bye to Nadine. Then and only then will I let that devil drag me on off to hell. I’m going to kick and scream the whole way. He ain’t going to have no easy time getting me into that flaming pit of hellfire. But if it means saving my children, then just come on and get me, you old devil! That don’t mean that I likes it. And it sure don’t mean that I’m going peacefully!”

Nadine never did show up. Dora held the phone to Edna’s ear to hear Nadine’s voice. By the time Dora tracked Nadine down, Edna was too weak to talk. Edna prayed that Nadine would hear her breathing her last good-bye to her.

Ushering her beloved mother into death was the toughest thing that Dora had ever done. She would never forget it. Even now Dora fought the resentment that she felt

towards Nadine for not coming to be by their mother's side. How would she ever be able to forgive her sister?

CHAPTER 19

Nadine switched on the light inside the limo pulling Dora out of her memories. Dora dabbed at her tears.

Night fell quickly around them. It had been years since they had been out this far in the country. They had only been to their cousin's house once and that had been when they were little girls.

In the dark, nothing looked familiar. Not one of them could remember a single landmark until they passed a dirt road. Dora shouted. "Stop! That's it. That's the road that leads to Cousin Ivy Mae's."

Clayton slammed on the brakes and put the limo in reverse. He tried to pull onto the dirt road only to discover that it was too narrow for the limousine. He stopped and switched off the headlights. They could not see their hands in front of their faces.

Clayton secured a flashlight and stepped out of the car. He opened the door and they nervously piled out of the backseat. They trembled as fear took over. Not one of them, including Clayton, wanted to take the first step into the dark abyss. Charlene grabbed her sisters' hands and pulled them forward. "Chicken shits." She squashed the thought before it slipped out of her mouth.

Clayton McGripper did not budge. On the football field, his two hundred seventy pounds of pure muscle smashed through pockets at quarterbacks with speeds unheard of

for a man his size. His grasp was so tortuous that his opponents called him “Clay The Gripper.”

His career had come to an untimely end at the hands of a freak motorcycle accident during the off-season. Unfortunately the terms of his contract were null and void since it expressly forbade him to participate in any extreme activities. With one wrong hit, the vertebrae injury that he had sustained in the accident would result in certain death.

Football had been his life. Even now, he was more than willing to sign a waiver for the chance to continue playing. Not one team in the NFL had been willing to assume that kind of risk bringing Clayton’s future as a NFL Superstar to a quick end. Having spent his entire life preparing to be a football player, he was left with few options. He had taken the job as Nadine’s bodyguard/chauffeur while he tried to figure out what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

“Clayton, are you coming?” Nadine called in that demanding tone she had reserved for him.

“Yeah, on your ass one day you uppity bitch!” As usual, she rubbed him the wrong way. He remembered the time when women like Nadine had fallen all over themselves just to be with him. He needed this gig and so he kept his feelings to himself. Being her bodyguard still allowed him access to the in crowd of sports and entertainment and he liked that. The pay and the perks were pretty good too. Though a pain in the butt, Nadine was quite generous.

“Ladies, I can’t leave the car.” He mustered up enough authority to camouflage his shaky voice. Although Clayton feared no man, from a very young age he had been afraid of the dark. He hid his fear quite well.

“Well, at least give us the flashlight.” Nadine demanded.

He gladly handed it to her and quickly got back in the car.

They thought he was teasing until they heard the heavy thump of the doors locking behind them. Despite putting on brave faces, their hearts sank.

“What a pussy!” Nadine giggled picturing the burly mass of muscles cowering down in the front seat. Her sisters laughed breaking the tension in the air. It was the perfect mask for the fear that gripped their hearts.

Nadine pointed the flashlight at the darkness in their path. The light shone only a few feet ahead of them. Shadowy trees loomed on both sides. A sudden gust of wind blew across the trail. The rustling sound of the leaves enticed them with comforting whispers. Locked arm in arm, they trudged forward bravely.

After walking along uneventfully for a while, a sense of relief washed over them. They finally relaxed. But no sooner than their breathing had returned to normal, the flashlight flickered and then went out. Pitched blackness surrounded them. They could feel but not see one another.

Nadine desperately shook the flashlight. “Rats, what are we going to do now?”

Dora’s voice trembled. “We’re this far. Let’s just keep going.”

“Going where?” Her two sisters shouted in disbelief.

Nadine added, “I can’t see a thing. Let me guess. You suddenly put on your night vision contacts? Thank goodness. Now we don’t have to worry.”

“Cut it out, Nadine. I’ve had just about enough of your mouth for today.” Dora was at her breaking point. She took a deep breath, regained her composure and reasoned with them. “We’ve been walking for a while. We’ve got to be really close.”

“Forever the optimist.” Nadine chided.

“Nadine, go back if you want but Charlene and I are going ahead.” She thrust Nadine’s arm away.

The thought of going back alone was a lot more frightening than going ahead with her two sisters. Nadine desperately grasped for one of her sister’s hand.

As soon as their hands were locked together, the distant hooting of an owl beckoned them. They fell into step in the direction of the sound. As soon as they got close, the sound moved further away. After what seemed forever, Nadine saw a pinpoint of light. They ran towards the light. The light grew larger until they found themselves in front of the little cabin.

“What took y’all so long? I could hear you coming for miles.” Ivy Mae cackled taking a long draw on a corn cob pipe. She gave a couple of chews on the tobacco tucked into her jaw.

“Come on and sit down in one of these here chairs.” She lovingly caressed the arms of the rocker. “These once belonged to your Grandma Mame.” Ivy Mae pulled out her bottom lip and filled it with a lid piled high with Sir Walter Raleigh snuff.

The trio watched in amazement as Ivy Mae smoked her pipe, chewed her tobacco and salivated on her snuff all at the same time.

Dora thought, “Now that gives new meaning to multi-tasking.”

The girls found a spot and made themselves comfortable. When their breathing returned to normal, their heads spun underneath the sweet aroma of honeysuckle and jasmine that hung heavily in the night air.

“Now what brings y’all out here?” Already knowing the answer, Ivy Mae cast a curious eye their way just the same.

Not wanting Nadine to piss their cousin off, Dora spoke up quickly. “Cousin Ivy Mae, we want to know about the curse you mentioned. How could it be true? And why didn’t Mama say something to us about it?”

“You ain’t calling me a liar, now is you, child?” Ivy Mae stood ready to defend her honor.

“No Ma’am. I would never do such a thing. We just want to know how to break the spell. That’s all.” Dora used her most disarming voice hoping to un-ruffle Ivy Mae’s feathers.

Ivy Mae collapsed down in her rocker sighing with regret. “Child, I reckon your Mama didn’t even know about the spell. And if I knew how to break it, you can be sure that I would have told Edna long ago.”

“Oh for God’s sake, then how do you even know that there is a spell?” Nadine’s skepticism refused to be contained.

She stood to leave. “If you don’t know how to break the spell, who does?” Her insolence raised the hair on the back of Ivy’s neck.

Ivy Mae’s glaring eyes pierced through the darkness. She blew so much smoke out of the pipe that it blanketed the entire porch. “For your mama and your grandma’s sake, I’m gonna’ overlook your disrespect. For the record, your Grandma Mame was the

one who told me about it. And she didn't know how to break it. Lord knows with all them tragedies she suffered in her life, if she knew, she would have sure enough long since broke it."

The three sisters, overcome by smoke, began choking and coughing madly. Their coughs turned to gags. When she thought they had had enough, Ivy Mae swished her hand in the air and the smoke quickly dissipated. "That ought to teach them a lesson." Ivy Mae chuckled to herself.

Gasping for air, Dora caught her breath enough to speak. "Cousin Ivy Mae, please forgive Nadine. We're just tired from the long walk."

Both sisters shot Nadine a look that dared her to say another word.

Nadine fumed in silence.

Dora continued. "Maybe it'll help if you just start from the beginning."

Ivy Mae slapped her leg and chuckled out loud. "From the beginning? How much time do y'all have?" She turned serious and warned, "This could take a while."

"Cousin Ivy Mae, we ain't going nowhere no time soon. I wouldn't be caught dead back out there on that dark trail again. It's a miracle we weren't eaten alive by a bear or some other wild creature." Charlene made no bones about how she felt, warning her sisters that if they chose to leave they would do so minus her.

Ivy Mae leaned back in her rocker taking a deep draw on her pipe. Each rock of the chair took her further and further back in time.