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TANGLED ROOTS

A Novel

By

Shelia Benskin

Shelia Benskin
1144 Lakeside Drive
DeSoto, TX 75115
Email: sheliaannb@aol.com
972 230-1509 Home
972 740-9368 Cellular

FOREWORD

The message in this book is simple: No matter how tangled and evil our pasts may be, God still achieves all of His good purposes. Though we anger and grieve Him, He is divinely faithful in the midst of our unfaithfulness. He is always at work bringing good out of evil, light out of darkness, joy out of pain, order out of chaos, and yes, even life out of death.

God's sovereignty does not let us off the hook. He commands His children to love, forgive, operate in unity and have faith in Him and glorify Him as our Creator. It is when we begin operating in these principles that we are restored to the full blessings of His promises.

This novel attacks unforgiveness at three different levels—unforgiveness of others, self and even God. Many women--just like Nadine, Dora and Charlene--are waiting to be set free from the chains of unforgiveness. The triumphant journey of these three sisters will be a blessing to the women who dare to travel with them. It will challenge them to break their own chains of bondage and seek restoration from on High.

Tangled Roots is divided into three parts. At the end of each Part, using the characters as a guide, you will have the opportunity to respond to questions, scriptures and meditations designed to help lead you down the path of forgiveness, redemption, and finally restoration.

While you are encouraged to complete these exercises, it is by no means a requisite. You may choose just to sit back, relax and simply enjoy reading.

Happy & Spirit Filled Reading!

TANGLED ROOTS

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**

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. Stepping inside, tiny particles of light shimmered in her tangled strands setting her head aglow in the dimly lit chapel. Ivy Mae sucked in deeply drawing all of the oxygen from the room and the lungs of all of its occupants. The old woman's birdcage chest expanded like a balloon ready to pop. The temperature dropped a chilling twenty degrees in a matter of seconds.

"That ought to take some of the hot air outta' here." She cackled without releasing her breath.

They weren't sure if it was Ivy Mae's cackle or the sudden drop in temperature. But the hairs raised on the back of necks just the same. The words that were ready to depart lips froze in place. Now uneasy silence hushed the room.

Finally, Ivy breathed out. "That ought'a hold us a while."

Gasping, it was now their turn to suck in. Air tingled all the way down breathing tracts expanding lungs with cool freshness.

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. Her frail one hundred twenty year old body seemed too much of a burden for her to carry. The few times a decade that she graced the town with her presence some brave soul would have the nerve to challenge Ivy Mae about her age.

“Ivy Mae, you’s been a hundred twenty for as long as I’s known you and that’s been over seventy years, give or take. How long you plannin’ on stayin’ a hundred twenty?” A few were heard to say.

Challenger after challenger cowered under her legendary cackle. “Truth be told, I don’t rightly know how old I am. I couldn’t start countin’ from the very day that I was born bein’ that 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 talkin’ 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 sistahs or brothas. Me and my Mammy and Pappy pretty much stayed put on the homestead, wasn’t safe outside these here bound’ries. Back then, wasn’t no tellin’ what could happen to a nigga’ out in that there world. So wasn’t nobody I could ask.”

Ivy Mae pondered the thought more, “Heck, I don’t even know when it was that I started countin’. Sometimes I’d swear that I remember clean back to slavery times. Once I even found myself walkin’ with a whole bunch of Cherokee Indians along mountain trails. Mean lookin’ soldiers itchin’ to kill was takin’ us to a place called Oklahoma Terr’tory.”

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 anythin’ else, don’t ya’ think?”

The response Ivy Mae got always drew a deep chuckle out of her. She had grown to delight in the confusion of her challengers as they rushed away, undeniably frightened out of their wits. Suddenly the weight of the years bore down on her.

“How many mo’ hundreds of years must I tell that story?” With eyes lifted to the heavens, it was obvious that the question was for no one in the room. Just as quickly her lungs raised and then fell in a deep sigh as she shifted her focus back to the shadows of darkness in the cramped quarters.

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 uncustomary 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. Ivy moved between the sisters pausing long enough to take each of their chins between her calloused fingertips. Though she only looked in each sister's eyes for a second, their souls told her everything she needed to know. Ivy Mae's unintelligible mumbles drew frowns of confusion on the face of each of Edna's children.

In blunt reassurance of the elderly, Ivy Mae dropped the bomb. "Y'all was your mama's pride and joy all right. It sure ain't hard at all to see why."

She paused and shook her head slowly. "Um! Um! Um! It's just a low down dirty shame that with all that there beauty, ain't not a one of you ever gonna' keep a man's love. Y'all is just like your mama, your grandmamma, her mama and her mama b'fore her. Ain't never gonna' find true love 'til that there curse is broken."

Nadine, Dora and Charlene gasped. This was the last thing they had expected to hear at their mother's wake. After getting over the shock of the startling announcement, the three 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.

"Ain't no denyin' that I's old but I swear on a stack of these here 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 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 go and 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 go and git yo'self all uppity wit' me, child!" The cane in Ivy's hand elevated slightly from the floor begging to deliver a message to the rebel of a child.

Ivy stroked it gently. "Not now, my friend. Not now." She whispered under her breath.

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 here fools, I mean folks, 'round here but I done glared into that there heart of yours, if you can even call it that. I knew you b'fore you knew yo'self. Better yet, Miss Thang, I done got that there high fa-lutin' mighty ass of yo's out of some messes that you don't want me to talk 'bout, 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 softened her brown eyes to those of Bambi as he innocently wandered through the forest.

"Why Cousin Ivy Mae, whatever do you mean?"

"Child, now I knows that you remember that there 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 rock back and forward unsteadily. She glanced down helplessly trying to control her wobbling ankles under the height of her colorful Jimmy Choo stilettos.

CHAPTER 2

Looking at her feet, Nadine was reminded of the heated exchange between herself and Dora earlier over those very shoes. At the last second she had kicked off the Manolo Blahnik's in favor of the Jimmy's.

"These are a lot more fun." 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 hiking her skirt to ogle over divinely cut thighs. "How many men had declared they were in heaven between these?" Nadine soon gave up at the futility of counting. Her long tongue swiped across her lips as it had so many bodies so many times. She was overtaken by a lustful daydream.

Dora's nagging over correct etiquette pulled Nadine away from her favorite spot and favorite pastime.

"Nadine, tell me you're not going to wear those 'CFM's' to Mama's wake." Dora blurted making no attempt to hide her displeasure at her sister's attire.

"Stop being such a prude, Dora!" Nadine eyed Dora from head to toe in equal 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.

“Maybe I should change into the black silk blouse?” Dora pondered out loud. “The ivory might be a little much.” She glanced her sister’s way for advice. “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 the first welt popped out on her tummy. She scratched it and reached for her Benadryl.

“Oh, please God, not now!” She whispered as she swallowed the capsules without the aid of any liquid. Within seconds, her senses dulled.

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

Dora’s attempts to downplay her God-given beauty were yet another source of irritation for Nadine. No matter how much beauty advice Nadine gave her, Dora refused to listen.

“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.

If Nadine hadn’t been so jealous, it would have been comical to watch Dora trying to mask her God-given beauty. It always backfired. The harder Dora tried to hide the more her

beauty shined through. It had taken years for Nadine to realize that looks were the last thing on Dora's mind.

Nadine shook her head bewildered why God had gypped her and wasted such beauty and elegance on Dora.

"P-l-e-e-z!" Her eyes rolled up as she flustered under her envy. "That child sure ain't never gonna' use them."

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. Make-up and costumes helped too.

Even so, Nadine's envy beast reared out of control every time she 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!" She touched up her lipstick.

"You know Dora, it ain't easy being sleazy but it's a lot of fun!" Stars of mischief sparkled in Nadine's eyes.

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 silky skirt grazing against the silk on her legs. Silk against 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 white 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 mirror.

CHAPTER 3

Self-control was the one thing in Dora's life that had never let her down. 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 how to turn on the heat in her furnace that now resembled a freezer more with each ticking second. Though Dora knew something was out of kilter in her life, she would never in a million years admit that Jacoby was the missing link. Admitting that would force her to face the role she played in their break up. She wouldn't—no, couldn't--face that. She'd rather be painted red from head to toe and tossed into a ring of raging bulls. Nevertheless, whether she was willing to admit or not, without Jacoby, 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. The eve before her mother's funeral found her 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.

She didn't even lose her cool when she found Paul in their bed with her admin assistant. That one look from Dora—the one that made even the most lion-hearted VPs shrink in their size ten wingtip Florsheim's--let Becky know that there was no point in going back to the office.

Dora almost felt sorry for Becky. It had been Becky's Alice in Wonderland innocence that had landed her the job as Dora's assistant. The blond hair and blue eyes had kept Dora's bosses in heat. It was amazing the information they had shared with Becky that later found its way to Dora's ears.

"Foolish child, she had such potential." Dora had sighed sadly. "Too bad she lost her job over that "Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde" ass bastard."

Truth be told, Paul was hard to resist and his persistence was relentless. Women, a lot more sophisticated than Becky, had unsuspectingly found themselves caught in his net, Dora included.

Nevertheless, she coolly dismissed Becky from her mind, and job, relieved to finally have a catalyst to make her do what she always wanted to do but never dared—file for divorce. Paul was a fighter and didn't just roll over. He fought her tooth and nail over everything.

Dora had thought that he would be glad to leave their house in Frost Farms. He had done nothing but complain about being in the upscale neighborhood in DeSoto, a suburban community about 15 miles south of Dallas.

“Too many Blacks.” He grumbled.

Dora was appalled at his statement and reacted before she had time to think about it.

“Newsflash, Paul! In case you haven’t looked in the mirror lately, we’re Black also.”

Dora quickly recovered from her untimely spontaneity. Breathing in, she gathered her composure under the realization that unless staying in DeSoto somehow became Paul’s idea, they would be moving in short order.

“Besides Paul, honey, you always said that this area is the best kept secret for Black folks in this country. Not even Atlanta has Black folks living like this.”

Appealing to his ego assuaged his desire to move for a while but somehow it always came back up. Dora stopped counting the times that he had threatened to sell their comfortable estate in the exclusive gated community of Regents Park so that they could move to Highland Park.

“That’s a much more suitable place for people like us.”

He had done everything in his power to convince her that they deserved to be with the crème de la crème of the White Dallas society that resided in Highland Park. It was the one thing that Dora refused to bend on with Paul. So when her divorce attorney told her that Paul wanted the house in Frost Farms, she was completely taken by surprise.

Out of spite, Dora told her attorney, “Just give it to him.”

Then she turned around and bought a home in Highland Park that very same day. When Paul found out about it, he was so furious with her that he rammed his big black Mercedes into her BMW. He had the nerve to tell the cops that he had lost control of his vehicle.

“Lost control my ass!”

Dora sat crumpled down in her bashed in silver 750IL struggling to control the vehemence that scratched and clawed at her throat. She bit down so hard on her tongue it started bleeding.

“The only thing he’s lost control over is his mind and his dick.” It took every ounce of her willpower not to scream out her thoughts.

“You all right, Mam?” One of DeSoto’s finest tapped on her window.

She managed a weak smile as she lowered the window.

“I’m fine officer. Thank God for airbags. It probably saved both of our lives.”

“Too bad.” Dora thought. “It would have been too sweet collecting on that asshole’s insurance policy.”

Dora imagined herself laughing all the way to the bank with the two million dollar check in hand. She was sure that Paul would have rolled over in his grave as she gave every cent of the money to her church, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship.

“You sure you’re all right, Mam?” The officer was alarmed at the blood that had found its way to the corner of Dora’s mouth.

Dora glanced in the rearview mirror.

“Guess I must have bitten my tongue in all of the excitement.”

She grabbed a tissue from her purse and wiped away the blood. Now her tongue began to throb.

The fresh rain that had fallen moments before the accident made Paul's story plausible. He and Dora knew the truth. No one quite believed Paul's malarkey. But no one could prove otherwise.

Paul hadn't escaped as easily as Dora. His leg had jammed on impact. When he stepped out of the car, he all but collapsed underneath the pain. Being Mr. Macho, he refused to let them call an ambulance. Later that night, the pain was too much for him to bear. Dora actually felt sorry for him and took him to the emergency room. His Achilles' tendon had been damaged. Surgery was the only way to fix it.

Though Dora had already filed for a divorce, she couldn't just leave Paul hobbling around on his crutches. He was all but helpless or so she thought. It was the first time since they had married that Paul seemed to really need her. And he was actually cordial.

Edna was there with them. Dora had begged her mother to come for a short stay with her in Texas, at least until the divorce was final. Reluctantly, Edna had obliged her.

While she never said anything against Dora's husband, he certainly wouldn't have been the one she would have picked for her daughter. He definitely wasn't the one in the recurring dreams she had about Dora's perfect mate.

Paul was a little too pretentious for Edna's taste. It didn't help that he seemed ashamed of her and of Dora's humble beginnings. He failed to see the triumph in Dora's journey out of poverty. Every chance he got he found a way to minimize Dora's successes.

"Well if this is who Dora plans on spendin' the rest of her life with, who am I to throw poison darts and try to stand in her way. At least she ain't shackin' up with him."

Edna sighed sadly thinking of Nadine's "ungodly" living arrangements.

Dora and Edna had just brought Paul home from the hospital. It had been a long day so Edna had retired to her room leaving Paul and Dora alone in the kitchen.

As soon as Edna had disappeared, tears welled up in Paul's eyes.

"Dora, how can I ever thank you? I've been such a fool." Now the tears dripped profusely down his face. He leaned on his crutches for support.

"You know I love you. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Paul, there's no need for thanks. And there's no need to worry. I forgave you a long time ago." Dora assured him.

He breathed out in relief.

"You did?"

"Yes, Paul, I did. I'm not angry at you anymore."

"Oh honey, you don't know how happy that makes me. I'll call my attorney tomorrow with the good news."

"Good news?" Dora looked at him incredulously.

"Don't worry, Dora. I'll take of everything. You don't know how happy you've made me by agreeing to call off the divorce."

A frown creased Dora's forehead. She chose her words carefully and delivered them slowly.

"Paul, I'm not calling off the divorce."

"But you said....."

Before he could finish his sentence, she interrupted him.

"I said that I forgive you. That's got nothing to do with our divorce. Let me be perfectly clear, I am not calling off the divorce."

“Dora, please reconsider. I’m begging you. I can’t lose you. Not now.”

“Paul, I’m sorry. I can’t. We both need to cut our losses and move on with our lives. We don’t want the same things out of life. Can’t you see that we’re blocking each other’s blessings? I don’t know about you but I, for one, am tired of having my blessings blocked. Besides, we don’t even like each other.”

“But Dora, I love you. I know I’ve made some bad choices, honey. But just give me one more chance. I swear you’ll never be sorry. We can go to counseling. We can do whatever you want. But please, just don’t leave me. Don’t go through with this divorce.”

Dora’s voice dropped to an adamant whisper. Her head tilted in trademark stubbornness.

“Paul, I don’t love you. I can’t imagine spending another day of my life with you as my husband.”

Paul’s blood rushed to his head. He dropped his crutches. On one leg, he hopped Dora’s way at warp speed. Reaching her, he grabbed her by the neck and began to try to squeeze the life out of her.

Dora screamed. Hearing the ruckus, Edna rushed down the hallway with Ethel Mae gleaming in her hands.

“Lord Jesus, let me use this wit’ the might of Gideon.”

Paul dropped his grip from Dora’s neck long enough for her to get away. His mouth flew open in shock as he stared at the butt-naked body of Edna running towards him with switchblade drawn for action. She wielded it with the might of a fierce warrior engaged in a battle of life and death.

Dora grabbed Edna's arm seconds before it came down across Paul's face. The two women ran into a bedroom and dialed 911. In moments, the grounds were swarming with DeSoto's finest.

"Mam, do you want to press charges?" It was the same officer that had tapped on her window at the scene of the accident just a few weeks before. Dora hoped in vain that he didn't recognize her.

It came out as a whisper. "I don't know."

Another one of the officers led Paul away and talked with him. Dora overheard Paul's conversation with the policeman.

"Man, they're just lying. How am I supposed to be able to do what they said on these crutches?"

The officer's voice was too low for Dora to hear. But when he finished talking, Paul grimaced and hobbled out of the house with his arms trembling on his crutches.

The event had landed them in the news. Feeling like the laughing stock of the town and at work, Dora all but came a recluse--not good for business. It was important for her to be out in the business community and out with her team. When she was at work, she now hid behind closed doors instead of making the rounds with clients and employees. The results in her division had begun to slip for the first time since she had taken over.

The nasty battle of her divorce was leaving Dora vulnerable at work, or so many of her colleagues had thought. One had tried to maneuver to take over her division.

"Until this mess blows over." He had told executives at company headquarters in New Jersey.

Dora had gotten wind of it through a long time mentor and trusted advisor.

A call to her would have been no surprise. He usually checked in on her every month.

But a personal visit was out of the ordinary. At most, they saw each other once year and that had only been a couple of months ago.

Dora welcomed Don into her office. Though alarmed at his visit, she was always pleased to see the silver haired fox.

“Don, you’re looking more dapper than ever?”

“Dora, you are good for my ego. Flattery will get you everywhere.” He teased.

“On a more serious note, Dora, what’s this business about you being under so much stress that you can no longer handle your division?”

“What the hell are you talking about Don?” Dora couldn’t hide her shock.

“Well, Dora, that’s exactly what Mike Cappelli is going around telling everybody. He’s fast becoming your knight in shining armor, if you get my drift.”

“I do, Don. And you know we can’t have that. You’re my only knight in shining armor.” She blew him an adoring kiss from across the desk.

He reached out and grabbed it and plastered it to his heart.

“I know and don’t you forget it.”

With that he stood and walked towards the door. Though he was twenty years her senior in his early fifties, the confident stride on his well-stocked body was a sight to be seen.

Dora’s heart pounded in her throat.

“If he wasn’t married, boy, could I chew on that for a while.” Her knees weakened at the thought.

Quickly she dismissed her wayward longings and got busy. She called an emergency division wide teleconference and launched the latest program that she had been working on. Her team, glad to see her from behind closed doors, rallied behind her.

The move took Mike completely by surprise. Within a month, the results had propelled her division back on top in the national rankings. She was riding high again, leaving poor Mike behind in a trail of dust.

She graciously accepted his congratulatory call without an ounce of animosity or vengeance towards him. Her calm demeanor left him wondering and guessing if she had even known about his plans to dethrone her.

Now if only she could find a way to handle Nadine with such cool disposition, she would be set. Instead, regardless of the many breathing techniques Dora employed around her big sister, Nadine was still the only person who sent her reeling out of control. With the slightest look or one simple word of disapproval, Dora dived into a kamikaze tailspin of doubt. 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, now 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 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.

(Note: This is a prologue and should be italicized.)

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 goin’ you motha’ flocka’?” Nadine moved her doll’s head up and down in a talking motion.

“You stinkin’ son-of-a-pitch that ain’t none of your business.” Dora had replied for her doll.

Edna had been passing by the room when she heard what sounded like foul words in her children’s voices. She stopped and stood at the door listening unsure of where the girls had learned such language. She had always been careful not to curse around them. Although she had to admit that every now and then the “s” word might slip out and sometimes the “h” word and not as often the “d” word. While thoughts of more daring profanity screamed in her mind, it rarely slipped out of her mouth. The few times that it had was because she had been driven to total outrage.

Soon Edna had an ear full and could take no more.

“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.

(Note: End of prologue)

Even now, with just the thought, they smacked their lips under the tart taste of that soap. The white paste coating their mouths had refused to go away without a fight. They had drunk glass after glass of water to rinse the taste and paste out of their mouths. To their surprise, it had only exacerbated the situation. They could still feel the bubbles foaming in and tickling their mouths. Bubbles floated out and up into the air with every word that they had tried to speak. For more than a few minutes, they had felt like human bubble machines.

Eyes nervously darted around the room waiting for the ghost of their mother. When Edna didn't show up to scare the beejeebers out of them, their giggles were uncontrollable. Soon giggles turned into uncontrollable laughter, the kind that used to make Grandma Jenny pee in her pants. With that thought, they doubled over in laughter.

Soon their minds drifted to how funny Edna would have found this whole scene. 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 one of them talking to her or even thinking about her for that matter. Not once had one of them missed her then. Now each found herself imprisoned in loneliness for Edna. Each second ticking away heightened the despair.

CHAPTER 6

A prickle on the back of Nadine's neck alerted her that she had drifted off into one of her daydreams. She whisked around on her heels to face the intense stares of Ivy Mae. Now every hair on Nadine's body stood out stiff. Her satiny mane no longer flowed around her shoulders. Instead it spiked out like porcupine quills. On trembling legs, Nadine 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 raised her cane to clobber Nadine over the head. "Father, let me teach this here lil' hellcat a lesson she ain't never gonna' forget. Your word says 'spare the rod and spoil the child.' Too much sparin' done gone on with this here child and I's ready to set her straight once and for all. Just say the word, Father! Just say the word!" She pleaded loudly with her eyes peeled towards the heavens. Everyone, except Dora, took two steps back.

Though it was tempting to let Ivy Mae knock some sense into Nadine, Dora quickly decided against it. "I don't want Mama's wake turning into the usual circus of Black folks showing out." She reasoned to herself as she graciously inserted herself between Nadine and Ivy

Mae. A warm hug wrapped Ivy in the reverence that she justly deserved. “Cousin Ivy Mae, thank you for coming. Come, sit here with us.”

Ivy Mae lowered her cane slowly but not before sneering at Nadine through tightly squinted eyes. The angry slits lingered long enough to hit its target. Satisfied that it had delivered a zinger, the sweetest of smiles graced Ivy’s face as she let Dora usher 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 to rest 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 come 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’s 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 was left 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. “Oh, no she didn’t! 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 their own lives 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. Between wails she shouted, "Lord Jesus, why you done gone and took my best friend!"

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 wouldn't even let me put his name on them childrens' birth certificate. Threatened to kill my ass if I did. He would'a done it too. Said weren't nary one of them childrens his. Lies he told. God rest his soul in hell!" 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.

(Note: This is a prologue and should be italicized.)

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 piping hot peanut oil 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 uncontrollable 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 out of control 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 leavin' a fine catch like Johnny down here all by hisself. That girl had to know she was askin' 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.

(Note: This is a prologue and should be italicized.)

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. She had rushed out of the sanctuary and contributed everything in her belly to the church grounds. “Don’t reckon that’s an acceptable tithe.” She chuckled to herself relieved that the bubbling and boiling in her stomach was gone.

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.

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.

(Note: Prologue ends.)

CHAPTER 11

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 that 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 unlike 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 Highway 117 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."

With that thought, instantly Nadine was back in the cafeteria at Wallace-Rose Hill High with lunch tray in hand. She was starving and had spent her last dollar on cold French fries and a shriveled slice of cheese pizza. Although most of the white kids complained about the food, it was a big departure from the fatback, collard greens, cornbread and butter beans and okra that Nadine and most of the other Black kids in town were used to eating. Nadine's mouth watered at just the thought of chowing down on the delectable treats. She looked down at her tray.

"Rats, I forgot my ketchup."

Turning quickly, she crashed headlong into Butch Blanchard, the burly star linebacker of the Wallace-Rose Hill Bulldogs. Nadine had often looked at him and thought that there was a striking resemblance to their school mascot.

Butch's face flamed to the color of his spiked red hair. His freckles all but disappeared in the scarlet mass of his mug. Nadine shrank back. She thought for sure that he was going to send

her sprawling across the cafeteria as he had so many receivers on the football field. She braced herself for impact. Instead, giant hands reached out and steadied her. She had never felt so safe. She mouthed a grateful “thank you” to him. His massive head nodded gently as he moved to the table with his football buddies.

Nadine took a few steps. Just as she passed by the cheerleader table, Beth Ann “accidentally” stuck her leg out. With no hands to steady her, Nadine found herself sprawled out on the cafeteria floor along with her French fries and pizza. Beth Ann and her gang roared out in laughter as they formed a circle around her.

With a snug smirk, Beth Ann knelt down inches from Nadine’s face.

“Best keep your paws off of one of ours, you black heffa’.”

She did the “white girl thing” whipping her long blonde hair around. She let it serve as her compass as she walked away in the direction of the last strand of her enviable locks.

“To hell with BethiLocks today! That bitch is goin’ down!” The thought thundered between Nadine’s ears.

Rushing blood propelled her to her feet. Her fists balled in a tight knot ready to punch Beth Ann’s lights out. Before she could take her first swing, Mr. McBride had planted himself between them. Though she had planned revenge on Beth Ann, the opportunity never presented itself to take her down. Instead she struck in a place that hurt even more.

David Welch was “the” senior. Captain of the football, basketball and tennis teams. He was the catch of the town. And lucky little Beth Ann had dibs on him. Or so she thought.

It just so happened that Grandma Jenny was the Welch’s housekeeper. She had all but raised David who lovingly called her “Aunt Jenny.” As a youngster, the first time she heard

David refer to her grandmother that way had confused Nadine. She tugged on Grandma Jenny's hand-stitched apron.

“What is it child?”

“Grandma Jenny, why that white boy call you Aunt Jenny? Is he our kinfolk?”

Jenny chuckled under her breath. “No child, he ain't our kinfolk. That's just white folks' way of callin' themselves treatin' you wit' respeck wit' out givin' you respeck, that's all.”

“Huh?” Nadine was more confused than ever.

“Never you mind, child. Now go on out yonder and play.”

Nadine didn't need to be told more than once. She scampered off forgetting all about her question.

After the incident with Beth Ann, Nadine made it a point to trek up Highway 117 North to the Welch's every afternoon to walk the mile home with her grandmother.

“Don't want you out here alone, Grandma Jenny. No tellin' what might happen to you.”

Nadine made sure she wore her shortest skirt or shortest shorts. Her legs and booty did not go unnoticed by David. Every time she caught him staring at her like a hungry wolf, she slowly licked her tongue across her lips ending with an inviting smile. Then she'd turn and walk away making sure he got a good view of her assets.

When David couldn't stand it any more, Nadine arranged to meet him. He was her practice field. The things they learned together still gave Nadine chills. More importantly, it worked. David's interest in Beth Ann all but disappeared. He was awestruck, or some would claim pussy-whipped, by Nadine. He even wanted Nadine to marry him.

Snuggled up to David, Nadine gave it serious consideration, that is, until she started getting answers she didn't like to her questions. She had curled up close to him with their heads

touching. His blonde strands tickled her forehead. She shifted on the blanket they had laid out in front of his candy red Corvette. Deep in his blue eyes the ferocity of his love startled her. Not one to shrink away, Nadine was determined to get answers.

“Tell me, Babe, where will we live?” She imagined herself as mistress over the Welch mansion.

“Who cares? As long as we have each other?”

Nadine’s antennae went up. She pressed on.

“Seriously, David. Where will we live? I mean, we will be living there at the mansion, right?”

The milky smooth skin on his face turned beet red.

“What’s wrong?” Nadine was now on full alert.

“Nadine, honey. You’ve gotta’ understand. My folks are still pretty ole’ fashion. There’s no way they’d let us spend a single night under their roof.”

She couldn’t hide her shock.

Everyone in the tri-county area knew that David was the apple of his mother’s eye. There was nothing Becky Welch would deny her baby boy. It was a well-known fact around town that she had already chosen him over his older siblings to take over the family business once he graduated from college. Even if his father had objected, it was clear who wore the pants in that family. Becky’s father had turned the reigns of his poultry enterprise over to her before David was born. She had taken the deteriorating business and made it one of the top enterprises in the state. It was known that what Becky wanted, Becky got. She had been grooming David since he was a babe in her womb. He not only inherited his mother’s blonde hair, blue eyes and business tenacity, he also had a double dose of her dogged determination and stubbornness.

Finally, words sputtered out of Nadine's mouth.

"David, you can't be serious."

"I'm serious all right. Mama keeps droppin' these lil' hints at the dinner table every nite."

Nadine got a glimpse of his sense of loss by the forlorn look in his eyes.

Quickly, he smiled. "But none of that matters, my darlin'. What matters is that we'll be togetha'. For richer or poorer, in sickness and in health."

She dare not look him in the eyes for fear her thoughts would betray her.

"To hell with that for richer poorer crap. I doin' the poor thing right now and, trust me, it ain't the life for me."

Mustering up a smile, she managed, "David, surely they'll change their minds when they see how happy we are."

"Fat chance! We'll be lucky to get out of this alive." He blurted out before he could stop himself.

"What? What are you talkin' 'bout, David?"

"Nadine, I don't want to scare ya' but there's been talk. Face it, folks 'round town just ain't too keen 'bout us. And I ain't just talkin' 'bout white folks either."

"What! In this day and age? You've got to be kiddin'."

The look on David's face told her he was anything but kidding.

"Since we're bein' open and honest 'bout this Nadine, I need to tell you everything."

"You mean that ain't all."

"No. I just owe it to you to tell you that when we get married, we're out, I mean completely out, of my family. I'll be disinherited."

“What? They can’t do that. Can they?”

Nadine’s dreams of being queen bee of town were growing dimmer by the moment. The small theatre built in the center of town with the Welch’s money floated further and further away from her eyes. Being the star in her very own stage productions went flying out the window. Now all she could see was being stuck in some trailer park with David, a house full of barefoot snotty nose kids and a hunting dog named Petey. This wasn’t her dream. That was not how her life was supposed to turn out—love or no love. While she did love David, this was becoming a lot more, or less, than she had bargained for.

The next day Nadine was walking from downtown when an ambulance screamed by. There was something about those sirens that made chills run up and down her spine. She quickly dismissed her feelings and hurried home. David would be picking her up after football practice in less than an hour.

Nadine waited in their usual spot. She had arrived a few minutes late and was surprised not to see David’s corvette. This was the first time he hadn’t beaten her there. She leaned against the tall oak and waited. Her heart sank as each moment ticked away without David showing up. Finally after waiting over an hour, Nadine huffed away determined to give David a piece of her mind.

“Too bad!” She relished in the thought of giving David the tongue lashing of his life and not the one he was used to getting all over his body either.

“And to think he could’a had a piece of this instead.” She lovingly reached her hands into the cutout pockets of her jeans and stroked herself between the legs.

Several hours passed and Nadine still hadn’t heard from David. Her fury intensified. She was tempted to call his house but knew better. Grandma Jenny’s warnings rang in her ears.

“So help me God, Nadine Louise Early, if you makes me lose my good-payin’ job up there at the Welch’s, hell is gonna’ be too good for yo’ hot ass. I’s done tole’ ya’ to leave that there boy alone. Miss Becky ain’t ‘bout to let some lil’ high falutin’ pickaninny into them lily white halls of hers. Best be listenin’ to me if you knows what’s good for ya’. And I better not ever hear talk of ya’ callin’ up there askin’ for Mr. David. Understand me, child?”

That, of course, didn’t mean that David couldn’t call her. Since Nadine was usually the one that answered the telephone, Grandma Jenny was never the wiser. The few times Dora had tried to answer the phone, razor sharp eyes from Nadine had all but sliced her hand off.

Sure that David would get around to calling, Nadine set out on a vigil beside the old black dial up phone. She was sure they were the only ones in the entire U.S.A. that still had a telephone with a dial and not the buttons. There was no way to be discreet when using that phone. The echo of the dial going around its circle announced every number being dialed throughout the house, not to mention that it took forever just to dial a number.

“Child, ain’t nuthin’ wrong wit’ that there phone. Still works don’t it!” Grandma Jenny was adamant about not replacing it with one with a touchtone keypad.

Nadine glanced at the cat clock as his one remaining eye swept noisily from side to side. It was after midnight and not likely that David would call at that hour. She finally fell asleep.

“Nadine, you best be gittin’ yo’ sleepy ass on up, child, and git ready for school. School bus is gonna’ be here in no time at’all and it sho’ ‘nuff ain’t gonna’ be burnin’ up its gas waitin’ on yo’ lazy ass.” Grandma Jenny’s gruff commands awoke her from a deep sleep.

Nadine’s head snapped forward.

“Ouch.” The slobber from her mouth had her face glued to the green vinyl sofa.

Her first priority of business when she got to school was to give David a piece of her mind. She had carefully pulled on a tight short skirt and halter top just to make sure he got a glimpse of what he had missed out on last night.

No white kids rode her school bus. As soon as she stepped off of the bus, she noticed the hushed buzzing and grim looks on the faces of the white kids. Though she was curious, she had more pressing business to attend to. She stood by David's locker waiting for him.

The look on everyone's face as they passed her had changed from the normal contempt to something she couldn't quite put her fingers on.

"Why's everybody lookin' all sad? Like somebody died or somethin'?" She finally blurted out.

Beth Ann happened to be at her locker a few doors down. She turned to Nadine with tears in her eyes.

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard? Heard what?"

Beth's voice dropped down to a whisper. Nadine moved in closer to hear what she was saying.

"About David. He's in the hospital. They don't know if he's gonna' live or die. For sure, he'll never walk again."

"What? Beth Ann that ain't funny. Stop your lyin'."

Tears streaming down Beth Ann's face told Nadine the truth just before her world went black.

That afternoon, Butch Blanchard made it a point to find Nadine. Tears streamed down his face.

“I’s so sorry, Nadine. I didn’t mean to hurt’im. I just did what I always do. I’ll do anything to make it up to you, to him. Anything.”

Now he was on his knees with his face buried in her thighs. Her sweet smell was intoxicating.

“Damn,” he thought. “No wonder David is stir crazy ‘bout her.”

Butch was torn by guilt as blood rushed to his head and other body parts. Afraid that Nadine would feel his hardness against her leg, he let her go so quickly that she rocked backwards slightly. Lustful thoughts were well disguised by his nonstop tears.

Nadine was stunned and just stood there stiffly as the other kids from the bus stop looked on in shock. Somehow, she gathered her composure.

“Take me to him.” Nadine demanded.

She hopped into the cab of his pickup and they sped off.

At the hospital, Butch cleared the path for Nadine as he had done so many times on the football field. Only this time, the path led straight to David’s room. Becky was startled to look up and see the fellow who had put her son in this condition. She was incensed when Nadine stepped from behind him.

“The both of you get the hell on out of here! Haven’t you done enough damage to my boy?”

She turned her attention back to David who lay in a coma.

“Miss Becky, wit’ all due respect, I ain’t leavin’ til I see David for myself.”

“Well he don’t want to see you!”

The two sets of feuding eyes locked in a daring gaze, each owner as determined as the other to have her way. Movement caught their attention from the corner of their eyes. Butch was glued in place stuttering and pointing to David.

Nadine and Becky turned in the direction of Butch's finger. David's eyes fluttered open. His lips moved in what looked like the struggle of his life. Beads of perspiration formed on his forehead. Finally one word came out in a desperate whisper.

"Nadine." He breathed and collapsed back in exhaustion.

Tears welled up in his eyes and then spilled over filling his ears.

Becky rang the bell for the nurse who cleared the room.

Within days David was talking and made it very clear that Nadine was who he wanted with him most. At first, Becky Welch was furious and resisted. However, even she could see that Nadine was having a miraculous effect on David's recovery. And what Becky wanted most was for David to get back as close as possible to normal.

"If I have to put up with that lil' annoyin' black bitch, then that's just what I'll have to do. It's a small price to pay. After my boy's well, there'll be time enuf' to take care of Nadine. She might have them claws of hers knee deep in my boy now. But I do intend to de-claw that lil' hellcat. Best of all, that foolish child will never be the wiser."

Becky was as certain about her plan to get rid of Nadine as she had been about making their facilities state of the art in poultry production and that had made them millions. She had already put things in motion and in a few short months, Nadine would be like a mouse in front of a large block of cheddar.

"It's perfect, just perfect!" Becky clapped in glee.

“Nadine will get what she really wants and I will have my David back. It’s just perfect if I do say so myself.”

Becky was hardly able to contain the self-satisfying smirk from spreading across her face.

The limousine stopping at one of the two traffic lights in town pulled Nadine from her trip down memory lane. She glanced out of the window to wave at her adoring fans. Her mouth dropped open. She couldn’t believe her eyes. She rubbed them just to make sure she wasn’t imagining things.

Stepping out of a big black Mercedes was none other than Becky Welch looking as stately and elegant as ever.

“How old is that bitch now?” Nadine wondered.

Tempted to roll down the window and spit on her, Nadine imagined a huge wad of her spit landing in Becky’s well groomed fading blonde hair.

“It should be that bitch in the grave instead of David.” Tears stung Nadine’s eyes.

Up until now, Nadine thought that she had put those feelings behind her. Upon seeing Becky Welch, raw grief and guilt came crashing down on her all over again. Her heart filled with the same bitterness and anger that she had felt at David’s funeral.

When it had been her turn to say goodbye to David, Nadine walked slowly down the aisle of the First Presbyterian Church dressed from head to toe in pure white. She stood in front of David’s open casket. Her heart felt as if it would burst out of her chest.

With trembling hands and tears streaming down her face, she placed one white rose across David’s heart. Leaning in close, she whispered in his ear.

“You take the best of what my love will ever be with you, my love. I will never again love as I have loved you. There can never be another first as you were. There will never be another you.”

Overcome by her emotions, Nadine reached into the coffin and shook David by the shoulders.

“How could you take your life, David? How could you leave me like this? I won’t, I can’t let you go!”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when she let go of David’s shoulders. But to the shock of everyone, she hiked up the tight lacy skirt and tried to crawl into the casket with David. Had it not been for Butch grabbing her just before the casket toppled over, she would have made it.

Becky and her family walked away in disgust.

“That bitch has made my son’s funeral a mockery--a pure circus with those silly over-dramatic theatrics of hers. And she calls herself an actress. Based on her performance today, I’d say she couldn’t act her way out of a Cracker Jack box.” Becky was heard saying all over town.

It was bad enough that Becky had manipulated Nadine by making sure that she got a full-ride to Julliard. To ridicule her talent made the unforgivable “unforgiveable” times infinity.

Nadine pushed back the tears and the memories. She turned her attention back to the crowd lining the highway.

“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?”

Nadine hated riding on freeways and insisted on taking the scenic route back to their beach cottages on Carolina Beach. The few lodging establishments in town were out of the question as were the houses of friends and relatives.

“Not enough privacy.” Nadine haughtily 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 out the window.

“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 plain 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. “Child, 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, best of all, 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 Dallas” 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.

Dora had sided with their mother.

“Nadine, why in the world do you want to shack up with that man? Mama’s right, you know. Why should he buy the cow if he can get the milk for free?”

Nadine’s face flushed as her mind turned to the lustful deeds of the night before with Cameron.

“Child the way that man lays it on me, or I should say in me, I say Moo, fucking, Moo anytime!”

That comment had sent Dora blustering off with Nadine’s laughter following her every step of the way.

Now Nadine’s attention turned back to Edna.

“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. Nadine couldn't wait to get that ring on her finger so that she could shove it in Dora's face.

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 with full irritation blazing out.

“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 superstitious mumbo jumbo 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.

Charlene was seconds away from letting Nadine in on her juicy little secret. She positioned her hands on her hips and tilted her head to the side.

“Well, yo’ man thought so last week, Bitch!”

Before Charlene could spit the words out, Dora had pounced on her between clenched teeth.

“Mama just didn’t believe in taking crap off of no man. She taught us that it wasn’t nothing wrong with being a strong Black woman. And if some man had a problem with that, then he wasn’t worth dealing with. Maybe you could learn from that.”

Dora and Nadine “high fived” each other directly in front of Charlene’s face.

“Y’all thinks y’all’s the victors and you ain’t nothin’ but victims just like every other Black person in this country. Willie Lynch was right! Looks like his methods are sure ‘nuf’ lastin’ three hundred years. Judgin’ by you two it may even last for thousands.”

Seeing the confusion on her sisters’ faces was quite satisfying. The mood shifted. Charlene was now riding high.

“Who the hell is Willie Lynch?” Now it was Dora and Nadine’s turn to be suspicious.

“You mean, y’all don’t know?” Charlene held her hand to her chest feigning shock.

“Why don’t you just school us?” Nadine was the first to nibble.

“You’re kiddin’ right? You mean you two never read the Willie Lynch Letters?”

Charlene was shocked that her Black History major in college was finally going to pay off. If she never did anything else with it, teaching her sisters this lesson was worth the time and money spent on a major that she now couldn’t get a job in—not even teaching.

The slump in Charlene’s back disappeared. She straightened with the grace and length of a ballerina. The authoritative smile of a scholar was glued on her face.

“Willie Lynch was a plantation owner from the West Indies who came to Virginia, I think in 1712, to teach southern slaveholders how to tame their slaves. What he taught them was raw beyond belief. It was mind control out of control.

“He told them not to hang insolent slaves. They were far too valuable of a commodity for that. Instead he taught them how to ‘break their minds cause if you break their minds their bodies will follow.’

“Seems to me just lookin’ and listenin’ to the two of you, his tactics are still hard at work. Let me break it down for you two Sistahs.”

Suddenly right before their eyes, Charlene whole body metamorphosed into that of the infamous plantation owner.

“I quote Mr. Willie Lynch himself on how to break a slave:

“Take the meanest and most restless nigga’, strip him of his clothes in front of the remaining male niggas, the female, and the nigga’ infant, tar and feather him, tie each leg to a different horse faced in opposite directions, set him afire and beat both horses to pull him apart in front of the remaining niggas’. The next step is to take a bullwhip and beat the remaining nigga’

male to the point of death, in front of the female and the infant. Don't kill him, but put the fear of God in him, for he can be useful for future breeding.

“Take the female and run a series of tests on her to see if she will submit to your desires willingly. Test her in every way, because she is the most important factor for good economics. If she shows any sign of resistance in submitting completely to your will, do not hesitate to use the bullwhip on her to extract that last bit of bitch out of her. Take care not to kill her, for in doing so, you spoil a good economic commodity. When in complete submission, she will train her offspring in the early years to submit to labor when they become of age.

“Understanding is the best thing. Therefore, we shall go deeper into this area of the subject matter concerning what we have produced here in this breaking process of the female nigga’. We have reversed the relationship in her natural uncivilized state. She would have a strong dependency on the uncivilized nigga’ male, and she would have a limited protective tendency toward her independent male offspring and would raise male offspring to be dependent like her. Nature had provided for this type of balance. We reversed nature by burning and pulling a civilized nigga’ apart and bullwhipping the other to the point of death, all in her presence.

“By her being left alone, unprotected, with the male image destroyed, the ordeal caused her to move from her psychological dependent state to a frozen independent state. In this frozen psychological state of independence, she will raise her male and female offspring in reversed roles. For fear of the young male’s life, she will psychologically train him to be mentally weak and dependent, but physically strong. Because she has become psychologically independent, she will train her female offspring to be psychologically independent. What have you got? You've got the nigga’ woman out front and the nigga’ man behind and scared. This is a perfect situation of sound sleep and economic. Before the breaking process, we had to be alertly on guard at all

times. Now we can sleep soundly, for out of frozen fear his woman stands guard for us. He cannot get past her early slave molding process. He is a good tool ready to be tied to the horse at a tender age. By the time a nigga' boy reaches the age of sixteen, he is soundly broken in and ready for a long life of sound and efficient work and the reproduction of a unit of good labor force. Continually through the breaking of uncivilized savage niggas', by throwing the nigga' female savage into a frozen psychological state of independence, by killing of the protective male image, and by creating a submissive dependent mind of the nigga' male slave, we have created an orbiting cycle that turns on its own axis forever, unless a phenomenon occurs and reshifts the position of the male and female slaves."

"End of quote! Looks to me like you two are doin' your part in makin' ole' Willie right still today. SHAZAAM! I rest my case!"

Charlene lifted herself in the seat and gave herself a high five as her two sisters looked on in shock at her mesmerizing performance.

"What? You two thought that Nadine was the only one with skills? Child, pl-e-e-z!"

Charlene pursed her lips in complete satisfaction at having stumped her sisters.

"That'll give'em somethin' to think about for quite a while."

Now the three sat quietly whirring by pine tree after pine tree. 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 brick and wooden frame 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 a 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 seen 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 mamas.”

She smiled in admiration. “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 and besides she told him it wasn’t safe for her to be traveling in her condition. LL did everything he could short of kidnapping her. When you was born, Jenny had a change of heart.

“LL came home soon’s he got word that Jenny had had you. My boy was so proud of you and Jenny. He beamed as he held you in his arms. The love he had for the both of you couldn’t be contained. It just bounced off the walls like a ball gone pure on-tee crazy. After a couple of weeks, LL had to get back to his job at the plant in Philly. He left with the promise that as soon as Jenny was up and about, she would be joinin’ him.

“Days later I had to go into town for supplies. While I was gone, Tom came and took you and Jenny from my house. I went out to get y’all back. Tom wouldn’t let me anywhere near y’all. Sat out on that porch nite and day wit’ that ole’ shotgun of his. I got as far as that there well b’fore he stopped me. Said if I took one more step he’d fill me full of buckshot. He pulled back on that trigga’ and aimed it straight at my head.

“The woman you call Mama, Raleigh Boy, she came out and begged and pleaded with Tom to stop. He turned and slapped her so hard that she fell off of that porch. Now he was mad as all get out. He aimed that gun at me and fired. The bullet whisked right by my ear.” Mame pushed her long strands back. “See that right there. That’s where that there bullet took a little chunk out.” Edna reached up and touched it.

Mame continued. “Anyway, by now I figured it was time to leave. But I wasn’t leavin’ for good. I made up my mind to take care of that ornery ass bastard once and for all.

“No sooner than I stepped on my porch, Raleigh Boy came runnin’ up with blood drippin’ down her temple from her fall.”

“Miss Mame,” she cried. “Please, I’s a’beggin’ ya’ to just leave Tom be b’fo he kills somebody. He’s a’threatenin’ to kill me, Jenny and that there baby of her’s. Lord knows, he will. He ain’t a man of idle threats.”

“Miss Raleigh Boy, you best be gittin’ outta’ here. That rascal you calls yo’ husband is goin’ down today.”

“I went in the house and grabbed my shotgun. Soons I stepped out, “whack!” The next thing I remember was wakin’ up on my porch with a headache and a knot on the back of my head the size of one of them there hard plums on yo’ grandpa’s tree b’fore they ripens.

“I sent for LL. He was able to get more time off from work but not b’fore they threatens to fire him. Of course, Tom wouldn’t let my boy see you or Jenny. Tom had Jenny send LL a letter sayin’ she ain’t love him no mo’ and for him to go back up north. That was when she told him that she had given you to Tom and Raleigh Boy to raise as their own.

“My boy was heartbroken. He tried to see you and Jenny time and time again but 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 anotha’—a bottle filled with a lady called gin. Said that it made him cool and hot all at the same time. She lured him with the promise of purity as clean as the clearest water. Every swallow of gin that LL gulped made him thirsty for anotha’ and anotha’. It was the only thing that numbed the pain of losing Jenny and his only child, Edna. Took to calling that there 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 black eyes were those of Mame's. The handsome doe stared at them for what seemed like forever. Then she turned on her 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.

"It was a doe not a buck." Edna gently corrected Charlene with a smile. "And yeah, 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 near ninety-year old great-grandmother had been in that shotgun shack hidden in the deep woods of Iron Mine. 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 Iron Mine, 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 y’all comin’ for miles.”

Ivy Mae cackled taking a long draw on a corncob 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 yo’ 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 callin’ 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 yo’ Mama didn’t even know ‘bout that there spell. And if I knew how to break it, you can be sure that I would’a told Edna a long time 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 great grandma’s sake, I’s gonna’ overlook yo’ disrespect. For the record, yo’ Grandma Mame was the one who told me ‘bout it. And she didn’t know how to break it. Lord knows wit’ all them there trag’dies she suffered in her life, if she’d a’known, she would’a sure ‘nuf 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 beginnin’, you say do you child? How much time do y’all gots?”

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.

TANGLED ROOTS – PART I
FORGIVENESS STUDY GUIDE

Before we begin this journey, whisper this prayer:

Father, You know my heart. You know all of my secrets. You even know my secret motives and desires. I call upon Your Holy Spirit right now to open my heart, soul, mind and spirit so that I might make this a journey of self-introspection. Father, give me the courage and boldness to look at my own self through new eyes. Uncover in me any feelings of unforgiveness that I may be harboring either consciously or subconsciously. Then Father, form in me a new heart of forgiveness, compassion, understanding and love so that I might walk more like Your Son and my Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now with the Holy Spirit's aide, we are ready to begin.

What area(s) of unforgiveness have you detected in

Nadine:

Dora:

Charlene:

Are any of these familiar to your life?

What lessons, if any, have you learned so far from the life of:

Nadine:

Dora:

Charlene:

Thus far, has unforgiveness been conquered in the life of:

Nadine:

Dora:

Charlene:

If yes, how?

If no, why not?

Is your experience with unforgiveness more like that of:

(Note: Check all that apply)

Nadine

Dora

Charlene

Identify and list those areas that apply to you.

What can you do to overcome?

Will you do it?**GOD'S PROMISES**

Outlined below are some of God's promises. This list by no means is all-inclusive. Please review these and check the ones you see at play in the lives of the characters. Also check the ones that you see at play in your own life.

God Will	Forgive you	<p>“Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.” <i>Acts 10:43</i></p> <p>“He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases. He ransoms me from death and surrounds me with love and tender mercies.” <i>Psalm 103:3-4 (LASB NLT)</i></p>
	Heal all hurts of the heart, mind and body	<p>“I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him...” <i>Isaiah 57:11</i></p>
	Cleanse you	<p>“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” <i>1 John 1:9</i></p>
	Give you a new life	<p>“Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.” <i>2 Corinthians 5: 17</i></p>
	Forget your sins	<p>“He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.” <i>Micah 7: 19</i></p>
	Delight in unchanging love	<p>“Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity and passes</p>

		<p>over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love.” <i>Micah 7:18</i></p> <p>“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” <i>Romans 5: 8</i></p>
	Never leave or forsake you	<p>“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, or things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” <i>Romans 8: 39</i></p>
	Give us peace	<p>“Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God for his own sins! He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped, and we were healed! All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God’s path to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the guilt and sins of us all.” <i>Isaiah 53: 4-6</i></p>
	Bear all of our burdens	<p>“...And because of what he has experienced, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins....He bore the sins of many and interceded for sinners.” <i>Isaiah 53:11-12</i></p>
	Make us right	<p>“We are made right in God’s sight when we trust in Jesus</p>

		<p>Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done.” <i>Romans 3:22-23 (LASB NLT)</i></p> <p>“And He is entirely fair and just in this present time when he declares sinners to be right in His sight because they believe in Jesus.” <i>Romans 3:26 (LASB NLT)</i></p>
	Declare us not guilty	<p>“Yet now God in His gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Jesus Christ, who has freed us by taking away our sins.” <i>Romans 3: 24-25 (LASB NLT)</i></p>
	Give you hope	<p>“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.” <i>Jeremiah 29:11 (NASB)</i></p>
	Listen to you	<p>“Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.” <i>Jeremiah 29:12 (NASB)</i></p>
	Be found by you and restore you	<p>“And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will restore your fortunes....” <i>Jeremiah 29:13-14 (NASB)</i></p>
	Give you a fresh beginning	<p>“The LORD your God will cleanse your heart and the hearts of all your descendants so that you will love Him with all your heart and soul, and so you may live!” <i>Deuteronomy 30: 6 (LASB NLT)</i></p>
	Have mercy on you	<p>“If you return to the LORD your God, and you and your children begin wholeheartedly</p>

		<p>to obey all the commands...then He will restore your fortunes. He will have mercy on you..."</p> <p><i>Deuteronomy 30: 2-3 (LASB NLT)</i></p> <p>"The LORD is merciful and gracious; he is slow to get angry and full of unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He has not punished us for all our sins, nor does he deal with us as we deserve."</p> <p><i>Psalm 103: 8-10 (LASB NLT)</i></p>
	Make you successful	<p>"Then the LORD your God will make you successful in everything you do....for the LORD will delight in being good to you. <i>Deuteronomy 30:9 (LASB NLT)</i></p>
	Remove our rebellious acts	<p>"He has removed our rebellious acts as far away from us as the east is from the west." <i>Psalm 103:12 (LASB NLT)</i></p>
	Love us with an unfailing love	<p>"For His unfailing love toward those who fear Him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth." <i>Psalm 103:11 (LASB NLT)</i></p>
	Be like a father	<p>"The LORD is like a father to His children, tender and compassionate to those who fear Him." <i>Psalm 103:13 (LASB NLT)</i></p>
	Always welcome you back	<p>"So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him." <i>Luke 15: 20 (LASB NLT)</i></p>

**CHALLENGE 1: How many of these promises can you find in what you have just read?
Please record your answer here:**

CHALLENGE 2: See how many of these promises you can find as you continue to read.

QUIET MOMENTS WITH GOD

Invite the Holy Spirit in and ask yourself these questions in the presence of God:

What am I struggling to let go of from the past that is holding me in bondage today?

How am I obstructing God's plan for my life by not forgiving myself?

Who in my life do I need to forgive so that we both can move on?

PRAYER

Oh Jehovah-rapha, The LORD who heals, in spite of my sins, iniquities and unrighteousness, Your Word says that through my belief in Your Glorious Son and my Savior, Jesus Christ, I can be forgiven. Father, I come confessing my sin of _____. (Fill in blank based on your own circumstances).

Yet though I am weak, my Faithful Father, I turn my back on all unrighteousness in my life. Not in my power, not in my strength, but on the power that lies at the foot of the cross. I lay it all at the precious feet of my Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

For those who desire a new relationship with God through Christ, please say this prayer from the heart:

Lord, I know that I have sinned. Please forgive me for my sins. I now want to become a child of God. I'm asking that Jesus Christ come into my life as my Lord and Savior. I surrender my all to Him so that I might have a new life in You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen

NOTE:

As you continue your journey through this book, you may be reminded of past sins in your life. If this happens to you, it is appropriate to stop reading at that point, confess and repent of your transgressions and ask forgiveness.

