

## **TANGLED ROOTS**

### **PART II**

#### **LIVING OUT THE CURSE**

*“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; He rescues those who are crushed in spirit.”*

Psalms 34:18 LASB NLT

**CHAPTER 1**

“Now your Grandma Mame was one part Indian other parts mixed. For certain, her mother, Summer Rain, was from them there Cherokee.”

Before they could even get the words out of their mouths, Ivy Mae was answering the question on the tip of their tongues.

“Now I already knows that y’all thinks that’s a crazy name. Them Cherokee b’lieved in namin’ they childrens after somethin’ that happened at the time of they birth. And yo’ grandmother thrice removed, Rose Blossom, gave birth to Summer Rain durin’ the summer, smack dab in the middle of the worst rainstorm that I ever done seent.”

Ivy touched her face. She could still feel the sting of the pellets of rain digging deep into her flesh. It had left behind pockmarks that remained with her even now.

A cool breeze blowing gently across the porch pulled Ivy back to reality. At a glance, she could see that the trio’s curiosity was satisfied. Taking a deep breath, she continued.

“Mame’s pappy was a different matter altogether. It was rumored that he had been born the masta’s son to a full-breed African slave. They called her Toolah. That was short for Tulullah.”

Ivy reached down and picked up a rusted can from beside her rocker. She lifted it to her chin and spat out what looked like watery brownie mix. The smell that drifted the trio’s way was anything but chocolaty sweet. Their stomachs turned topsy-turvy.

Ivy wiped what spittle was left behind on her chin with the back of her hand before she spoke again.

“Hear tell from white folks that Toolah was from the same tribe as some crazy African warrior named Shocka’ Zulu or somethin’ like that. Now that Shocka’ fella’ was a descendant of none other than Nimrod hisself.”

Ivy looked at Nadine, Dora and Charlene.

“Y’all do know who Nimrod was?”

They averted their eyes.

“Lord have mercy, for you childrens to be so educated y’all don’t know nothin’. Ig’nant as heathens, I tell you. What is they teaching y’all in school and church these days?”

She shook her head before seizing the moment to school them.

“Bet y’all know who that there Two-Pack is.”

Charlene corrected her. “It’s Tupac, Cousin Ivy Mae.”

“Tupac, Two-Pack! Yep—y’all sure ‘nuf knows ‘bout him. But not a thing ‘bout Nimrod. It’s just a damn shame I tell ya’!

“Listen up, Girls! Nimrod was the son of Cush who was the son of Ham who was Noah’s baby boy. Never mind all that. What’s important for y’all to know is that Nimrod was a heroic warrior, ‘a mighty hunter in the LORD’s sight’. He built the first known civi’zations right there in Babylonia and Assyria.”

The looks of disbelief on their faces came as no surprise to Ivy Mae.

“Y’all ain’t got to believe me. Look it up for y’all selves. It’s right there in the book of Genesis. That’s the first book of the Bible.” Ivy added for emphasis before continuing.

“Why Nimrod’s the very one that led his kingdom to build that there Tower of Babel. God came down and confused their tongues cause they didn’t scatter and fill the earth like he tole’em to do. Instead they decided to stay put and then build a temple unto themselves. Now you know God wasn’t ‘bout to have none of that. So He came down and confounded their language so that they couldn’t understand a word they was saying to each other.”

Ivy paused in a cackle.

“Come to think of it, maybe Nimrod ain’t that different from that there Two-Pack fella’.”

“It’s Tupac.” Charlene interrupted once again to the rolling eyes of Ivy Mae.

“No matter, child. That Two-Pack sure ‘nuf started a new language with that there rap music that can’t many of us understand. Seems to me like it’s done confused a whole generation of childrens.”

Charlene came to the defense of the only rap artist she admired.

“Cousin Ivy Mae, with all due respect, Tupac was not just a rapper. He was an urban philosopher like none other in our generation.”

“So you say, child. Hard as it is to believe, I reckon it’s possible. But there’s many folks like me who just can’t get over all that cussin’ and callin’ each otha’ nigga’ this and nigga’ that, not to mention how they disrespects us women folks. Don’t they realize the hurt they’s causin’ they very own wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts, grandmas? Worse yet, maybe they don’t even care.” Ivy Mae sighed sadly.

Charlene searched for a response to ease Ivy’s misgivings. None came so she sat quietly and meekly as her cousin continued.

“Guess I got a little off track.”

The schoolgirl giggle from Ivy put them back at ease.

“Anyway, Mame’s pappy was said to have gained his freedom from the ‘Mancipation Proclamation. Not much else was known about him, other than his name—Obadiah.”

Her voice lowered a few octaves and her breath shortened.

“They called him Obby for short.”

Had the girls been looking at her, they would have seen the shield come down as soon as his name rolled off of her tongue. Once again, Ivy grew quiet staring into the darkness.

Nadine’s sniffles brought Ivy back from wherever she had gone.

She immediately lit into Nadine.

“Child, what in the world is wrong with that there nose of yours? Can’t you control it?”

Nadine gave her a helpless look.

Though tempted to get to the heart of the matter, Ivy decided it was best to let it be for now. She cleared her throat, pushing down the words that begged to scold Nadine. Instead she let words about Mame slip out slowly.

“Yo’ Grandma Mame was pure downright warrior at heart. Reckon she got it honest bein’ from them there Cherokee and them Zulus. She stood more than a few inches over six feet, taller than most men. Everybody layin’ eyes on Mame swore that they ain’t never seen a more beautiful creature. Said she was surely the envy of Lucifer hisself. And you know the Bible says that Lucifer was glorious and perfect in beauty. I knows that lots of folks thinks that Satan is some kind’a ugly two-horned monster with a pitchfork. Them’s the ig’nant fools that ain’t read what our LORD told Ezekiel, his prophet, in the Old Testament.” Ivy hesitated.

She glanced at them. Satisfied that her words had hit their mark, she started talking again.

“Mame’s hair was the color of midnight itself--waves just a’rippin’ down her back like water in Mr. Jim’s pond with a rock skippin’ ‘cross the top. And the Good LORD took special care in craftin’ every inch of that there body of hers into womanly perfection. I do believe that every time Lucifer saw Mame his blood boiled over in envy.”

Ivy Mae blew out a whistle better than any New York City construction worker. Her eyes followed the invisible notes from her mouth to the sky. She gazed into the heavens as if it was her first time seeing its spectacular beauty. It took her breath away for a moment.

“And them eyes of hers was just like that there night sky.”

Ivy pointed up at the moonless ocean of darkness dotted with countless twinkling stars. Edna’s daughters looked in the direction of her finger.

“They pierced straight through to the soul.” Ivy Mae paused for a long time.

“Lord knows, I surely do miss that there gal.”

Nadine interrupted Ivy Mae. “What’s all this got to do with the curse?”

“Hold your horses, child, I’m getting’ to that. Y’all needs a bit of history first.” She looked around befuddled. “Now where was I?”

Ivy Mae glared at Nadine. “As I was getting’ ready to say, Mame was married only once in her life. Said she’d never do it again, too much heartbreak. Now don’t get me wrong. Yo’ Grandma weren’t no saint. Mame never ran short of havin’ plenty of men whenever she wanted them and sometimes when she didn’t.” Ivy grinned in admiration before drawing in a deep breath of sadness.

“Her husband’s name was Frank. Now Frank had worked on Master Early’s plantation for as long as he could remember. He had the magic touch when it came to raising that there tobacco. As long as he was ‘round, Master Early had year after year of bumper tobacco crops.

Of course, that overseer Tommy Tucker took credit for it. The day came when Frank had finally saved up enough money to buy his freedom and some land outside of Lumberton. He and Mame got hitched and in no time that child was pregnant. That baby of hers was born at the very same time that the tobacco came ready for croppin'.

“Once Frank left the plantation, Masta' Early's tobacco crop didn't do well at all. Ole' Tommy Tucker made one excuse afta' anotha' but all the coloreds knew it was b'cause Frank weren't there no more. Tommy came beggin' Frank to come back. Imagine the look on his face when he saw acres and acres of that there lush green tobacco growin' all over Frank's farm. Of course, Frank refused and made the mistake of tellin' him just how he felt. “I ain't buy my freedom and this here land just so's I can be a slave to no white man again.”

“Well now you know that didn't sit too well with Ole' Tommy. He went 'round town bendin' the ears of all them white folks sayin' how Frank was sure 'nuf gonna' get rich and uppity. One thing that ain't changed much is that white folks can't stand the mere mention of a uppity nigga'.

“Frank got offers from some of them white folks to sell his crop to'em. Course for a fraction of what it was worth. He just flat out refused makin' them white folks crazier than a wild stallion penned up in a corral for the first time.

“One day, Frank didn't return home from town on time. Mame shushed her worries away and went 'bout doin' her chores. Night came and Frank still hadn't come back home. The hooting of an owl stirred the juices in Mame's belly. She tucked the baby in a papoose and headed out to find Frank.

“It was so dark that Mame couldn't even see her hands in front of her face. Every now and then the moon would peek its face out from behind some angry lookin' clouds. Horses

galloped wildly a ways out. Mame took to the safety of them woods. 'Can't be nothing but trouble riding out here tonight.' She thought to herself.

"They had to be headin' to the farm since it was the only thing out that way. Mame was tempted to turn back but that owl kept right on callin' out to her. That there moon peeked out from behind them clouds again. That owl whisked by Mame's ear. "Swosh!" She ducked. Her eyes followed the bird as it landed on the branch of a big ole' oak tree. That tree was swaying like it was drunk on Johnny Ray's famous moonshine. Mame's eyes were drawn down from the branch. Her mouth dropped open wide in horror.

"That there moon was just like a spotlight zeroin' in on Frank's beat-up body hangin' from a rope. Not one ounce of life was left in him. When that moonlight hit his eyes, Mame swore that she could feel his pain. She right near fainted. Her screams must have frightened Frank Jr. He did what any baby would do and screamed at the top of his lil' lungs.

"Mame ran quickly back through them there woods. She smelled the smoke and felt the heat b'fore she even got back to the farm. It was all in flames. She couldn't save any of it. That there ground pulled her down to her knees. Poor child, didn't know how long she stayed there choking on that there smoke, fire roaring in her ears. She just knew that she had to get the hell outta' there.

"Mame got up on them there feet of hers and followed the hootin' of that owl into the foggy woods." Ivy Mae stopped and looked past Edna's children as if they weren't even there. Her eyes stared intently in the direction of the woods.

Nadine spoke up. "I'm sorry Cousin Ivy Mae. I still don't get what this has got to do with the curse."

“Child, if you’ll just sit still and shut that big fat mouth of yours for just a lil’ while longer it’ll come as clear as them there icebergs floatin’ ‘round in that there Artic Ocean.” Ivy Mae wondered how someone as loving as Edna could have raised a child as annoying as Nadine. “Better yet, how did she tolerate this young’en wit’out killin’ her!”

Ivy Mae struggled to keep her thoughts to herself. She had a renewed admiration for Edna’s patience. Finally she gained her self-control and despite the interruption continued.

“As soon as Mame stepped into the woods, the spirit of her Grandma Rose Blossom formed in the mist. She walked alongside Mame without saying a word for the longest time. Just when your Grandma Mame thought for sure that she was going to drown in the silence, them stories of long ago started spilling out of Rose Blossom’s mouth.”

## CHAPTER 2

Rose Blossom's voice cracked in the beginning but grew stronger with every word.

"Before I was born, Andy Jackson, that was the President of the United States back then, sent his soldiers to take away all the land from the Cherokee. They had orders to take the Cherokee to some far off place called Oklahoma Territory. Gold had been found on our land sealing our fate. Whites from everywhere were crazed with thoughts of getting rich.

"All of the land that had been ours from the beginning of time no longer belonged to us. A band of ten Cherokee signed a treaty giving our land to the white man just like that!" Rose Blossom snapped her fingers.

"Those ten weren't even elected representatives of the Cherokee Sovereign Nation. It didn't matter though. White folks held lotteries every day giving away Cherokee land and gold rights. It now all belonged to them."

Rose Blossom sighed heavily. Her presence dimmed under sad memories. Then with the sudden spark of happier times she became more visible.

"My grandmother and grandfather, Whistling Bow and Rose Lily, had a large farm with land stretching farther than the eye could see. Runaway slaves helped them work the land. They lived and worked together in peace and harmony. There was always plenty of food and laughter in the village.

“Then one day, the sound of horses running wildly through the village shattered the dreams of Rose Lily, her mother, and Sadie, her best friend. The pounding hooves were there to stamp out the bright futures that were the birthright of their children. Before the women could get to the door, my great grandfather, Running Bear, crashed into the house. Disbelief covered every inch of his face.

“He whispered in a hushed tone, ‘Gather your things quickly. The soldiers are here to move us.’”

“The soldiers gave them a few minutes to gather their belongings. They jeered threateningly at the bewildered tribesmen. ‘Hurry up! Y’all won’t be needing much where you’re headed!’”

“Rose Lily had just finished packing all that could be carried on their backs when the hunched body of Hopping Owl walked by aimlessly. Her two long braids had long ceased swaying as in the days of her youth. Now gray strands hung stiffly from her head.

“Hopping Owl was the village medicine woman, and at ninety-two, the village elder. She had learned everything from her husband, Sweeping Eagle. Coming from a long line of medicine men, he had grown to be the greatest medicine man of the entire Cherokee Nation.

“They had wed as young teenagers in love. Since the two never had any children, they claimed all of the children of the Cherokee Nation as their own. As true spirit warriors, they warded off evil from those entrusted in their care. Loved and revered throughout the Cherokee Nation, they traveled from village to village throughout the Southeast always welcomed by their fellow tribesmen.

“Whenever they returned from their travels, the villagers threw a big celebration in their honor. Sweeping Eagle brought news from family throughout the Cherokee Nation. Hopping Owl told stories of their adventures.”

A loving smile graced Rose Blossom’s face as she remembered her favorite story. She turned to Mame. “Would you like to hear the story that all of the children in the village loved?”

Mame nodded yes.

**CHAPTER 3**

With a blink of Rose Blossom's eyes, the old Cherokee medicine woman appeared and walked alongside them. Hopping Owl painted vivid pictures with her tongue.

"Sweeping Eagle and I were returning to the village by the same route we always take. Only on this day, when we came to the trail down the mountain, it had been moved. Strange cackling drew our eyes to the sky.

"Flying high above us was a long string of silver foxes dancing around. Clutched in their paws was our trail. Sweeping Eagle and I had been traveling for many days and nights. We were anxious to get back to the village. We called to the leader of the silver foxes who wore a crown of eagle feathers atop his head.

"Oh great silver fox," Sweeping Eagle cried out in respect, "we beseech you to lower our path so that we can be on our way."

"The great silver fox looked angrily down upon us with fiery eyes."

"Find another way!" He shouted. "Silly Cherokee, can't you see we are busy dancing! Now go away and do not disturb us again."

"Oh mighty Silver Fox, there is no other way and we must return for we have important news."

"Then you must wait!" The silver fox leader announced haughtily.

"How long must we wait?" We lowered our eyes and bowed our heads.

“Until we tire!” The great silver fox laughed with the other foxes following suit.

“We waited patiently for a day. Then two days passed and then three. Determined to drive us back over the mountain, the silver foxes danced never stopping to rest, sleep or even eat. We were determined to wait them out.”

Rose Blossom politely interrupted Hopping Owl with a giggle. “This is always the point in the story when one of the children would eagerly ask the same question: “Why didn’t you shoot the foxes down with your bow and arrow?”

“A very good question.” Hopping Owl whispered looking around suspiciously. “These silver foxes were magic. Any harm from our arrows would bring swift and certain destruction of the entire Cherokee Nation.”

Mist blew out of Rose Blossom’s nostrils as she breathed out warm laughter of dismay. “It never failed. The children gasped in fright and then begged Hopping Owl to continue. Of course, she obliged them.”

Dutifully, Hopping Owl continued. “On the fourth day, the foxes danced noticeably slower. Day five those silver foxes were dancing so slow they looked to be suspended in mid air. By the sixth day, the dancing stopped altogether. They floated lower and lower to the ground. One by one they fell to earth. As each fox hit the side of the mountain, pouf! It disappeared. The only remaining fox was the great leader, determined not to give up.

“He danced alone desperately holding onto our pathway which by now was fed up and tired of being shaken about in the air. After all, it was not used to flying. Suddenly, the trail turned in on the great silver fox catching him by surprise. It wrapped itself tightly around him. Every inch of his great body was buried in rocks, dirt and grass. Then the path twirled and swirled around at speeds greater than a thundering twister. Just as suddenly, it stopped and

opened up. The great silver fox leader had disappeared. The trail floated slowly down to our feet and we were on our way again.”

Rose Blossom read her grandchild’s mind. “I bet you want to know what happened to the silver foxes!”

Mame nodded.

As always, Hopping Owl laughed as she disclosed the fate of those foxes. “Well child, if you look ever so closely in the earth of the mountain, you will see each one captured inside never to be released again. The great silver fox now lays helplessly trapped in the mountain path and trampled underneath the feet of any who cross!”

A look of short-lived vindication overtook Hopping Owl before she continued. “Though it was in the middle of the summer, that very evening a terrible storm blew in from nowhere. The harsh winds chilled the rain to ice and then snow. In no time at all, the entire trail was covered in mounds of icy snow making it impassable.

“When the storm hit, soldiers were close to the top of the mountain. Blinding snow drove them back down. The storm raged on the mountaintop for weeks. Each attempt the soldiers made to cross over the mountain seemed to make the storm rage more fiercely. Many soldiers lost their lives. Many more lost limbs to frostbite.

“Beneath the mountain in the rich valley, the Cherokee went about life as normal. The bad weather did not reach down into our land. Most Cherokee often looked up at the stormy mountaintop bewildered at the raging snow clouds, but not Sweeping Eagle and me. We looked at the mountain in deep reverence for blanketing us under its protection.”

**CHAPTER 4**

“Just like that,” Ivy Mae snapped her fingers, “that there ole’ medicine woman vanished in thin air. Mame’s face lit up with a smile. Seein’ the light of life on her grandchild’s face was downright encouraging’ to Rose Blossom.”

A refreshing coolness surrounded Rose Blossom. She spoke with soft reverence. “From the day they wed, Hopping Owl and Sweeping Eagle never spent a day apart until the day he died at seventy. Sweeping Eagle had never been sick a day in his life. One morning, he simply did not wake up. Hopping Owl was devastated with grief and loneliness.

“For the next twenty-two years, she spent every waking hour at his burial site vowing never to leave him. She talked to him as if he were still alive. Many swore that they had seen Sweeping Eagle sitting around the campfire with Hopping Owl. She conjured him up at will. That last year in the village, many reported that she was conjuring him up every night. The villagers who saw gave the same report time and again:

““Sweeping Eagle sat contently around the campfire with Hopping Owl. They talked and laughed lovingly together. He tenderly caressed Hopping Owl’s wrinkled cheek. Out of the blue, Sweeping Eagle soared high above in the sky. He looked down at the village. His eyes filled with sadness. One tear dropped from his eye, then another and another. Soon his tears filled the sky. A great thundering rain poured down upon the village. The village along with all the people was washed away by Sweeping Eagles’ tears never to be seen again.””

Rose Blossom paused. “Some believed these visions were warnings foretelling unsettling times. Most went their way ignoring the warnings.”

Ivy Mae took over again. “Tho’ you could hardly see’em, them there tears formed in Rose Blossom’s eyes. She choked on them painful memories. She and Mame walked as slow as snails through that there creepy ass forest. They ain’t speak not one word between each otha’.”

**CHAPTER 5**

Nadine's patience grew short again. Before Dora could stop her, she cut in exasperated.

"For Pete's sake Cousin Ivy Mae, what has this got to do with anything? Can we just get to the curse?"

Suddenly the slow creaking of the rocker stopped. The wooden planks on the old porch no longer vibrated underneath them. They had not realized what a comfort the back and forth creaking of the rocker had been. They sucked air into their lungs in one collective breath.

Ivy Mae stretched an invisible hand toward Nadine. She was going to do what somebody should have done long ago: stitch that child's mouth closed once and for all.

Just inches away from Nadine's mouth, she remembered her promise to Mame.

Her hand trembled as she pulled it back replying with sweetness that she didn't recognize as her own.

"In due time, my child. Everything's got its time and place. And this is the place to teach you a lil' somethin' or 'notha'.

"You best believe that God gives us all special talents. Nadine, yours is performin' on stage and in them there movies and on that there TV. Dora, God done blessed you to be such a giver of grace." Ivy Mae paused looking for just the right words as she glanced in the direction of Edna's youngest child. "And Charlene, well I ain't quite figured out what God's got in store for you. But don't you worry none, it'll come clear someday. I got a feelin' real soon too."

Seeing Nadine squirm uncomfortably, Ivy Mae shifted her attention back to her.

“Lord have mercy, Nadine Louise, don’t you know nothing about the Bible?”

The look on Nadine’s face was telling.

Dora glared Nadine’s way.

“For once,” she thought, “I’ve got one up on her.”

Dora was smitten that her knowledge of the Bible was finally paying off. Watching Nadine squirm in pure unadulterated ignorance made Dora’s heart leap with vindication.

“Bet she wishes she had read her Bible more now.”

Dora kept that thought to herself. There was already enough tension in the air without her adding more. Besides, she knew Ivy Mae had it well under control.

Their old cousin continued.

“Hopping Owl’s talent was revealing the truth in parables. Now you know our LORD, Jesus Christ, did the very same thing. He almost always taught in them parables, not that his disciples or the people understood him. Most of the time, he had to break it down to them. I ain’t saying Hopping Owl was the LORD, nothing close to it. But had them Cherokee listened to Hopping Owl they would have seen what was coming. Yep, this here country might have been a lot different today.”

She drew on the pipe and before long the creaking of the rocker surrounded them.

“Now where was I?” She waited patiently for Rose Blossom to take over.

Before long, a cloud drifted down from the sky and hovered over the porch.

Ivy Mae smiled as Rose Blossom’s face appeared in the cloud. She nodded a welcoming greeting to Mame’s grandmother.

Words tumbled from Rose Blossom’s mouth revealing the rest of the story through Ivy Mae.

**CHAPTER 6**

“With the soldiers threatening the village, Rose Lily feared for Hopping Owl. She grabbed Hopping Owl to keep her from being trampled to death underneath the soldiers’ horses. “Hopping Owl, gather your things. We must leave now!”

Hopping Owl shrugged her off. “Rose Lily, my place is here with Sweeping Eagle. I vowed never to leave him and leave him I will not!”

“Hopping Owl, we must all leave or the soldiers have orders to kill us on the spot.” Tears streamed down Rose Lily’s face.

“Hopping Owl’s plea tore at Rose Lily. ‘If only they had listened to Sweeping Eagle. He warned many times of the soldiers coming. No one listened and now this is upon us. I will not leave Sweeping Eagle. I’m an old woman. Even if I wanted to go, which I don’t, I’d never make the trip alive. Now go along, girl. Leave me to spend my last days with the man and the land that I love!’”

“Although Hopping Owl was still surprisingly strong, she was no match for Rose Lily. After quite a scuffle, Rose Lily and Whistling Bow subdued Hopping Owl, taking her on the treacherous journey.”

Rose Blossom’s spirit thickened as she shared the heartbreak of her ancestors with a voice trembling in uncomfortable sorrow.

“All of the people were heartbroken to leave the land of our ancestors, the only land they’d ever known. Rose Lily cried, as did all the Cherokee women, calling upon The Great Creator for help.

“They traveled under heavy guard. There were at least a thousand Cherokee making this journey. They recognized many relatives and others from neighboring farms and villages. This proud tribe of people whose strong legs once ran gallantly through the forests now slumped over walking in slow dejection, eyes staring only at the ground. They willed themselves into the dirt underneath their feet. Each step brought more grief and greater loss.

“The further away they went from their homeland, the more their souls despaired. The burden of losing their beloved land was far too great for many of them to carry. All the people were sad and heartbroken as their land drifted further and further behind.

“Many tears were shed as family members died day after day. All five of Rose Lily’s brothers and sisters perished along with her young twin sons—Fighting Bow and Swift Arrow. Too disheartened to fight to live, each day, another family member fell victim to cholera. Eventually Rose Lily was left only with Whistling Bow.

“Whistling Bow fared no better. He lost both the sister and brother who traveled with them. He never knew what happened to his other four brothers. The devastating grief of losing their ancestral land was compounded with the loss of beloved family.

“The surrounding forest was saturated with a grief so alive that it took on a life of its own claiming yet more lives. It was too much for many to bear. Many of those who didn’t surrender to disease died just the same. Their spirits were broken in too many pieces to ever put back together. They’d never be the same proud and brave people again.

“Hopping Owl’s life crept slowly from her body with each step she took away from her beloved. Being forced away from her village and loved one, carried consequences that none of them could have foreseen.

“Weeks into the journey, Hopping Owl finally collapsed. Rose Lily knelt lovingly beside her, stroking her face. Her teardrops glistened in Hopping Owl’s silver strands.

Hopping Owl’s last words gripped at Rose Lily’s heart. “Rose Lily, why did you take me away? I begged you to leave me. Now just as you have taken me from my love, the women who descend from you will be born under the spirit of the lonely owl. They will not find lasting true love until I am reunited with my one true love.”

“It was in the middle of the day. Hopping Owl took her last breath. An owl with huge wings came from out of nowhere and hovered over her. A hush fell over the camp as the owl’s shadow completely blocked out the sun.

“The Cherokee fell to their knees in reverence. A light mist of breath slowly drifted from Hopping Owl’s mouth. Her spirit floated upwards uniting with the soul of the hovering creature. They watched mesmerized as the two spirits bonded together. The owl flew off into the thick of the surrounding forest.

“The Cherokee chanted with such grief that the once bright blue sky slowly darkened. Rose Lily still kneeling over Hopping Owl lifted her arms to the heavens crying out in deep sorrow.

“Oh Great Father of all creation! I call upon you now. Here lays Hopping Owl. Great Creator, let her become the petals that blossom each spring and summer on your beautiful flowers in the meadows. As the warm season ends, may seeds from her flowers be plentiful. Let

the autumn winds spread her seeds far and wide across the land until they reach the valley of our ancestors and reunite her with her beloved.”

Rose Blossom whisked about with the story unfolding rapidly.

“Thick thunderclouds blanketed the sky in a threatening mass. Sharp lightning bolts flashed around them. The wind blew furiously. Trees and bushes doubled over.

“The souls of all the dead Cherokee now ran rampant in this one place and struck out in vengeance. Though midday, the earth darkened to night. Sheets of rain poured down.

“The owl hurried back out of the forest in a desperate search. It locked its gaze on Rose Lily and Whistling Bow. Just as they noticed the owl, a sharp bolt of crackling lightning streaked from the hovering clouds and split a nearby oak tree in two. Fire ravaged its branches.

“None was more surprised by the storm than the soldiers guarding the band of Cherokee. Their frightened horses reared on their hind legs throwing the weary soldiers from their backs. The soldiers hit the ground hard knocking their breath out of them momentarily. The horses bolted away with soldiers in pursuit.”

Rose Blossom’s eyes looked across the woods as if following the disappearing horses. With the horses out of sight, her spirit calmed as she floated back down beside her weary granddaughter. They stood face to face. The words tumbled from Rose Blossom’s mouth painting pictures of long ago for Mame to see in the mist of her breath.

“This was their only chance to escape. In the midst of the chaos, Whistling Bow and Rose Lily, along with many other Cherokee and runaway slaves, ran into the woods. They fixed their gaze on the owl never once looking back.

“They traveled deeper and deeper into the thick forest. Out of fear for herself and the unborn child she carried, Rose Lily ran faster than she ever imagined her feet could take her.

Falling behind meant certain death. She would not lose another family member to such a terrible death.

“Many times, those who were bold and brave enough to dare the escape talked of the day their feet took wings. One by one and in unison, they flew over every obstacle that stood in the way of finding a new home. They left no tracks that could be followed.

“After hours of running, they reached a clearing. They stopped in awe of a land so breathtaking that they fell to their knees in thankful prayer. The owl, with its work done, disappeared over a snowcapped mountaintop.

“They scouted the area for many miles in every direction. They returned satisfied that they were far enough into uncharted territory that no one would find them.

“The owl had led them to this happy valley nestled and hidden between two great mountain peaks. The soil was rich. Water was plentiful. Wild game roamed in the heavily wooded forest.

“Though much sadness had befallen them with the loss of so many of their loved ones, this band of Cherokee and runaway slaves was determined to live on. Their smiles and laughter belied great sorrow over those lost to them. They built houses reminiscent of those left behind. They planted crops and hunted for game. The Cherokee once again multiplied and flourished tucked away in this unknown valley.

“Your ancestors, Rose Lily, Whistling Bow and Isaac and Sadie—both runaway slaves, were among those who escaped and made their way to this rich valley. Not a day went by that Rose Lily did not grieve the loss of her twin sons, her mother and father, her sisters and brother and Hopping Owl. She allowed her losses to strengthen not weaken her. She emerged

determined to bring into this world strong children who would carry on the ways and stories of her people. Months later, my father was born!” Rose Blossom beamed with pride.

“The day they escaped burned vividly in Rose Lily’s mind until the day she died. It is said that ‘the mothers of the Cherokee grieved so much during this terrible time that the chiefs prayed for a sign to lift the mothers’ spirits and give them strength to care for their children. From that day forward, a beautiful rose grew wherever a mother’s tear fell to the ground. The white petals were for the mother’s tears. The gold center was for the gold taken from the Cherokee lands and the seven leaves on each stem were for the seven Cherokee clans that made the journey.’”

Rose Blossom nodded to Ivy Mae who told the rest of the story. “The fragrant smell of roses stopped Mame. She was in the midst of a garden filled with beautiful white roses in the center of a town she did not recognize. She plopped down on a bench staring ahead blankly.

“With clothes that was dirty, tattered and torn, she looked possessed by the devil himself. Her skin was dusted with black smut from them there ashes of her burned down farm. Her hair, matted with sticks and leaves, stuck to that pretty head of hers. Everyone passin’ by looked at her ran the hell away.”

**CHAPTER 7**

Silence let them know that Ivy Mae was finished for now. The rocker eased to a stop as she puffed slowly on her pipe, eyes fixed on years past. Not a dry eye could be found between the three sisters. Between snuffles, Nadine managed a few words.

“I guess we were born with a double dose of despair—slavery and the trail of tears.”

“Girls, don’t fool yourselves. Despair ain’t nothin’ but God’s way of moldin’ us into a strong people, just like he did them there Isra’lites. Why even his word tells us that ‘He has tested us, purified us like silver melted in a pot. Then he captured us in a net and laid the burden of slav’ry on our backs. He sent troops to ride across our broken bodies. We went through fire and flood. But he brung us to a place of great abundance.’”

By now Ivy Mae was on her feet testifying like she had done in her younger days at Peter’s Tabernacle, the tiny Black church on the Ironmine. She stomped her feet, clapped her hands and shimmied across the porch until it shook.

“Whoever done heard of peace wit’out tribulation, love wit’out heartache, joy wit’out sorrow? You best believe that He aims to refine us like a silversmith removes that there scum from silver.”

Her voice rivaled that of any Southern Baptist preacher giving his fire and brimstone sermon on Sunday morning. Sweat dripping from her pores gave the girls a fright.

“Oh God, please don’t let her be having a heart attack.” They prayed under their breath.

Ivy Mae's sudden performance with the Holy Ghost caught them off guard. They thought it best to remain quiet as they mulled over what they had learned.

Ivy Mae finally settled down. Puffy clouds of smoke from her pipe floated to the heavens. She stared straight ahead as if nothing had happened. Finally, Ivy Mae spit out tobacco juice from the side of her mouth. Nadine felt droplets land on her feet and shoes.

"Oh no she didn't!" Nadine thought ready to do battle with the old woman.

Dora stroked Nadine's arm gently to calm her.

"Girls, I wish I could tell you that Frank was the only loss your Grandma had in her life. But every man that she ever loved was yanked from her bosom, each time tragically." Ivy shook her head slowly. "A kind man named Sam had found Mame sitting on that there bench in the middle of town. He took her home with him. She fell in love with him and his son, Lonnie. Stayed with and loved both of'em.

"Of course Sam was ole' enuf to be Mame's pappy. But as he told her, 'there might'a been snow on that there roof of his but there was still plenty of fire left in his chimney.'" Ivy Mae slapped her leg in laughter before turning serious.

"Now Lonnie was a handsome rascal with his smooth talkin' self. Talked many women, white and colored, single and married, right out of them their drawers of theirs and their possessions too. Though he changed his ways when he met Mame, it ended up being the death of both him and his daddy just the same. But not before Mame got herself pregnant. She never was sure which one of them was Little Lonnie's daddy. Said it didn't matter since they both had the same blood.

"Children, I's sorry to say that yo' Grandma Mame suffered so much of that there trag'dy in love, it couldn't just be chance."

Ivy Mae stopped rocking and settled back quietly in her chair.

Charlene was convinced more than ever by Ivy Mae's sudden outburst that the old woman was a certified kook. Her mind quickly shifted achingly to Leon. He had been the love of her life.

She startled them all but none more than Ivy Mae with her sudden admission.

"I don't believe in God. And even if there is a God, he's meaner than any diamondback rattler. I don't know how y'all can go around saying he's so good and merciful. Look what he did to Leon." She paused as tears filled her eyes.

"And then to my poor helpless baby." The tears dripped down slowly.

"And now to Edna." Her body shuddered as she continued. "Not one of them ever did a thing to hurt anybody."

They knew that now was not the time for words. They sat quietly letting Charlene grieve her loved ones.

**CHAPTER 8**

Though it had been over five years ago, the hurt was still as fresh as the day it had happened. Charlene and Leon had been taking their usual stroll along a secret path on Rockfish Creek.

He surprised her when he stopped suddenly and rubbed her belly.

“I still can’t believe it.” His face beamed with pride. “I aim to give you and my baby a better life than I ever had.”

She started to say something when he put his finger to her lips.

“I ain’t got no money. The Silk Mill is closing down so I won’t even have a job in a few weeks. I didn’t do that well in school. All I have to offer you now is my love and my determination to make a life for us. It ain’t much but I have a plan so hear me out.”

From the start Charlene had been filled with apprehension. But Leon was so sure that this was their only chance for a good life that she didn’t have the heart to discourage him. She had taken him to Raleigh/Durham Airport and saw him off with the promise that he would return after basic training and they would be married.

It was the longest six weeks of her life. She wrote him everyday. Leon had never been much for writing. Even so, she got a letter from him once a week telling her how much he missed and loved her.

A week before he was to return home, she got a frantic call from him saying that he had special orders on a training mission.

Charlene had giggled into the phone, “Okay Baby, so when do I pick you up at the airport?”

What he said next made her heart sink.

“Charlene, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I ain’t gonna’ be coming home. I got to go straight on this mission, Baby. I’m so sorry.”

She stared at the phone sure that she hadn’t heard him right.

“What? That can’t be. Our wedding, everything is all planned. The only thing missing is you.”

“Charlene, honey, I’m sorry. But I can’t get back home now. It’ll just have to wait.”

“Have to wait? Have you forgotten that I’m pregnant with your baby? How long do you think it’s going to take before people notice and start talking?”

“I know Charlene. But what do you want me to do? Go AWOL and have the MPs come drag my ass off to the brig. Honey, I know this ain’t easy for you. It ain’t easy for me either. But I promise as soon as I can I will come home and marry you.”

Charlene choked on her tears. Every ounce of strength drained from her body. She collapsed into a nearby chair.

“Charlene, honey, are you there?”

She heard Leon’s desperate plea for her to say something but the words would not come.

“Damn it, Charlene, say something and stop acting like a spoiled brat.” Leon demanded.

Just as Charlene opened her mouth to speak, she heard banter on the other end.

“Time’s up man. Give me the phone.”

Then click. Leon was gone.

Now all she could do was wait for him to call back. She had no idea how to get in touch with him. Every day that passed without hearing from him was more torturous than the day before. After two weeks she had all but given up hope when the phone rang.

“Charlene, Honey, it’s me. I’m sorry but I couldn’t call. Look I don’t have a lot of time. I just wanted to call and tell you that I still love you and as soon as I can get home you will be Mrs. Leon Highsmith.”

Charlene pushed back tears of relief. She’d be damn if she was going to be sabotaged by them again.

“Oh, Baby, I thought I’d never hear from you again. I love you. How can I write you? I’ve got so much to tell you.”

The silence on the other end of the phone put Charlene on alert.

“Leon, are you there?”

“Yeah, Baby. I’m here. Look, I’m on a secret mission. I can’t tell you where I’m at or even when I’ll be back.”

Charlene was at a loss for words.

“What?” She finally managed.

“Baby, I’ve got to go. I’ll call you again as soon as I can.” Click, he was gone.

This went on for months. By now Charlene was huge with child. No one said much about her plight, that is, at least to her face.

On her early morning walk along the trail the relentless hooting of an owl startled Charlene. A terrifying shiver ran the length of her spine.

“An owl’s hooting is sure to bring death.” She laughed to herself dismissing the old wives’ tale.

With her next step she crumbled to her knees in pain. Looking around desperately for help, there was none in sight. The only sound was the whispering of the wind through the trees. What it seemed to be saying to Charlene was not to her liking. Her fear heightened with each whisper. Again, she looked around for help. There was no one for miles around. Worse yet, no one even knew where she was. Just as she managed to get to her feet, a sharper pain sent her hurtling to the ground again.

“Maybe I should’a listened to the doctor.”

Dr. Baxter had warned Charlene to stay off of her feet.

“Charlene, you’re putting yo’self and yo’ baby in danger. I’m orderin’ you on complete bed rest.”

That had been the doctor’s verdict in her sixth month. Charlene felt fine though.

“Old Dr. Baxter don’t know what he’s talkin’ about. I got too much stuff to do to be layin’ ‘round. Everything’s gotta’ be perfect when Leon returns.”

Whenever she had felt herself tiring or getting a little down, she would do what she always did--take a hit of coke. It had always given her more energy than she knew what to do with. This was no exception. Sitting in her car moments before, she had snorted a line of cocaine followed by a healthy dose of guilty conscience.

After she became pregnant, she had promised Leon that she would stop.

“Hell, he’s God knows where now. I need somethin’ to get me through and he sure as hell ain’t here to help. What he don’t know won’t hurt!” She had convinced herself.

Her breath came in pants now. Minutes later, the pain subsided. She thought it best not to try to stand again so she crawled along. In a few moments, another pain struck her more intense than the others.

“Why didn’t I listen?” Charlene whispered as the pain wrenched tears from her eyes.

Now she panted and prayed for another break between pains hoping to crawl a little further. She lost track of how long she had been crawling. Finally she gave up and curled into a ball reduced to bare whimpering. She had no idea how long she had been there when she heard nearby voices. Gathering her last ounce of strength, she screamed and passed out. When she woke up she was in a room that she did not recognize.

A pint-sized nurse with rosy cheeks strolled in cheerfully.

“Good morning dear, welcome back to the land of the living. You gave us all a little scare.”

Charlene winced. The pain around her middle was almost unbearable. Instinctively, she took a deep breath in. Her lungs filled with fresh air. She felt as if this was the first time she had breathed in months. All of a sudden she noticed that her belly no longer bulged with child. Her eyes widened in alarm.

The nurse came to her side immediately and gently stroked her forehead.

“There, there, child. You’ve had a pretty rough go of it. Just try to relax.”

Charlene was on the brink of being lulled into relaxing by the soothing tone of Nurse Susan’s sweet voice.

Suddenly she remembered where she was.

“My baby. Where’s my baby?”

Growing more agitated by the second, Charlene demanded, “I want to see my baby now!”

Nurse Betty made no efforts to leave the room. Instead she stood over Charlene trying to calm her.

“If you won’t go get my baby, I’ll do it myself!”

Charlene tossed the covers off the bed. They hit the floor about the same time as her feet. She was surprised at how quickly the little wisp of a woman had her restrained back down in the bed. The last thing she saw was Nurse Susan putting something in the IV that was connected to her arm.

When she awakened Edna was by her side. It was the first time she had seen her in a long time. Charlene tried to talk but tears came out instead of words. By now she had heard hushed whispers around her. Her baby was dead.

“What will I tell Leon?” Was the only thought that played through her mind.

Tears poured from Edna’s eyes as she whispered over and over.

“I know, Sugar. I know how it hurts to lose a baby.”

Her gentle strokes across Charlene’s forehead soothed both of them. They sat silently together for hours. Edna never left her bedside.

It was in those hours and days of despair that Charlene came to know her mother. When Charlene wanted to give up, Edna wouldn’t let her.

“Sugar, it’s too soon to give up now. You’s too special to even think about it. Let me tell you somethin’. Did you know that I wasn’t even supposed to have children?”

Charlene rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath.

“Here we go.”

Her antics didn’t deter Edna one bit.

“All the doctors told me that I’d never have children. But I knew God wanted me to have babies. Since I was a child I knew it. There were times when I got depressed over it. But it was in those times of absolute certainty that I went to doctor after doctor ‘til I found one that gave me just a speck of hope. He told me that if I had an operation then maybe, just maybe, I could have

babies; but there weren't no guarantee. Child, I jumped for joy and told Dr. Jones, 'let's get started.'

"He looked at me like I had lost my mind and I reckon I had gone just a lil' crazy. But I meant it. I wanted my operation that day. He stopped and explained to me that no one from 'round these parts could do that kind of operation. The only doctor he knew of was in New York City and besides it would cost a small fortune.

"My heart sank. I didn't have no money, lil' education and lil' hope. But I did have one thing. I had faith, just a mustard seed of faith. I knew that I had heard God tell me that I was supposed to have children. Well to make a long story short, I got my operation and I got three beautiful girls—very special gifts from God hisself.

"So you see, I didn't go through all that for you to give up, child. No sir-ree-bob! This ain't no time for givin' up. This is time for praisin' the good Lord for what he's done. You's alive, ain't you?"

Charlene nodded through sniffles.

"You's got your health, right?"

Charlene nodded yes again.

"And I know I heard that doctor say that you could have more babies, didn't I?"

Another yes came from Charlene.

"Well child, we gots plenty to be thankful for."

After a long deliberation, Charlene finally agreed with Edna.

She chimed in, "And I still got Leon."

The howling of the wind drew her attention to the window. "At least for now." Charlene kept this thought to herself.

Now it was Edna's turn to nod.

"That's right child. You still gots Leon."

Charlene wondered if Leon would still love her if he found out what had really happened to their baby.

"How am I ever gonna' tell him?"

Feeling the tears welling up in her eyes, Charlene turned her back to Edna. She was afraid Edna would offer that same old tired story about Abraham being willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on the altar out of obedience to God. If one more person told her to brave it like Abraham did with Isaac, she would just scream at them.

"Well God didn't take Isaac, now did he? Besides, God ain't said a word to me. He just took my baby!"

To Charlene's surprise, Edna said nothing. She sat quietly and patiently waiting for Charlene to turn back around. It took all of her willpower not to tell Edna what was really on her mind.

"No need worrying her anymore. Ain't nothin' she can do anyway. Ain't nothin' nobody can do."

The emptiness in her once full womb spilled into her soul filling it with the despair of longing for her lost child. The last ounce of energy drained from Charlene's body.

"It can't get any worse than this. I got nowhere to go but up." Charlene tried to comfort herself.

Once released from the hospital, Charlene went to Edna's to recuperate. She had been there a few days when there was a knock at the door. Leon's mother stood there in a daze. Edna's smile disappeared as soon as she saw the look on Ida Lou's face.

Edna opened the door and Ida Lou collapsed in her arms.

“He’s gone, Edna. He’s gone. My only baby is gone.”

“Ida Lou, what’s you talkin’ ‘bout?”

Edna took the crumpled paper from her hands. She almost passed out as she read the words. The only thing that had given her baby hope was now dead.

She dropped to her knees in prayer.

“Father, help me now. Help this boy’s mother and help that child in there. You told us, ‘Come to you, all who are weary and carry heavy burdens and that you would give us rest.’ Now Father, we’s coming to you. We need yo’ rest. We need yo’ hand of comfort.”

Edna got up from her knees and took Ida Lou in the bedroom with Charlene. Screams of agony echoed through the tiny house and out into the street.

Edna had drawn Charlene close and whispered in her ears. Charlene could still hear her words.

““Baby, the Lord does not abandon anyone forever. Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion accordin’ to the greatness of his unfailin’ love. For he does not enjoy hurtin’ people or causin’ ‘em sorrow.””

**CHAPTER 9**

Charlene bristled then and now as she whispered under her breath.

“Well you can’t prove that by me.”

She renewed her vow to herself.

“I’ll never forgive God for takin’ my baby, then Leon and now Edna. Never.”

Ivy Mae muttered out loud.

“Must this here child walk in her mother’s footsteps?”

“What did you say?” Dora frowned unable to decipher Ivy Mae’s ramblings.

“Child, what the Lord giveth is his to taketh away.”

Ivy Mae had barely finished her sentence when Charlene interjected.

“Well now, we can sure enough agree on part of that. Cause he’s sure given me heap after heap of hurt. I just wanna’ know when he’s gonna’ take some of it away. Can you answer that, Old Lady?”

Ivy Mae was visibly upset. Now it was Dora and Nadine’s turn to step out of the line of fire.

“I’ll tell you like I told yo’ Mama a long time ago. God don’t do things like we do’ ‘em. He don’t even think like us. And thank goodness he don’t. His ways and thoughts reach higher than them there heavens of his. We ain’t got to agree wit’ God. It’s all his creation and he can do whatever he wants to wit’ it, whenever he wants to and whether we likes it or not. It ain’t

gonna' do you no good to fight against him. He reigns supreme over it all. Sooner you figure that out, child, the better off you'll be."

A long pause followed.

"That's all I gotta' say." Ivy nodded her head letting them know she was finished for now.

**CHAPTER 10**

This was the first time Dora realized that Charlene had such an unforgiving spirit.

“I’m glad I don’t have that problem.” Subsequent thoughts startled her.

“Yeah, you’re forgiving all right. To everybody except yourself.” Her mind turned to her long lost love.

Jacoby had swept her off of her feet from the very first moment she had seen him. Though she had been watching him from afar since she had arrived at Florida A&M University two years earlier, she was sure he hadn’t noticed her.

“Just as well,” she thought. “With his fine self, he can’t be nothing but trouble. Anyway I bet it takes more to maintain his ego than it does to service the national debt.”

Edna’s words replayed in her head.

“Dora, you wanna’ be happy?”

Dora had nodded yes.

“Well then, child, the key to happiness for a beautiful woman is to marry an ugly man. Don’t get yourself caught up with them pretty boys ‘cause they already caught up in themselves. They ain’t going to do nothing but give you a belly full of misery. Now an ugly man with a pretty woman sure enough knows how to treat her right.”

Dora thought. “Judging by looks, Jacoby is sure to bring some woman a double dose of misery. But not me!”

She quickly chided herself.

“Not that it matters. I’m sure he wouldn’t give me the time of day.”

The mere thought of Jacoby still gave her heart palpitations. She couldn’t believe that he still had the same effect on her even though it had been over ten years since she had seen him. Recently she had read an article featuring him in “Black Enterprise”. It looked like his dreams had come true.

The corners of her mouth turned up slightly. She was still amazed at how a gust of wind had precipitated their meeting.

**CHAPTER 11**

Dora's heart had skipped in trepidation as she pondered which route to take on campus. She hated crossing the infamous "Set." It was there in the dead center of FAMU's campus that legendary wolves hung out in pursuit of unsuspecting prey. The presence of any player who had an ounce of game was demanded on the strategically placed courtyard. Therefore any guy attending FAMU would rather be caught dead than not frequenting this spot at some point during the day or night.

It just so happened that cutting through the Set was the shortest route to the School of Business and Industry and Dora was in a hurry. She gathered her courage and stepped foot onto the sidewalk leading through the center of campus. She strolled along uneventfully. About midway through the Set, she saw Jacoby talking to a group of guys. She was sure that he had not noticed her. Her heart pounded so loudly that she expected every eye on the Set to turn her way. She shifted her notebook nervously in her arms when a sudden gust of wind blew in from nowhere. Her flared skirt ballooned up over her head like an umbrella popping up.

"Thank God I put on panties today." Dora abhorred the sight of panty lines and had found the only way to avoid them was to avoid panties. Now she had grown to love the freedom of going pantyless.

She was down to the burnt orange skirt from her meager wardrobe. At the last second she had pulled on the lacy black thong that Nadine had given her for Christmas. She could still

hear the mischief in Nadine's voice as she handed over the unsuspecting gift. "Girl, if this silk string massaging the crack of your butt doesn't make you feel sexy nothing will."

Dora scanned the Set relieved that no one saw as she hastily pulled her skirt back down. Another gust of wind blew up. She grabbed her skirt to hold it down and the papers flew out of her notebook scattering everywhere. Dora's bronzed cheeks blushed red as she chased her papers around. Just as she reached for the last sheet, one size thirteen foot of a \$150 pair of Air Jordans came down on top of it. Her eyes followed the long trail up the starched jean leg as it bent. He gently helped her to her feet. His smile told her that she hadn't been as lucky as she had thought.

"You're new on campus, right?"

"How did you know?" Dora kicked herself in the butt for lying.

"I would have remembered you. A booty, I mean, beauty like you would not have escaped me." He cleared his throat, "I mean would not have escaped my memory. I never ever forget a beautiful woman." He touched his fingers to his lips in a kiss before handing her the paper.

Thick eyelashes directed Dora's gaze to depths of never-ending green and violet in his eyes. She was so entranced that the paper slipped through her fingers and fell to the ground. Embarrassed yet again, she bent down quickly to pick it up and bumped heads with the gorgeous specimen in front of her.

"I'm sorry." Dora stammered.

He winced and rubbed his forehead. "Damn girl, you got a hard head."

Dora thought, "Guess that does that." Tears stung her eyes. She picked up the paper and hurried away.

“Hey, wait up.” He called after her.

From that day on, they became fast friends.

**CHAPTER 12**

Unlike Dora, Jacoby Banfield had come from a family of substance. He was one year shy of getting his degree. Like his father and grandfather, he was destined to be a pharmacist. His family owned a small chain of drugstores in Virginia. They were counting on Jacoby to join the family business as soon as he graduated.

Jacoby was used to getting what he wanted. Dora had not been an easy acquisition. He had never worked so hard to get a woman into bed with him. More often than not he was the pursued and not the pursuer. But not with Dora who seemed a lot more interested in her studies than she was in him.

When Dora met Jacoby she finally understood what all the hoopla was about when it came to love. One look at him sent her heart careening out of control. He came without a stellar reputation. Girls on campus were after him and he didn't seem to have the willpower to turn many of them down. Dora was determined not to be one of those girls styling in the Mercedes SLC convertible his parents had given him as a high school graduation gift.

Dora had come from a family who had never owned a car. They would have given their right arm for any motor vehicle. Jacoby rode around in his one hundred thousand dollar car as if it was nothing. It sickened Dora to think of the good she could do for her family with the money that had been spent on that car.

She had worked hard to get a full scholarship so she could have a better life. She'd be damned if she was going to let some out-of-control hound ruin it for her, no matter how

handsome and persistent he was. So while her body ached for him, her mind would not succumb. She had seen too many smart girls in her neighborhood get into trouble that way. One moment in love, the next pregnant and on their own to raise their child. It had happened to her mother, both of her aunts, and to their daughters.

Nadine had broken the cycle by being the first in the family to graduate from college and the first female not to have a baby out of wedlock. Dora was determined to follow in her big sister's footsteps. She would not be the one to throw them back into the vicious cycle of destruction that had held back a whole generation of Early women.

The more Dora resisted Jacoby the more persistent he became. It was not beneath Jacoby to invite her on dates because he knew she was hungry and too proud to ask for help. He seemed to have a knack for showing up when she was hungriest. This went on for months.

Jacoby made her laugh and smile a lot, more than she had done in her entire life. Dora was astounded to find a warm person underneath the superficial shell that she had clothed him in. Even more puzzling was that in all the times they had gone out together he had not once hit on her. He was the perfect gentleman, treating her more like his little sister than a prospective lover. So much so that Dora began second-guessing herself. "What's wrong with me that he doesn't at least try?" She wondered many times as she stared across the table into his dreamy eyes. She longed for him to reach over and take her hands in his and tell her that she was all he wanted and needed. That was how she felt about him. She sighed. "I wish I could tell him."

"Why can't you?" A voice deep within challenged.

"Don't be silly. He's got better prospects than you, child. You ain't nothing but a country bumpkin. And that boy is the real thing, the crème de la crème. Why would he want to be with a nobody like you?"

Dora didn't have an answer so she sat silently as Jacoby told her about his grand plans to expand their family operation into every state in the South and then nationwide. She tried to look interested but nagging doubts made it hard for her to concentrate.

A few days later Jacoby honked at her as he drove by on campus. She knew it was silly but she found herself getting jealous whenever she saw Jacoby riding by with one of his "hoochie mamas." He was spending more time with Serena these days. Both she and Jacoby were from Richmond and their families had been friends for many years.

Dora was convinced that Serena, while not in the same social or economic class as the normal "hoochie mamas" was a "hoochie mama" just the same. "Why else would she run around in those skintight skirts, barely covering that big teardrop ass of hers; her nipples poking out from tank tops stretched to cover her 38Cs."

It annoyed every female on campus that those 38Cs were not only real but didn't have even the minutest sag in them. They defied the law of gravity for sure. None of them doubted that Serena had gotten every male's vote in her campaign for Miss FAMU, winning hands down. Though she never came to Serena's defense, Dora refused to participate in the scuttlebutt surrounding Serena, figuring most of it was from pure envy.

When Serena walked across the football field on Homecoming Day, Dora heard the jealous sneers from other women in the bleachers. "Them tits might be real but that hair ain't!" They high-fived each other until they noticed their male companions salivating. Miffed, they continued, "It might be good weave but IT IS WEAVE!"

There were times when Dora was tempted to play the part of "hoochie mama" just to get Jacoby's attention. "If that's what he likes that's what I'll give him." At the last second, she always chickened out. "Girl, you don't even know how to get started. Besides if he wants me

he's going to have to take me like I am, skinny legs and all." She gave into the helplessness of wanting him but being too afraid to let him know.

Early one sunny morning Dora was strolling to campus. Birds chirping melodies along the oak lined street strummed at her heartstrings. There was something about their songs that inspired her. She swallowed her pride and marched over to Jacoby's apartment.

"So what if I'm not tall, chocolate and B-E-T "thick." I'm smart, ambitious and kind of cute. Besides one day I'm bound to fill out." Dora looked down at her hopelessly flat chest. "Why wouldn't he want me instead of that chocolate covered Barbie Doll? I could certainly help him a lot more in expanding his family's business." She had already shared a few novel ideas with Jacoby that had changed the way he looked at her.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the silver Mercedes parked in its usual space. She rang the doorbell and waited. After waiting for a while, she impatiently pushed the button several times and giggled.

Serena opened the door scantily dressed in Jacoby's white shirt. She hadn't taken the time to button it up all the way. "Jacoby," she called with disdain. "It's Dora." She made little attempt to hide her displeasure, that is, until Jacoby appeared in the room.

He hugged Dora warmly. "Hi Baby Sis. What brings you over?"

Dora stammered in embarrassment. It was hard to take her eyes off of Serena's nearly exposed bosom.

Jacoby didn't seem to notice. "Dora, I'm glad you came by. I was just getting ready to call you. You being my best friend, I wanted you to be the first to hear the good news."

Dora looked at him puzzled. "Good news?"

“Yep. Serena and I just announced our engagement to our parents.” He smiled as he pulled Serena into his arms. Serena looked up at him adoringly. Her abnormally large eyes flashed a look of “score” at Dora.

Dora was at a loss for words. Finally, she mustered up, “Well, congratulations. I hope you’ll both be very happy. You certainly deserve each other.” She struggled to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

“What did you come by to tell me?” Jacoby snapped long manicured fingers as he remembered.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just wanted to let you know that I aced that Tax Accounting test that I was so worried about.”

“Hey, I knew you would. Never doubted it for a second. Look, my parents are going to be in town in a couple of weekends. They’re dying to meet you. They wanted me to invite you out to dinner. You can bring a date.”

Dora was fighting back the tears. She didn’t want to make a fool of herself. “Sure. Call me with the details.” She hurried away without even saying good-bye.

Jacoby watched her leave. “What got into her?” He wondered out loud.

“Oh for God’s sake Jacoby. Don’t be so naïve. The girl’s got the hots for you.”

“Serena, stop being such a suspicious bitch. Nothing could be further from the truth. All Dora cares about is getting A’s in her classes.” For a fleeting moment his heart leapt with joy that Serena could be right. He just as quickly dismissed the idea. He had long since given up hope on that. Besides, Dora deserved more than the restricted life of parties, charities and socials she would live as a Banfield wife. “With her brains, not to mention her looks, she can easily be a

top executive at any Fortune 500 company by the time she's thirty. How could I stand in the way of her dream?"

Dora cried all the way back to her tiny apartment. She plopped down on the couch with the only thing that could soothe her. "Mama was right." She sobbed as she finished off the last bite of an entire chocolate cheesecake. "How could I have let myself fall for such a pretty boy?"

**CHAPTER 13**

The three sisters had been so immersed in Ivy Mae's tales and their own recollections that they did not notice the sun peeking over the tree line. The call of the Bob White bird along with the close hooting of an owl alerted them that daylight was upon them. They stretched and yawned their way back to reality.

"Wow, Lonnie sounds like my kind of man." Nadine sighed totally enamored.

"Who isn't your kind of man?" Dora wondered out loud.

Staring off into the distance, Nadine raised her eyebrows and nodded towards the narrow trail. "Here comes the answer to your question." Her mouth turned up in disdain.

Charlene could not resist. "Child, now you know that man there is no "buttis"?"

Her two sisters shrugged their shoulders. "What's a buttis?"

Charlene took pleasure for the second time that day in knowing something that her sisters didn't.

"Everything looks good "but his" head!"

The three roared out in laughter leaving Ivy Mae scratching her head in bewilderment.

"Ain't nuthin' funny 'bout that there nonsense! Now hush on up so's I can finish my story!" She snapped at them.

Clayton hurried down the barely lit trail towards them. Despite Ivy's chastising, the trio couldn't bring their laughter under control. Through laughing eyes, they salivated at the approaching fudge-covered Denzel on steroids.

"Don't nothing get a woman's love juices flowing better than a good laugh." Each thought as Clayton now stood in front of them.

"What's so funny?" He inquired with more than a hint of irritation.

They quickly wiped the smiles from their faces. It was a long walk back to town. They certainly didn't want to piss Clayton off to the point that he might leave them stranded there.

"Nothing." They replied with guilty faces before breaking out in giddy laughter again.

Clayton did what he always did when he was stressed out. He knelt down, found a stick and began doodling in the dirt. Charlene was surprised as she gazed down upon the animals that Clayton was releasing from his stick onto the ground.

"That's some talent you got there." She admired his handiwork.

"I used to do that with my friend when I was a little girl." She jumped off the porch and doodled with him.

"Oh yeah?" Hope flickered in his eyes. "What was your friend's name?"

"Gosh, it's been so long ago I can't remember."

Dora snapped her fingers. "But I used to call him Mud."

They stared at each other with questioning eyes.

By now, Dora had brought her laughter under control.

"Clayton, please forgive us. We're just a little giddy from staying up all night. Cousin Ivy Mae has been entertaining us with delightful stories.

“Stories! They ain’t stories. They’s the truth!” Ivy Mae insisted looking around for her cane.

“Ladies,” Clayton quickly stood to his feet gathering his fast waning patience, “you have a busy day ahead of you. I think I’d better be getting you back to your cottages.”

Ivy Mae jumped up from her rocking chair so fast that their heads spun.

“Young man, you ain’t takin’ these here girls nowheres ‘tils I finish tellin’ ‘em ‘bout their grandma.” She raised her cane.

“Take one more step and you’s gonna’ find yo’self at the bad end of this here stick.”

She shook the cane inches from his face.

It was no surprise that Clayton backed away. The look in her eyes made all of their hearts shrink.

Dora soothingly responded to their aged cousin as she gently placed her hands on the walking stick. The two stared intently at each other. Something in Dora’s eyes made Ivy Mae loosen her grip. Dora eased the cane down to the porch.

“Cousin Ivy Mae, we’ll only be gone for a little while. We need to shower and change our clothes. We promise we’re going to finish hearing everything you want to tell us.”

Ivy Mae eyed them suspiciously. “Everythin’?”

“Everything!” Nadine and Charlene chimed in nodding their agreement.

“We wouldn’t miss the rest of this for anything.” They quickly added.

Ivy Mae’s eyes darted from one to the next.

Finally each raised her right hand and took a turn vowing.

“We swear on the Bible we’ll be back. Cross our hearts and hope to die.”

They ended by making the symbol of a cross against their chests like they used to do when they were children.

“Y’all wouldn’t be tryin’ to fool a ole lady, now would ya’? I wouldn’t take right kindly to that.” She warned. “Lest you forget, I know how to find each one of ya’.”

Taking her time, she narrowed her eyes at each of them.

“And if you makes me come lookin’ for ya’, I ain’t goin’ to be happy at all ‘bout it.” Her tone gave them chills.

“A promise is a promise.” They gulped as Dora proclaimed on their behalf.

“Reckon it is. Now ain’t it?” Her departing looking left no doubt in their minds that they would be returning at all costs.

As soon as they were back in the car, Nadine pulled out her cell phone and punched in familiar digits. She frowned.

“That’s strange. Cameron hasn’t answered since I got here.” She dismissed it remembering that he had just gotten the lead role in a new play.

“He’s probably holed up somewhere studying his lines.”

Try as she might she still could not shake the nagging feeling that gnawed away at her insides.

It took less than an hour to get to the cottages. Nadine dashed from the car and into her cottage slamming the door behind her.

Her two sisters wondered, “What’s gotten into her?” They shook their heads as each went to her separate cottage.

Nadine rummaged through her purse looking for the vial of cocaine. Unable to feel it with her hands, she emptied the contents of her handbag onto the bed. Her heart sank. It was not there. Then she remembered leaving Cameron alone with her purse when she went to the ladies room at the airport.

“Damn him!” Her anger spiked.

Then she chastised herself for taking what looked like the last of his stash from his chest. She picked up her cell phone and dialed his number again, still no answer. It was too risky for her to try to score some coke there. She would have sent Clayton, but he had just started working for her. She was not sure that she could trust him to do that.

She quickly glanced at the Rolex adorning her wrist. Cameron had given it to her for no reason other than he loved her. She sighed with a jolt of love rushing through her veins. If she hurried, she could go to New York and return before anyone even realized that she was missing. It was worth a try.

She found Clayton and they sped off to the airport. On the flight she thought of how surprised Cameron would be to see her. In less than an hour, she would be getting her groove on with her favorite lover and her high of choice. She took a sip of champagne and reclined in the luxurious leather of her private jet.

When she awoke, they were landing in New York. She hurried to the waiting limo. Luckily traffic was unusually light. She made it to their penthouse apartment on Fifth Avenue in record time.

“Welcome home, Ms. Early.” The doorman’s normally polite greeting was replaced with what looked like disturbing worry. She nodded a greeting back brushing off her suspicions as overworked nerves.

Nadine rushed to the elevator. On the way up, she beamed with pride just thinking about the handsomely appointed apartment. She stepped off the elevator expecting to delight as she always did in the view of the city from the ceiling-to-floor length windows. The smile on her face instantly vanished as she stepped into a world of total upheaval. The world, where everything had its place, was in complete disarray.

Tears sprung to Nadine's eyes. She had spent untold hours making sure that they were surrounded only by the best. Her eyes desperately searched the living room for her favorite painting. It was the original angel from the Heaven Sent collection painted by Larry Poncho Brown. It had taken her months to find it and a small fortune to acquire it. Now it was gone.

Until she heard whispering, she was too incensed to be alarmed. Voices coming from the bedroom put her on full alert. She looked around for something to take care of business with. Whoever did this was going to pay dearly. She grabbed the antique walking cane within arm's reach. The silver head and the steel sword concealed within weighed heavy in her hands.

Carefully she opened the bedroom door. The smell of fresh sex smacked her in the face. The sight that greeted her ripped her heart out. Surprised, Cameron pulled the cover up to hide his naked body. Bruce lay beside him flaunting his nakedness without a hint of embarrassment.

Nadine screamed. "What the hell is going on in here?"

Bruce laughed wickedly while picking his teeth with the long nail on his pinkie. Nadine's eyes widened in shock at the diamond engagement ring gleaming on his little finger. It was the one she had found in Cameron's chest.

"What does it look like, Nadine? Surely you didn't think you were the only one who paid for my services this way." He nodded towards the line of cocaine on the nightstand.

Nadine and Cameron's eyes met. They both shrank away in shame.

Nadine ran to the elevator. Cameron gathered the sheet around his waist and ran after her. The elevator door closed in his face.

For the first time in her life, Nadine was at a loss for what to do. If it had been a woman that she had found with Cameron, that would have been easy. She proclaimed, "I would have scratched her eyes out!"

Then she sighed heavily. "There must be something really wrong with me to drive Cameron into the arms of a man, drugs or no drugs."

The more she thought about it, the smaller she felt. She had always prided herself on her sexual prowess. Catching Cameron with a man put a severe dent in her confidence. She racked her brain. "Surely there had to have been signs."

How many times had she boasted to her friends about her uncanny ability to pick out gay men? And to think she was living with one blew her out of the water. Realizing how ignorant she had been, she kicked herself in the butt. No matter how hard she tried, she could not come up with a single warning sign.

A sinking feeling in her stomach erupted as it dawned on her that she could have AIDS. Along with anger, embarrassment, betrayal and hurt, now she had to contend with fear for her very life. The gravity of the situation made her hands tremble uncontrollably.

"Damn you, Mama! Why do you have to be dead now?" She cried out in agony.

She had never realized before now how much she relied on her mother. Edna had been as steady as the Rock of Gibraltar as she went through the ups and downs of Nadine's chaotic life. She would have known just what to say to her devastated daughter. Of course, Nadine would have left out the part about the drugs and finding Cameron in bed with a man. She would have simply said that she had caught Cameron cheating on her and in their very own bed.

Nadine saw that her limo was still in front of their building. “Thank God.” She whispered as she crawled into the backseat.

No matter how hard she willed herself to forget, the scene of Bruce and Cameron replayed in her mind over and over again. Before long she was on board her private jet heading back to her home state. She leaned back and closed her eyes. She wondered if what had happened in Jamaica had driven Cameron to this.

She quickly chastised herself for not being able to remember everything that had happened so many years ago. Most of it was so unreal that she had convinced herself that it was a dream. Back then, she and Cameron were virtually unknown and about as close to desperate as they could get. Nadine’s head twisted fitfully as the surreal world haunted her dreams once again.

**CHAPTER 14**

“Ladies and gentleman, we have just been cleared for landing.” A lyrical voice with British formality aroused Nadine from her first peaceful sleep in weeks.

She and Cameron had been coaxed into an island getaway. It was just what they needed to relieve the stress of a show that was crashing and burning and careers that were doing no better. Thanks to the generosity of the producers of the show, they would be sitting in the lap of luxury for two weeks.

After an indulgent stretch and yawn, her face widened in a serene smile, “Hmmm! In a few moments I’ll be in paradise.” Jamaica was the only place where she felt completely at home.

She shook Cameron awake and they hurried off the plane. They gathered their bags and made a mad dash to catch their next flight to a remote island that had been reserved just for them. With ocean on both sides, the small twin-engine plane landed on the tiniest of runways frightening them almost to death. The wheels of the plane skidded with a hop, skip and jump to a halt a few feet from a cluster of lonely palm trees.

Nadine squeezed Cameron’s hand until it turned blue. Dust swirled all around invading the interior of the aircraft. They coughed losing the battle to fan it away. The Rastafarian pilot jumped out of the plane onto the ground. His hardened bare feet hit the tightly packed dirt with a

loud thug. “Madame, welcome to me world.” He proudly widened his arms, words flowing out of his mouth like an island melody.

“Now gimme’ your hand so me can lift you outta’ here.”

For once, Nadine did as she was told. Cameron jumped down afterwards. The heat was suffocating. Within seconds, they were soaking wet from perspiration. Smoke drifted their way tickling their noses with a pungent sweetness that they recognized immediately.

Nadine followed the smoke to their pilot, I-Von. He was smoking the biggest fattest reefer they had ever seen. He offered a hit to Cameron and then Nadine.

They shrugged in agreement. “When in Jamaica, do as the Jamaicans!”

Any worries they had brought with them melted away with each draw. “I could have used this on our flight over here.” Nadine giggled.

“You got that right!” Cameron playfully snatched the joint from her hand. While the jaunt to the remote destination had been harrowing, their flight from New York had been perfect.

The large jet glided through the clear sky effortlessly. Cameron had lied telling the flight attendant that they were on their honeymoon. She made an announcement to the applause of all on board and gave them bottle after bottle of champagne.

Nadine was not about to object. She snuggled close to Cameron in absolute bliss. “Hmmm! I would marry him,” she stared up at him longingly. “If only he’d ask!” She let out an almost undetectable breath of frustration.

Her heart quickened with the thought. “Maybe this trip he will.” She crossed her fingers in hopes that her wish would come true. She had so many wishes it was hard to prioritize them. Most days, her only wish was to be a famous star with all the fixings—fame, fortune and sex

with anyone she wanted whenever she wanted. Today though, she abandoned those thoughts focusing on Cameron only.

Her breath caught in her throat as her love spilled from her heart into her lungs. Struggling to catch the air that was slowly being squeezed out, Nadine gasped taking a big gulp of the plane's recirculated air to replenish her lungs.

Thinking that she was having one of her anxiety attacks, Cameron reacted quickly. "Craps, here we go again." He thought. "This is the tenth time this week."

He disguised his irritation with a caring smile as he fumbled around the seatback in front of him. Finally he found it stuck between the pages of the Sky Mall catalogue. He handed Nadine the bag and coaxed her to breathe in and out slowly until her breathing returned to normal.

Cameron relaxed after a few moments but his mind was racing. "This is exactly why I didn't want to come. I knew she couldn't make this long flight without getting hysterical. Hell, just last week, she had a fit when we were on the subway. From out of nowhere, she was claustrophobic. Same thing happened when we were on the elevator. We didn't even make it to the second floor before she was hyperventilating. My legs are still sore from walking up those twenty flights of stairs. I knew this was going to happen. I should have stuck to my guns."

Nadine had nagged Cameron until he had finally relented and agreed to come with her. Now he was regretting it. He rubbed his sore knees. Within moments he had fallen back to sleep.

Filled with gratitude, Nadine looked at Cameron sleeping peacefully. "He's so good to me." She whimpered lovingly.

In every one of the 365 days 9 hours and 32 minutes that she had known Cameron, she felt as if she had known him before. She glanced up at him realizing for the first time that he was the splitting image of the man she had called Daddy. Mr. Moses and her mother had never married. Nor was he her biological father but she had loved him unconditionally anyway. Even when he abandoned them, Nadine still loved him and would have forgiven him if only he had come back.

The flight attendant interrupted her thoughts with another bottle of champagne. By the time they arrived in Montego Bay they were feeling no pain. They had even forgotten about their fear of flying on small planes.

**CHAPTER 15**

Nadine and Cameron's mouths had dropped open in shock. The longhaired, barefooted Rastafarian that they thought was the luggage handler jumped up into the pilot seat of the small Cessna. Cameron pushed Nadine in the one seat behind the pilot next to their backpacks. He jumped up front with the Rasta man who moments before had introduced himself as I-Von.

The half naked I-Von safely buttoned down the plane. He jumped back into the tiny aircraft talking to the tower in a language that they could barely understand. In seconds, they were taxiing down the runway.

The last effects of the champagne had worn off completely. Reality set in and both Nadine and Cameron trembled with fear. Suddenly the tiny cabin was enveloped in a stench that made a skunk's spray smell as refreshing as juniper in a cool spring breeze. Nadine pushed back the urge to puke. The odor was having the same effect on Cameron. He put his head out of the window to get some fresh air. There was none for Nadine in the cramped space between their bags.

I-Von grinned bearing big white teeth. "That smell be the scent of a Rasta' man." His proud declaration would have made them laugh had his foul smell not been choking them.

The rest of the flight I-Von taught them about his chosen way of life. He dare not befoul his body with soaps, detergents, deodorants or any man-made products. To do so would be blaspheming the temple of God.

Nadine had read enough of the Bible to know that their bodies were the temples of God. She thought as she tried to hold her breath, “Obviously, I-Von and his clan have chosen to overlook that “Cleanliness is next to godliness.”

By some miracle, Cameron and Nadine managed not to throw up all over the airplane. They were relieved at I-Von’s announcement. “That speck of land below be where we going.” He brought the plane in wide circles to a landing.

After landing, Nadine put as much distance as possible between herself and I-Von.

I-Von pulled their packs from the plane. His dreadlocks hung down his back stopping just above his muscular behind. The saltwater had turned his locks to a glistening reddish gold. He wore no shirt showing off his hard chest and stomach. His cutoff jeans exposed tight lean muscles. He took off his sunglasses. Eyes the color of the Caribbean Sea crashing into the white sand sharply contrasted against his chocolate skin. His nose spread across his face.

I-Von stood confidently in his tall lean body with large feet supporting his frame. Nadine was unable to contain her mounting desires when she noticed fingers that wrapped around everything with ease.

“Signs of a well endowed man.” She looked away but not before he noticed her lustful stares.

I-Von led them to the edge of a thick mangrove and took out his machete. He swung it cutting away the bush. Nadine and Cameron followed along the path he cleared.

I-Von laughed and talked puffing away on his “ganja”. They only understood a word or two of what he was saying. It soon became clear that I-Von’s conversation was not with them anyway.

Cameron moved his finger in a circle around his temple. Nadine nodded knowingly. I-Von was certifiably crazy.

“Madame, watch your step now. Me don’t want the snakes to carry you away!”

Deathly afraid of snakes, Nadine jumped three feet in the air.

With toothy grin, I-Von confessed, “No snakes, Madame! I-Von just be teasin’ and havin’ a little fun, that’s all!”

Nadine snorted a sarcastic “Ha! Ha!”

Cameron whispered through tightly clenched teeth. “Nadine, this is not the time to be agitating I-Von!”

I-Von turned, machete raised and a sinister grin on his face. On shaky knees, Nadine let one of her sweetest smiles grace her worried face.

After traveling for a while, Nadine finally worked up her nerves. “I-Von, are we there yet?”

“Oh no, Madame, not yet. But it be right around the bend.”

Finally they came upon a roughly made raft of logs strapped together with thick rope. I-Von pulled the raft to the shallow edge of the river and tossed their packs onboard. The river flowed by so slowly that it looked like a wide, slowly moving sidewalk. Millions of sparkling diamonds glistened on the water as the sunlight hit its surface.

“Madame, take me hand.” I-Von pulled Nadine onto the raft. Cameron jumped aboard. Nadine held on for dear life as the raft sank beneath the water and then popped back up rocking wildly.

“What have I gotten myself into?” She muttered under her breath praying that she would survive the trip. “I knew I should have listened to Cameron.” She now regretted that she had badgered him into coming.

I-Von picked up a long pole and pushed the raft to the middle of the river. It caught in the gentle current and they floated peacefully along.

The clear sparkling water lulled Nadine into relaxing. Before long, she had thrown her legs over the side of the raft and dangled her feet happily in the cool water, fingers splashing alongside. Pebbles sparkled and twinkled from the bottom as the sunrays beamed down touching each one. They drifted along lazily for hours.

“How much longer, I-Von?” Nadine asked with the impatience of a four year old.

Cameron flashed a look of warning.

“Me told you me lady, it be just around the bend.” He bellowed out a hearty laugh.

Nadine cupped her hands over her eyes to block the bright sunlight. Up ahead, there was no bend anywhere in sight. Tall thick trees formed a canopy over the river. Birds happily chirped out their tunes. Parrots squawked loudly from the dense forest.

Several hundred feet from the riverbank a stately mansion magically appeared. One moment there was nothing and the next a grand manor with lush grounds occupied the space. Nadine rubbed her eyes to make sure it was not an illusion. She expected it to be gone when she looked up again. To her surprise it was still there.

She shook Cameron who was fast asleep and snoring loudly.

Nadine decided that now it was her turn to have a little fun with I-Von. In her best Jamaican accent, she joked sarcastically, “I-Von, that there be your house, man?”

I-Von laughed nervously. “No me lady. That there be Li-Ved’s house. It’s where we be lodging for the evening.”

Cameron was still a little groggy but at least he was awake. Nadine ignored Cameron’s warning stare.

She teased I-Von. “Who is Li-Ved, your mother?”

Cameron, exasperated, rolled his eyes in the air. He fell back helplessly on the raft. “That’s it! We’re screwed! At least if I gotta’ die, I might as well go happy.” He puffed heavily on the ‘ganja’.

“Li-Ved not be me ma, Madame.” I-Von shuddered, his playful nature turning eerily serious. The sudden change made Nadine carefully study him. She wondered. “Is that fear in his eyes?”

Nadine watched I-Von’s seriousness turn into sullenness. Now he stared straight ahead in a desolate trance. Then as he had promised untold hours before, they rounded the bend. He waved to the enchanting creature who stood on the riverbank. He pushed the raft closer to shore with the pole and tossed the rope to her. With the grace of a swan, she tied it to the mooring.

Upon coming ashore, I-Von made the introductions. “Me Lady, meet Devilla. She be the mistress of this beautiful estate. We be her guest this evening.”

Devilla tipped her head graciously. “Welcome Miss Early.” Amber eyes focused on Nadine as if Cameron did not exist. The intensity in her eyes made Nadine uncomfortable.

Cameron did not notice what Nadine considered a brush-off from their hostess. With a slight nod from Devilla, I-Von whisked Cameron away for a tour of the grounds. Nadine was left alone with the exotic goddess of the estate. She had never met anyone as alluring as Devilla.

In white sarong with delicate gold threads, Devilla led Nadine up the winding path towards the mansion. Bright orange wings streaked with blue hovered on tall stems above thickets of Birds of Paradise lining the pathway. Beautiful Orchids with hues of yellow, maroon, pink and white petals blossomed in trees along the way. Their delicate fragrance wafted lightly through the heavy tropical air.

Devilla's golden body glowed to perfection under the sunlight. Nadine's uneasiness grew as she watched each of Devilla's long shapely legs gracefully maneuver the course. Never before had Nadine felt an attraction to another woman. She shrugged it off blaming her strange desires on the sultry heat.

Devilla looked back with almond shaped eyes that seemed to peer into Nadine's soul. What she said next made Nadine blush. "Your deepest desires are mine to deliver to you."

Nadine thought, "That's a strange way to offer services. Never quite heard it that way before." Then she began to wonder if there was a deeper meaning to Devilla's offer.

She dismissed that thought in favor of something more delightful. "A nice hot bubble bath with a bottle of chilled champagne is all I need right now." Before she could get the words out of her mouth, she was overwhelmed by the pure lushness of her surroundings. She was unable to imagine what had possessed someone to put this lavish estate in the middle of nowhere.

With knowing eyes, Devilla offered an explanation. "This place has been in my family since the beginning of time, with a few updates every now and then, of course. Later, if you like I will share some of its history."

"Oh yes, I would love that." Tiny rainbows of light dotted Nadine's body from the massive chandelier in the foyer. Her eyes were drawn to the open French doors in the parlor.

She peered through the double doorway leading back outside. Magenta blossoms of bougainvillea draped heavily over lattices scattered around the expansive courtyard.

Her attention was drawn back inside by the rich smell of mahogany. The intricate carvings of the moulding along the ceiling and staircase were of workmanship no longer done. Aged mahogany graced floors, furniture, cabinetry and archways throughout the house.

Her body melted into the silk upholstery on one of many chaises strewn throughout. She was seduced by the exquisite feel, smell and sight of luxurious antiquity.

Awaiting her in the master suite was a large tub filled with luscious bubbles. Beside the tub stood a heavy silver ice bucket with a bottle of Dom Perignon and delicate crystal glasses chilling within arms reach. Another set of French doors opened to a balcony with a breathtaking view of the lush gardens and surrounding rainforest.

With perfect ease, Devilla began undressing Nadine. “After such a long trip, you must be exhausted. I have prepared an evening that will awaken every inch of your body and soul.”

That sounded perfect to Nadine. She did not object when Devilla finished undressing her. Devilla stepped back and admired Nadine’s body. She moistened her lips with her delicious tongue. If a man had done the same thing Nadine would have recognized it instantly. As it was, she brushed it off. “Something about this place has got my imagination working overtime.”

Gentle breezes from the forest cooled the room to perfection. Nadine relaxed in the velvety softness of the bath. Devilla handed her a glass of champagne.

“Devilla, I hate drinking alone. Please join me.” Nadine pursed her mouth in a pretentious pout.

“Only if you insist.” Devilla hesitated demurely charming Nadine even more.

“Then I insist.” Nadine offered magnanimously. She looked up and was captivated by the relentless stare of her hostess. What she saw was so unsettling that she nervously looked away.

With that Devilla poured champagne for herself. “A glass of champagne is not complete without a toast. You first, Nadine.”

Nadine held her glass high with her arm blanketed in white bubbles. Her arm quivered as she managed to breathe out, “To awakening.”

“Here, here.” Devilla applauded. “My turn now.”

Outfoxing people was a way of life with Nadine. She had been controlling people and circumstances for as long as she could remember. Grandma Raleigh Boy told her that she was a natural born schemer just like her husband and Nadine’s great grandpa Tom Newkirk. It was a required asset in her profession. The look on Devilla’s face made Nadine realize that the fox had just been outwitted.

Devilla held her glass high and stared Nadine deeply in the eyes. “To destiny and the bold who claim their deepest desires.”

Nadine struggled to look away. An invisible force kept her eyes locked on the amber lights housed in Devilla’s head.

After several chilling moments, Nadine’s hand trembled and champagne spilled over the top of her glass breaking the spell. “Here, here.” Nadine whispered.

They finished their glass and then the bottle. Nadine’s head was spinning from the combination of champagne, reefer and lust that hung heavily in the air. She was too relaxed to move a muscle.

“Devilla, what kind of bubbles are these? It feels like each one is massaging every single cell of my skin. Mmm! This is so absolutely fantabulous.” Nadine leaned back in the tub.

“It’s an old family secret. The ingredients can only be found here.”

“Wow! It must be worth a fortune.”

“That’s an understatement.” Devilla claimed matter-of-factly. “But it’s not for sale. It’s only for enjoyment by the chosen few.”

“Chosen few?” With one eye, Nadine peeked over the mountain of sparkling white foam.

“Yes, Nadine. The chosen few.” Devilla whispered soothingly. “You have been chosen from many to be here. I offer you your heart’s desire. Name it and it’s yours.”

“Yeah right.” Sure she was teasing, Nadine looked laughingly at her. “Cameron put you up to this, didn’t he? That rascal! What he won’t do to get even?” She chuckled at the joke she had played on him before they left New York.

The look on Devilla’s face said otherwise. “This is no joke, my dear Nadine. Ask and it is yours.” She summoned her again.

Nadine’s suspicions were on high alert now. She had lived in New York long enough to know that there was no such thing as a free lunch. “If what you say is true, what do I have to do in return?”

“Trust me, you’ve done quite enough already.” Devilla choked back the comment on the tip of her tongue saying instead, “The only remaining thing for you to do is simply bow and pledge allegiance to me and to me alone.”

Nadine was astonished that it could be so simple. She speculated, “Heck, what do I have to lose? Nothing else is working: Praying, studying, lying, working hard, networking and partying with the “right” people, cheating, screwing. You name it. I’ve probably tried it at least

once. Besides, what harm could come from playing along with the marketing gimmick for this place. Maybe I'll even win a grand prize of a million dollars."

"Okay Devilla. Sounds easy enough. I'm in." The look of expectancy was written all over her face.

Devilla gave her the smile of a benevolent monarch granting a wish to a deserving subject. "Now you must tell me what you desire above all else."

Without the slightest hesitation, Nadine exclaimed, "That's easy. I want to be a famous star."

Devilla fought the temptation to yawn with boredom. "How many times must I hear this one? Whatever happened to originality? It would be nice to be surprised every now and then."

Then it occurred to her, "I guess it's those people who would surprise me that never make it this far."

"And so it is." Her lack of passion was somewhat perturbing to Nadine. To dispel any doubts, Devilla clapped her hands with a sudden surge of energy and announced, "Let the celebration begin!"

Double doors on the other side of the room opened slowly. The adjoining ballroom exploded in the untamed exhilaration of Mardi Gras. Striking men and women scantily costumed in festive feathers, beads, flowers and luxurious fabrics stopped what they were doing and looked in Nadine's direction from behind their masked faces.

Two masked temptresses helped Nadine from the tub. They carefully slipped a silky white gown over her head. The gown clung to Nadine's curves with her nipples standing to the attention of a reveille call. Devilla led the procession into the room. The seductive pair followed

close behind with Nadine on their arms. With a regal nod from Devilla, each patron welcomed Nadine into the fold.

Sensually erotic music swirled slowly in the air strumming each of them into full arousal. Lust inched its way through the room like ants on a mound of sugar. Uncontrollable yearning drove them into each other's arms in a wild orgy of pleasure: men with men, women with women, and women with men. They were desperate to quench insatiable desires tearing at the very core of their beings.

Nadine fell victim to Devilla and her ravaging escorts. They possessed her body bringing her to heights of pleasure beyond her wildest imagination. Nadine was on the verge of exploding in the most intense climax of her life. No small feat since she had had quite a few.

Suddenly her eyes were drawn across the room. Cameron was standing in the doorway. The betrayed look on his face said it all. He turned and walked away. Nadine tried to go after him but multitudes of hands pinned her down.

"Let me go!" Her screams were drowned out by moans of mounting passion. She struggled with every ounce of her strength. She could not break free and they would not release her.

She yelled out in horror, "Oh God, please help me!"

"He can't help you now," Devilla laughed wickedly. "You're mine, all mine."

"No!" Nadine screamed in terror.

Now they all joined Devilla in a chant as they circled Nadine. Their eyes disappeared leaving a hollow hole of emptiness.

Nadine heard her mother's voice, "Girl, I told you that your selfishness was going to get you in trouble one day. Life ain't just about you. God didn't give you your talents so that you could serve yourself."

Nadine pleaded like a little girl, "Help me, Mama. Please help me."

"I wish I could but you're beyond my help now." The tears streaming from Edna's eyes ripped at Nadine's soul. Edna whispered, "Nadine, you know what to do. You know what to do."

"No Mama, I don't!" Her cries grew more desperate as her mother's face faded away.

Suddenly calm peace washed over her. She began muttering, "Father, Most High, forgive me and remove me from the presence of this evil. Hide me beneath the shadow of your wings until this violent storm is past." Her mumbling turned into a chant in its own right. Soon her chant drowned out that of Devilla and her legion.

Then Nadine passed out. The next thing she remembered was being whisked through the air on the arm of an old lady with a coarse mop of silver hair.

The woman's skin sparkled like onyx as they zipped between clouds. "Be still child and hush up all that there silly mumblin' of yours. You's makin' me nervous." They took a sudden dive but Ivy Mae quickly gained control and ascended up to the clouds once again. Out of breath, she hovered behind a large cumulus cloud momentarily. "We ought'a be safe here!"

Nadine heard Ivy mutter under her breath, "If I didn't love Edna like she was my own child, I sure as hell wouldn't be out here fighting the likes of Devilla and rescuing the likes of you."

Nadine cowered under the woman's scowl.

Ivy Mae sighed in resignation. "Promise is a promise and I's a woman of my word!"

**CHAPTER 16**

“Ms. Early!”

A voice repeated her name while Nadine fought off the hands that shook her until her eyes opened.

“You were having a bad dream!” Clifford, her pilot, informed her.

“You kept screaming ‘Let me go!’ What was that about?”

“Like you said, bad dream. That’s all.”

Nadine shuddered wishing that she believed that. At the moment, she did not quite know what to believe. Her dream was so real. And it was not her first time dreaming it. Each time the exact same thing happened leaving her a little more distraught.

She thought, “Maybe I should see a shrink.”

Huge tears crept down her cheeks. There was something about her tears alerting Clifford that these were not manufactured like the ones that Nadine easily unleashed on stage. These were the real deal.

He was genuinely concerned. He had been piloting Nadine’s jet for over two years now and had never once seen her so out of sort, quite the contrary.

“Well she did just lose her mother. That can be humbling for most.”

Though he had never pictured Nadine being humble for anything. Yet here she sat on the plane looking like a little lost girl. In spite of all of the times she had whispered insults behind his back and sometimes to his face, right now he felt sorry for her.

Clifford Ravenell with his receding hairline and stubby body was not what Nadine had expected. Obviously someone had lost her order for the a tall dark handsome pilot. Instead she got Clifford. She didn't try to hide her disappointment and made it a point to let him know every chance she got. Clifford's reputation as one of the top pilots in the nation mattered not to Nadine.

"I'd trade him any day for that hunk." She often said within his earshot as she nodded towards a specimen more to her liking.

Clifford had been on the brink of quitting several times. Each time, Dianne, Nadine's manager and publicist, had begged him to stay on. The sizable bonuses she gave him took the sting out of Nadine's insults.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed tenderly at Nadine's tears. Before long her head was buried in his shirt. At first he felt awkward. He didn't know what to do with his arms as he held them out in shock. Nadine's body shuddered with each sob. His instincts took over. He wrapped his arms around her and rocked her until she had no more tears to shed. Her eyes were swollen almost shut by now and the blood pounded in her head so hard that he could see the veins pulsating in her temples.

"Look, Ms. Early, you're in no condition to face anyone right now. Just sit here and relax for a while. In the meantime, I think there's still some coffee in the galley. I'll be right back."

Nadine wondered. “How can he be so kind to me when I’ve been such a butt-face to him?”

Clifford hurried back with the coffee. “Here I managed to find these.” He handed her the coffee and a bottle of Excedrin Migraine. “These always work for me.” He smiled.

Nadine was surprised that he looked like a totally different person. “You have a beautiful smile. I don’t know why I never noticed it before.”

Clifford blushed underneath his brown skin. “Guess because I never smiled much around you.”

“I guess I never gave you much of a reason to.” Nadine admitted shamefully. “I’m sorry for all the hurtful things I’ve said about you. Can you ever forgive me?”

Nadine’s apology took Clifford by total surprise. He stammered, “Why yes, Ms. Early.”

“Stop calling me Ms. Early. It’s Nadine. Please call me Nadine.”

Clifford was floored. “Okay.” He managed.

Nadine reclined back in her seat with her eyes closed. She didn’t even miss Clifford until he placed a warm moist towel over her forehead. Eucalyptus drifted into her nostrils. Each breath took a little edge off of the throbbing.

“How’s that?” He asked.

“Heavenly.” Nadine cooed. She drifted off into a peaceful sleep. When she awoke Clifford was still there watching her like a trained Doberman on duty.

Sure that the magic would be gone and Nadine would awaken with her turbo broom fully recharged, Clifford approached her cautiously. “How’s the head?”

“Like new.” She smiled and paused. “How can I ever thank you for taking care of me?”

“No thanks needed. It was my pleasure, Ms. Early.”

“Please, just call me Nadine.” Her smile let him know that she meant it.

Clifford escorted Nadine to the limo and waved good-bye from the tarmac. She turned and stared out the rear window until she could no longer see him. Before long, the whirring sound of the limo zipping southeast on Interstate 40 lured Nadine back to sleep.

**CHAPTER 17**

Nadine was operating on autopilot at this point. She looked up finding herself back at the beach cottages. For a moment, she had no idea how she had gotten there. The last thing she remembered was the hysterical look in Cameron's eyes as the elevator door closed in his face.

"The only reason he's so upset is because he thinks I'm going to tell somebody. Maybe I will." Nadine pondered doing just that.

"Oh my God, what would people think about me if they knew?" She decided against telling anybody.

As soon as she stepped out of the limousine, her sisters flanked Nadine on both sides. "Where in the world have you been? We've been worried sick about you." Dora screamed.

Though Charlene pretended ignorance, she knew that Nadine had flown back to New York. Now she eyed her sister cautiously afraid that she might be onto her secret.

"Oh shit!" Charlene gasped as Nadine's eyes seemed to slice her in two. "That bastard Cameron told her."

**CHAPTER 18**

Nadine was as frazzled now as she had been on her return flight. Words had refused to come out of her normally loquacious mouth. She was so engrossed in her plight that she took no notice of her flight crew. They figured something terrible had happened to take her from being the happy lark of that morning to this clump of a person a few short hours later.

Her emotional state teetered between catatonic to sudden outburst of real tears. The two attendants were worried about her. On the earlier flight she had chatted their ears off like they were old friends. Now no matter how friendly and caring they were, Nadine refused to talk with them except to order drinks.

She abandoned her usual champagne in favor of glass after glass of Grey Goose vodka. The hardness of the liquor did nothing to soften the ugly truth of what she had just witnessed.

Nadine stared out of the window of the aircraft. She rubbed her eyes smearing her already smudged makeup even more. Edna's loving face followed along in a marshmallow cloud.

The stern chastising that always followed one of Nadine's famous attempts to hide her mischief echoed in her ears. "Child, how many times do I have to tell you before it sinks into that thick skull of yours that 'there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known'?"

Like never before, her mother's words hit a home run in Nadine's now broken heart.

Nadine turned away holding her hands up to Dora and Charlene.

“I just needed a little time to myself. That’s all.” Then she scurried to her cottage locking the door behind herself.

Charlene glanced at the heavens and whispered. “Thank you, God!”

**CHAPTER 19**

Dora was worried. Nadine's eyes were swollen almost shut. She had never seen her invincible sister in such a complete state of emotional turmoil.

"We've never lost a mother either." She breathed out sadly.

Charlene was not so easily fooled and was still on full alert. Cautiously she pondered out loud.

"What's gotten into Nadine? She was fine a few hours ago. Now she looks like the world is coming to an end. You think it's got something to do with Edna's death?"

Dora used all of her self-control to push aside her irritation at Charlene's callousness.

"Of course it does. What else could it be? She's living the perfect life—fame, fortune and the romance of the century."

Charlene could have sworn that she heard a hint of envy as Dora's voice trailed off.

Although Dora and Nadine fought like cats and dogs, Charlene had learned the hard way that they fiercely protected each other. Though disappointed, it came as no surprise that Dora refused to nibble on her comment.

Still, Charlene was sure that Nadine's sudden emotional upheaval was not over Edna entirely. She was like a hound dog when it came to sniffing out trouble. And trouble with a capital T hung heavily in the air.

Dora tapped lightly on the cottage door.

"Can I come in, Nadine?" Her gentle voice carried inside the cottage.

After a long pause, her tone grew firmer.

“Nadine, I know you hear me. If you don’t open this door right now, I’ll have no other choice but to get the key from the front office.”

Nadine, who normally delighted in publicity, was not ready to face the press who normally followed her around. So far, they had remained at a safe distance out of respect for the occasion. With this latest development, Nadine wanted it to stay that way.

Dora heard the shuffle of footsteps.

“Click!” The door was unlocked. She stepped into the room. The ocean roaring in the background added the only calmness to an otherwise tense atmosphere. She followed Nadine to the bedroom.

Nadine threw herself across the bed with gut wrenching sobs.

Dora held Nadine whispering soothing words in her ears.

“I know, Sweetie. I miss her too. But we will somehow get through this.”

Nadine realized how lucky she was to have Dora for a sister.

Dora had been more attached to their mother than the rest of them. As a child, she had been Edna’s shadow. Nadine could not imagine the personal hell that Edna’s death had caused her sister.

“In spite of her own heartbreak, here she is trying her best to comfort me.” The thought made Nadine boo-hoo even louder.

Loud wailing drew Charlene into the cottage. As soon as she stepped into the bedroom Nadine opened her arms for her.

Relieved that Nadine was still in the dark, Charlene rushed into her older sister's welcoming embrace. The three hugged in the safety of sisterly love. They lay on the bed and fell asleep curled up together.

Nadine awoke first. She twisted her head looking from sister to sister. In spite of their petty jealousies, she realized what a blessing they were. She never wanted to disappoint them again.

Her stirring caused them to wake. They sat up in the bed shoulder to shoulder with Nadine in the middle. She looked at each of them.

"I've got a confession to make."

Charlene thought. "Here it comes!"

"Cameron and I broke up."

"What?" Dora asked in a state of shock. "But I thought everything was going so well between the two of you."

"So did I." Nadine broke down in uncontrollable sobs again.

"What happened?" Charlene approached the subject cautiously.

Nadine clammed up.

"I don't want to talk about it now. Let's just say that that damn curse has been working full-time."

Charlene salivated. "Hmmm. Smitten one moment and bitten the next, this is going to be juicy and worth a fortune."

A rap at the door alerted them to Clayton.

"Ladies, if we're going to be on time, you're going to have to hurry."

**CHAPTER 20**

“It’s not real. How can we be burying Mama? She was supposed to live with us forever.”

Intellectually Dora knew that wasn’t true but her mother being dead just couldn’t be real, couldn’t be right.

Now the many times that Edna had squeezed her hands and dispensed her wisdom on the subject of death rushed back to her.

“Dora, child, ain’t not one of us gonna’ remain here on this here earth forever. God just put us here for just a lil’ while so’s we could practice for when we gits to His glorious heaven. It ain’t never been his intentions to let a one of us live forever on this here earth. Best believe, child, earth is just the place sandwiched between heaven and hell. When the time is right, we’s eitha’ gonna’ be called to heaven or we’s gonna’ be called to hell. Yo’ faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior, is sure ‘nuf gonna’ say which way the arrow’s gonna’ point for ya’ when ya’ takes that last breath. Ain’t nobody gonna’ live here forever, child. Nobody.”

The words her mother had spoken rang true but somehow Dora discounted them to be for someone else, not her mother. Dora’s breath caught in her throat as she choked back the tears. She was determined to hold onto her calm façade.

“Barak!” Pastor West’s voice boomed across the room.

“Now that I have your attention, let us pray and give thanks to God for this wonderful servant that lays before us.

“Mrs. Early was like a camel carrying its load across the desert. Though burdens weighed her down throughout this entire journey we call life, she managed to make it to her destination and deliver her load.”

Lovingly he stared down at the body of one of his small beloved flock. He pushed back the tears that were on the brim of spilling over. Looking out over the filled pews, he continued.

“Edna Rose Early, I had the privilege and honor of knowing this woman.”

Edna’s daughters braced themselves. They knew how much Edna hated for someone to use her middle name. Even in death they thought for sure she would take her vengeance.

Suddenly without warning, the microphone screamed a high-pitched tone drowning out Pastor West. When tapping the mike didn’t stop the annoying tone, he clicked it off and on. As soon as he turned it back on, the piercing screech echoed out across the church.

Several people came up to try to fix the microphone. In the meantime, everyone else held their hands to their ears.

“Oh for Christ sakes!” Nadine couldn’t take it any longer.

“What imbeciles!” She muttered to herself as she left her seat.

To everyone’s shock, she stood whispering in the Pastor’s ear. One of Pastor West’s bushy eyebrows raised up in a high arch.

“Ah-ha!” He exclaimed nodding his head.

Some in attendance leaned forward in a desperate attempt to hear what Nadine was saying between the racket. They finally gave up and leaned back disappointed.

“Pastor West, please don’t use Mama’s middle name again. She hated that.”

When she had finished schooling Pastor West, Nadine turned and smiled at the audience. She fought the temptation to take a bow. Without even thinking, Nadine raised her finger in the

air as she had seen the “good sisters” do so many times over the years and then tip-toed back to her seat.

Now it was Pastor West’s turn to look out over the audience. He gave them a benevolent smile and nodded his agreement to Nadine. The screeching stopped immediately.

“Well, now, where was I?” Pastor West chuckled but quickly turned serious.

“I watched Mrs. Early struggle on many a journey. Never once complaining, always submitting to her Master as she toiled across this desert we call life.

“Barak!” His voice boomed again startling awake the few who had begun to doze off.

“It’s a Hebrew word that has a few meanings. I’m only going to concentrate on two of its meanings today--the two that are so appropriate for Mrs. Early’s life as she journeyed across that desert.

“You see, in the old Biblical days, as a journey began across the desert, the master would load up his camels. You’ve all seen the pictures of the camels in a caravan with piles and piles of cargo loaded on their backs.

“I know when I’ve seen it, I always thought, ‘No way is that poor animal goin’ to make it across that hot desert with the burden of all of that stuff.’

“But to my amazement, with one word from their master, one by one each camel would wobble up on one knee first and then up on that leg. It would linger for a moment balancing and juggling its load, and then up it came on the other knee and finally the other leg. What a balancing act! Watching their skinny little legs trembling so under all of that weight strapped to their backs, I would swear that at any second their legs were going to snap in two like toothpicks. Somehow the longer the camel stood the stronger his legs became. And right before my eyes,

the camel pulled up straight with the grace of a ballerina and began its long trek across the desert.

“Now you’ve seen the movies or shows with those camels going across the desert, their loads swaying from side to side.”

Pastor West raised his arms in the air and swayed from side to side as he slowly walked across the room mimicking the actions of the camel. Each step took his lean further to the side to the point that everyone gasped for fear that he would surely tumble over.

“Just when we think their goin’ to lose their load and tumble over in the sand, their master calls out to them.

“Barak!”

“Through years of training and carrying loads across the desert the camel knows that when he hears the master call “barak,” it means to kneel down. And so the camel kneels. Once the camel kneels, the master comes along side the beast and tightens its load.

“With a tap from the master, the camel stands, on even wobblier knees, and starts its journey once again. This happens several times during the journey to get to the other side of the desert. Each time, the camel kneels obediently, not for water, food or other sustenance, but for his load to be tightened. Tightened, not lightened.

“Each time, the camel strains but finally manages to stand--the load seemingly heavier than before. By now, the hot sun is unrelenting as it beats down on the poor camel’s head. The hot sand pulls him deeper and deeper down with each step until it looks like he’s knee deep in that stuff.

“The entire time the camel is under the watchful eye of his master. At precisely the right moment, the moment when the camel can take not one step more under his burdens, the master calls, “Barak!”

“The camel obediently yields to his master each and every time—not because of the promise of sustenance or for the promise of a lighter load—but because he trusts his master. He yields and kneels in submission.

“This treacherous journey goes on for miles and miles until finally they reach their destination. The master calls to the camel one more time.

“Barak!”

“The camel kneels down. Only this time, the master does something different. He doesn’t tighten the load on the camel’s back. He loosens it and begins to remove item after item. When he’s finished, he calls out again and lovingly strokes the camel’s head for a journey well served.

“Barak.”

“This time the camel stands quickly. The burden that caused him to struggle has now been completely removed. There is something in the master’s voice that lets the camel know that there is something different about this “barak”.

“Again, the camel yields and obediently he follows his master. Only this time his master leads him not into the desert but to delightful springs of fresh water.

“Barak.” The master calls one final time. “Blessings, my good and faithful servant. Blessings!”

The camel kneels down for a final time and drinks from the fountains of sweet water.

“Mrs. Early’s life was like that of the camel’s. Many times I saw her weighed down and burdened under the heavy load of this life. At the Master’s call, she knelt down in obedience and submission for her load to be tightened, not lightened, so that she could continue her journey.

“She was one of the very few that I’ve come to know who recognized that ‘we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’ Her daily walk was one of humility.

“She was never one to judge. How often did I hear her say, “who am I to judge? That’s the Good Lord’s job not mine.”

“Even in her sickest moments, she stretched out a hand to others. I went to visit her in the hospital during one of her bouts of illness. She had just come out of a coma and so she was very weak—still struggling to breathe—could barely talk.

“I said to her, ‘Mrs. Early, I’m so glad to see you back with us. Let me pray for you.’

“She looked at me like I was crazy.”

“Well Pastor West,” she said. “You can pray for me if you wants to, but there’s some really sick people in here. You go on down and see them. I want you to pray for them first. I’ll be right here when you gits back.”

“Oh! To know that woman was to love her. God sent her here as a blessing to all of us so that we could watch and learn how a servant is to carry his load even through the hottest and driest of deserts. But now, God has called his final “Barak” to her. She is now with Him drinking from the wells of His living springs for eternity.

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”

From the vestibule of the church, Dora watched the hearse pull away with Edna's body. Her heart shattered into tiny pieces. This hurt far more than losing Jacoby and more than the cruel things Paul had said and done that led to their bitter divorce.

The next time the trio saw their mother would be in the vessels they had chosen for her ashes. It had taken hours of heated discussion for them to make the decision to cremate Edna.

In her usual drama, Nadine had insisted upon the traditional burial.

"Mama would be terrified of us setting her body on fire. Remember how she was when she heard about Uncle Baby Bubba burning up in that fire. Dora, how could you even suggest that?"

Charlene offered no opinion, which only served to annoy her sisters.

Dora could not bear the thought of worms and bugs eating away at Edna's flesh. Once that picture was painted for Nadine, neither could she.

Nadine wanted an ornate urn embellished with real gold and silver flowers.

Dora scolded her.

"Mama hated showing off. Spending all that money on that vase would piss her off something good. I can hear her saying, 'Child, I could have filled my freezer for the next ten winters with the money you spent on that.'"

Edna had served many hot meals from her own table to hungry children, old folks and even some of the town's drunks.

When questioned about the wisdom of sharing what little she had, she quickly pointed out, "All of us need a helping hand sometime.

"I might not have much but my little bit is a lot more than some folks have. I don't mind sharing one bit and as long as I got a mouthful to eat, ain't no neighbor of mine going hungry.

Besides, who knows? One of them might very well be our Savior. Now y'all remember what your Grandma Raleigh Boy used to tell y'all that Jesus said in the Bible, don't you?"

They knew it was pointless answering or trying to escape. She was going to tell them again anyway.

"For I was hungry and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger and ye took me in: Naked and ye clothed me. Then shall the righteous answer him saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed thee? Or thirsty and give thee drink? Or naked and clothed thee. And he answered them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto to me."

They were tickled by the thought of Jesus sitting at Edna's table eating hard dried lima beans, crunchy macaroni and cheese and black-topped biscuits.

Charlene couldn't hold back her giggles.

"Reckon Jesus would come back for seconds?"

Both sisters shook their heads in an emphatic "no" shuddering as they reminisced over the un-tasty meals Edna had proudly prepared.

Charlene pondered quietly for a while. In excitement, the thought that ran through her mind came spilling out of her mouth.

"I bet Edna would love an Asian design vase. I saw her staring at one in the window of Downtown Furniture Mart. It has beautiful butterflies flying around cherry blossoms."

"I don't think so. Mama hated Chinese food and that would be like wrapping her in one big egg roll."

The other two squashed the idea.

Charlene would not give up.

“Okay, I’ve got it. You know how much Edna loved sweets.”

They shook their heads in agreement.

“How about a cookie jar? We could put her ashes in a cookie jar.”

Charlene beamed proudly, sure that she had come up with the perfect solution. The glaring looks from her sisters told her otherwise.

Thus far, Dora had heard nothing that was suitable for her mother’s ashes and would not relent. She happened by a gift shop and saw a beautifully decorated wooden box that brought a smile to her face. She showed it to her sisters who, of course, disagreed.

After hours of bickering, they agreed to disagree. They decided to each buy a container of their choice and divvy up Edna’s ashes equally among themselves.

**CHAPTER 21**

After the funeral, everyone gathered at the four-room cinderblock house that Edna had once occupied, sharing food and stories about the deceased. According to the many tales told that evening, Edna had finally approached sainthood. No one remembered or cared about the many times she had stumbled home drunker than Cootie Brown's kite. It did not matter that not one of her three girls had the same father. No one questioned how each of those men just seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. The cursing outs that Edna had bestowed on friends and neighbors over the course of the years had long since been forgotten. The temper that made her switchblade, Ethel Mae, legendary now brought laughter.

Getting through the day had been harrowing. Now that everyone was gone, the three sisters sat together on the green vinyl couch in the tiny living room. Edna had sent back the plush leather living room set that they had purchased for her. She pitched such a fit that the furniture store had given her cash instead of the store credit that was their longstanding policy.

Edna had used the five thousand dollars to help Miss Gladys pay for surgery for her baby. It was supposed to be a loan but Edna knew that she would never get a dime of it back. It was a small price to pay to save the baby's life. The doctors had warned that if little Susie did not have the surgery, she would die before she reached the age of two.

Time had been running out when Edna received the extravagant gift from Dora and Nadine. She was shocked when she saw the price tag, but then realized that it was the answer to her prayers. Edna would not have been able to live with herself if she had not done all she could

to help save the baby. Giving back the living room set was a small price to pay for Susan's precious life.

Imagine their shock when they did not find the living room suit in Edna's house. Of course, she had forgotten to tell them that she had returned it. When they confronted her, she told them in no uncertain terms that what she did with the money was none of their business.

It had always been a mystery until her funeral when Susan, now grown up and healthy, told the story. The fury they had felt back then was replaced at first with shame over their selfishness and then with pride at their mother's generosity.

Charlene surprised them with her announcement.

"It's time for a celebration. Edna would be the first to agree."

She called to Clayton, "Bring in the champagne."

Charlene was always amazed at how champagne loosened Nadine's tongue.

Clayton proudly brought in a galvanized tub filled with champagne on ice. He popped the top on the first bottle. In lieu of stemware, they settled for the jelly jars that Edna used for glasses.

"Wow! How old can these be? I remember these from when we were kids."

Dora exclaimed as she held the cartoon decorated glasses to the light. She took a sip of the champagne and nestled Fred Flintstone close to her heart thinking of all the times her mother had touched this glass.

Charlene kept Nadine's glass filled.

After the third bottle, Nadine hiccupped uncontrollably. They all began to giggle. Then Nadine's giggles turned into tears.

"Damn that Cameron! How could he?"

Her two sisters leaned over and lovingly rubbed her back. Through sniffles Nadine continued.

“I caught that son-of-a-bitch cheating on me in our very own bed.”

“No!” Charlene faked sympathy.

Dora, having gone through a similar experience, empathized with her.

“Oh Honey, I’m so sorry.”

They sat quietly sipping their champagne. Suddenly, Dora jumped to her feet and grabbed her purse.

“You know, I’m tired of being sorry. And I’m sick and tired of these ‘ho’s’ zeroing in on men that they know are taken. Let’s go find that bitch and whip her ass.”

Her two sisters could not believe what they had just heard. Stunned, they watched Dora shed her cool reserve like the skin of an onion dunked in hot water. Right before their eyes, she transformed into a furious warrior.

**CHAPTER 22**

The last time Nadine had seen Dora like this, she was eight years old. The Knight sisters had chased them home from school for the umpteenth time that week.

Tuesday and Wednesday were the neighborhood bullies. All of the kids, and some of the adults in the neighborhood, trembled in their shoes at just the mention of the names of the evil twins. Mott Knight had denied being pregnant right up to the moment that she had given birth. She had not come up with a name for one child and now she had two. She took great pride in her cleverness in naming the unexpected babies. One had been born at 11:58 pm on a Tuesday night. The other one broke through after midnight Wednesday morning. Their unusual names were a source of teasing from the earliest age.

Dora and Nadine had run into the house out of breath. To their surprise, they ran smack into Edna.

“What’s wrong, girls?” She knelt down wiping sweat from their foreheads.

They explained their plight. The duo braced themselves when Edna pulled out the tattered Bible.

“This reminds me of the story of David and Goliath. Y’all remember that don’t you?”

They quickly shook their heads yes. Edna proceeded to tell them the story anyway of how little David did what seemed impossible by slaying the giant Goliath with only a sling, a stone and his faith.

“Well, seems to me you girls got a few choices. You can keep on running from them Knights and they’ll keep right on chasing you. Or you can stand and fight. If you stand and fight, even if you don’t win, let them know you been there and I guarantee they’ll leave you alone.”

Then Edna threw in an added incentive.

“But if you run away from those girls one more time, I’m gonna’ whip your behinds myself when you get home. I don’t mean for y’all to go ‘round pickin’ no fights. But I sure don’t mean for y’all to be nobody’s punching bag neitha’.”

It was no contest. They would rather take on the fiercely violent twins. Just to be safe, that night Nadine and Dora insisted on eating the nasty can of spinach that had been collecting dust on the shelf for months, maybe even years.

They reasoned to each other, “If it worked for Popeye The Sailor Man, it’ll work for us!”

Their little chests puffed out bravely with each bite of the slimy greens. Each chew deepened the scowl on their faces.

“This better work.” Their hearts fluttered between hopelessness and hopefulness.

After school the next day Nadine and Dora decided to outsmart the Knight twins by going the long way home. They rounded the corner on the last stretch of the trip. The twins jumped down from the chinaberry tree scaring them half to death. They stepped in front of the trembling Early sisters.

Nadine gathered her courage.

“Get out of our way, please.”

“If you want us out of the way, then just move us out of the way.”

Mistaking Nadine's politeness for fear, Tuesday puffed out her wide chest and pounded it in a threatening dare.

"We don't want no trouble, Tuesday, so just go on and leave us alone."

Nadine tried to reason with her. She grabbed Dora's tiny hand and tried to walk past them.

Tuesday and Wednesday pushed Nadine and Dora hard against their chests. From out of nowhere, metal "Pop Eye The Sailor Man" lunchboxes slammed into the heads of the twins. The unexpected blows knocked them to the ground.

Nadine and Dora jumped on them biting, kicking and pulling what little hair they could find on the twins' heads. After several moments of pounding, the twins' screamed for mercy. Dora and Nadine came out of their state of rage and released the bruised and battered pair. The day went down in infamy as Dora and Nadine whipped the evil twins into submission. The entire neighborhood, adults and kids alike, cheered them on.

**CHAPTER 23**

Charlene's chirping yanked Nadine from her memories.

"I'm in! Let's go! We can be in New York within a few hours. Boy, will that bitch be surprised!"

This was too good to be true. Charlene would not miss it for the world.

Nadine almost laughed out loud at her sisters' bravado. In any case, she certainly was not about to tell them that "that bitch" was really a bastard named Bruce. Even if she could have mustered up the nerve to tell them, she would never let them confront Bruce who had a mean streak wider than all of the Los Angeles freeways put together. His violent temper had landed him in prison a few times. She regretted ever letting him into her life.

She had been at a party after the opening night of another flop play. To drown their pain, the cast was getting high.

Bruce was the toast of the party. He had all kinds of the goodies to take their pain away and put them on top of the world. And best of all, it was free.

Bruce was as striking as he was dangerous. Jet-black hair against soft mocha skin made every woman, and more than a few men, in the room just want to slurp him down. He ignored them all and made his way to Nadine who for the most part had been ignoring him. She had her eyes set on Cameron, her co-star. They both sat in a corner commiserating over the disaster of the show.

“Tom just isn’t getting it. His style is too stiff for this kind of play.” They both agreed about the director.

Bruce piped up.

“I couldn’t agree more. It’s like he’s got all of you in a vise. This play screams for FREEDOM!”

The room grew quiet as everyone turned their way at Bruce’s outburst. He nodded at the crowd and they all turned back to what they were doing.

Bruce then turned his attentions to Nadine.

“And you, my dear, are exquisite.”

He began at her feet and let his eyes drift slowly up her body. His eyes rested momentarily on her exposed thighs.

“Divine.” He breathed so low that only she could hear.

His eyes moved on until they reached the healthy swell on her chest.

“Succulent.” His tongue swiped slowly across his lips.

Slowly he brought his eyes to hers and held his stare until she shifted uncomfortably.

“Thank you.” She managed a whisper.

The heat of his eyes had already begun to warm Nadine in unseen places.

Bruce reached across and slipped something in Cameron’s hand.

“For you, mi amigo. Enjoy.” He graciously cupped both of Cameron’s hands and lowered his eyes with a slight nod of his head.

Cameron stood.

“Please excuse me.” He quickly disappeared into the men’s room.

Nadine turned to Bruce.

“Looks like you’re the life of the party.”

“Me? Never.” Bruce feigned innocence.

“These are all my friends.”

He opened his arms magnanimously and stared out over the crowd.

“And I do what it takes to bring my friends happiness.”

“Would you be my friend, Nadine? What can I do to make you happy?”

He turned his dark eyes on her melting what little resolve she had left. His closely cropped straight hair spiked to give him an edge that made him dangerously delectable.

Bruce took Nadine’s hand and led her outside. He opened the door to his black Ferrari and they dashed off with him gunning the engine.

As soon as he had eased into the flow of traffic, he grabbed Nadine’s hand and brought it to his lips. He licked each finger and darted the tip of his tongue in and out between her fingers. When Nadine thought that she would scream out in unadulterated passion, he caressed her palm with long gentle strokes with his finger. As he removed his hand, he pressed something into her palm.

“For you.” He squeezed her hand closed tightly and then let it go.

She opened to find a tiny vial filled with white powder.

He nodded his okay and she snorted it up her nose. Her head went back as she relaxed into the mellow moment of pure sensuality. She melted from head to toe. Her blood turned to warm caramel caressing every inch of her body.

The Ferrari came to a screeching halt. Bruce opened her door and pulled her along. Within moments, he was pushing her against the back wall of the elevator. The short length of her skirt drew a circle around her waist. Her thong was thrown to the side. She wrapped her legs

around Bruce just as the elevator door opened to his penthouse apartment. Before closing her eyes in the ecstasy of the moment, Nadine got a glimpse of the city lights. Bruce swung her around and down into the soft lushness of Italian leather. Their bodies rolled together in the perfect crescendo of a roller coaster. At the final turn, they pounded against each other until they melted in a cataclysmic explosion.

Nadine wasn't sure if it was Bruce or the drugs. She just knew that whatever it was she wanted more.

It didn't take long for Bruce to convince Nadine to take "goodie" packages to his friends at the theatre. While Nadine delivered the goods, she never wanted to know what was in the package. Nor did she ever take any money in exchange for the package. For all she knew, she was delivering powdered sugar.

Though she and Bruce were hitting it off quite well, Nadine still had Cameron in her sights. While Bruce was serving his purpose for now, he sure wasn't somebody that she'd want to take home. And though he had "friends" in the business, Nadine was careful not to be seen in public with him. This was fine with Bruce. They both seemed to be getting exactly what each needed and wanted from their relationship.

It came as no surprise to Bruce when Nadine told him how she felt about Cameron. As a matter of fact, he had wished them both well. There was no animosity at all. He knew that if she was going to go where she wanted to be, she needed a "Cameron" kind of guy.

"Look, Babe. No hard feelings." He had said to her with a wink. "Business is business."

Bruce understood that the more famous Nadine became, the more business she would be bringing into his circle. He certainly didn't have a problem with that. Besides, Nadine's constant need to be in control had started really rubbing him the wrong way.

He graciously gave Nadine up to Cameron and wished them well.

The whole while, he was thinking to himself, “You poor unlucky bastard. You have no idea what a big fucking favor you’re doing me. Better you than me, man. She’s great between the sheets but the price on the mind is way too high for me.”

He recalled how charming and sweet Nadine had been in the beginning and what a vicious conniver she had turned into before his very eyes. Not that he had anything against conniving. He just didn’t want to be in a relationship with someone who was better at it than he was.

And so it was with benign resignation that he turned his beloved Nadine over to Cameron. While Nadine and Bruce were no longer lovers, she still relied on him for her drugs. Not once had it ever occurred to her to pay him nor did he request payment from her, at least not with money. She was always more than game to sleep with him. He was, after all, a skillful lover and never once disappointed her.

Even after the disastrous event of finding Bruce in bed with the professed love of her life, Nadine’s body still turned hot at the thought of his hardness moving inside her. Her fingers wrapped around her throat as if to choke some sense into herself. She squeezed until she felt the last drop of lust drain out of her body. Regaining her composure, she woefully declined her sisters’ offer.

“All right then, let’s go whip Cameron’s ass.” Dora was aching for revenge.

Nadine dried her tears.

“Thanks for the offer but the damage is done. Nothing is going to change it. I swear I’ll be okay.”

She managed to say with a lot more confidence than she felt at the moment.

Suddenly she froze as the paralyzing thought returned to her.

“What if this really is payback for Jamaica?”

Just then, Clayton walked in rescuing her from terrifying thoughts.

“Ladies, if you want to get to your cousin’s house while there’s still plenty of daylight, we’d better leave now.”

His official no nonsense manner made the trio sit up and take notice.

They staggered to the limousine with Clayton helping each into the back. As soon as they were seated, they fell into a drunken sleep.

**CHAPTER 24**

Clayton stopped the car in front of the familiar dirt road.

“Joining us today, Clayton?” Charlene teased.

“Now you know I’ve got to stay with the car. Anyway I get the feeling your cousin doesn’t like me too much. I’ll be safer here.”

Clayton helped them out of the limo.

“Here, take the flashlight just in case. And if you’re going to spend the night again, a call would be nice.” He pointed to his cell phone.

They ventured down the road that was as enchanting in the daytime as it had been scary at night. The Spanish moss that was ghostly in the dark hung gracefully from the large oaks in the light of day. Long branches created a natural archway all the way down the trail. Colorful wildflowers in red, yellow, pink and white popped up alongside the road and into the woods as far back as could be seen. The trek that had been so frightening was now breathtaking.

The never-ending journey from last night now went by like a flash. They easily climbed the five steps that had tripped them up the night before. The weathered planks of untreated pine on the porch creaked underneath their feet.

The three sisters ducked as scores of wasps zinged past them to their nest overhead. A wisp of a thread barely held the papery shelter to the rusted tin covering. The slightest of breezes was certain to send the nest plummeting down on top of them.

Ivy Mae was oblivious to the danger as she rocked in the exact same spot puffing on her pipe. She glanced pleasingly at the swarming wasps. Mischief gleamed in her eyes.

“Don’t worry ‘bout them none. They’s just back from a impo’tant mission. I sees they was right successful.”

She nodded “job well done” to her winged friends. They buzzed around her in reverence until she blew a light breath launching them on their way. Within seconds, the tiny dots of their bodies vanished in the light.

A hint of disappointment was in her voice as she stared after the dots.

“I sent ‘em to make sure y’all got yo’ lil’ fancy asses back here. Best be glad you did too. I’d hate to have seent what my lil’ friends would’a done to y’all if y’all hadn’t.”

The startled look on the trio’s faces made Ivy bend over in her usual cackle.

Remembering her dream, Nadine approached her cousin gingerly.

“Could it be true?” She wondered to herself.

Ivy Mae gave Nadine a knowing wink.

“Well, I reckon y’all done come back to hear the rest of the story.” She murmured.

“Let’s see, where’d I stop?”

She rocked her chair as she played through the visions in her head. She went through the motions of winding and rewinding until she came to the exact scene she was looking for.

“Ahhh! Yes. There it is.”

Her rocking now eased into the comforting back and forth motion from the night before. With her next breath, the rest of the story unfolded.

Ivy Mae would never forget the desolate look in Mame's eyes as she had shared the story of her life with Lonnie and Sam. Ivy Mae felt as if Mame was rocking with her sharing her pain all over again.

Hearing the details of Lonnie's tragic death was a painful reminder of the recent loss of their mother. Though they grieved for their mother, their reaction had been so different from that of Mame and Sam who had united in the death of their loved one.

Nadine, Dora and Charlene had done the exact opposite. Since the ordeal had begun, the only thing they had agreed on was to disagree.

## CHAPTER 25

Not even a week ago, the “Shockolate Diva” had been at it again. Her publicist held the phone away from her ear half listening while Nadine ranted for an hour.

Annoyed that her sisters would even consider honoring their mother’s last wishes, Nadine screamed into the phone.

“I’ll be damned if I’m going to be embarrassed. Every newspaper in this country is not going to accuse me of giving Mama a pauper’s funeral. I have a reputation to uphold.”

At times like these, Dianne hated Nadine’s guts. In her long career as one of the top publicists in the entertainment industry, Dianne had come across control freaks, many her very own clients. Nadine put them all to shame.

Nadine treated her mother’s funeral arrangements as she did everything in life. It was her way or no way. To hell with her two sisters’ wishes, or her late mother’s for that matter.

There were other times when Dianne stood in awe of Nadine’s ingenuity. It had been the very thing that had caught her attention.

Dianne had been one of a few in the audience of a small production “off-off” Broadway. Nadine had the lead role. At the end of the play, to the shock of the unsuspecting cast, Nadine reached into a mysterious velvet bag and tossed Godiva chocolate bars to the audience.

The audience went bonkers clamoring over each other for the sweet treat. They rushed out all smiles telling everyone in their path. Soon word got around packing the tiny theater to capacity. The unprecedented move had earned Nadine the nickname “Shockolate Diva.”

Shortly thereafter, Nadine snagged the role of spokeswoman for a leading chocolate company giving her instant recognition with millions of people. Fame quickly followed with all of its trappings.

Some days Nadine felt herself growing weary of the attention but never the glamour.

On those days, as if by magic, a child in the crowd would point at her squealing out in delight, “Mommy, it’s the Shockolate Diva.”

No one could fill her nickname with wonder like a four year old. It always recharged her battery.

Nadine had spent most of her life as one of millions of unknown faces in the world. It held no allure for her. Quite the contrary was true. Even on its worse days, she would take fame over anonymity. Not that long ago, fame had been her constant prayer.

She had been ready to throw the towel in on her struggling career when out of nowhere Dianne had appeared wrapped in the skin of an old Barbie doll. It was the perfect cover for Dianne’s G.I. Joe doggedness. From the moment they met, Nadine’s life was changed forever.

Many of Nadine’s friends complained about the ridiculous fees they paid their publicist and agent. Nadine was happy to pay Dianne whatever she asked. She was worth every penny. Right under the noses of everybody, Dianne had snatched the coveted chocolate candy endorsement for the unknown Nadine over several big name stars in sports and entertainment.

Nadine still had a hard time believing that Dianne had taken her on as a client. There were still times when Nadine pinched herself just to make sure it was not all a dream that she would soon wake up from. She counted her stars lucky for Dianne. It took nothing short of a miracle to turn her fledgling career around. Dianne had done it single-handedly.

“If she can do that with my career, I know she can spin whatever happens at Mama’s funeral to our favor.”

Nadine cringed at some of the hideous ideas her sisters had.

Edna had been dead for almost a week and the three sisters still had not agreed on one thing for her funeral. The big three “gotcha’s” stood in the way of them agreeing on something as basic as the color of Edna’s dress. Jealousy, envy and guilt reared their ugly heads at every turn.

Nadine wanted Edna dressed in red.

“It’s the color of power and boldness like the life Mama lived.” She adamantly defended her choice.

“That’s just like that floozy wanting to turn Mama into one too.”

Dora was having none of it and insisted on pink.

“Nadine, you have already said that pink’s Mama’s favorite color.”

Charlene meekly added her two cents.

“What’s wrong with ivory?”

Nadine immediately frowned at Charlene’s suggestion popping her lips in obvious distaste.

“Charlene, honey, ivory is just so blasé, so typical.”

She paused thoughtfully.

“Even Dora’s choice is better than that.”

Nadine blanketed her cutting remarks with an endearing smile.

Both Dora and Charlene had grown use to her backhanded compliments. Anything else from their big sister would have shocked the hell out of them.

Nadine was determined to pull out all of the stops by burying her mother in grand style. She had arranged for her mother's favorite gospel artist to sing Amazing Grace, Edna's favorite song. Nadine expected lots of press coverage at the event so everything had to be perfect.

When her sisters refused to go along with Nadine's plan, she had stormed out of the room and dialed a number on her cell phone. The sound of Dianne's voice on the other end had a soothing effect on her nerves.

Early in their relationship, Dianne had made it clear to Nadine that her temper tantrums would not be tolerated. They had agreed that Dianne was to signal time-out when things were getting out of control. After an hour of hearing the same banter repeatedly, Dianne yelled into the phone, "Time out!"

"Not to worry, Nadine. We'll find a way to spin this to our favor."

She assured her client with the calmness of December water on Biscayne Bay in Miami.

Most times, Dianne had to bite her tongue not to tell Nadine what she really thought about her pompous attitude. Dianne knew better than most that in the entertainment industry there was a fine line between confidence and arrogance. Nadine shimmied over that line almost every second of the day. Nevertheless, Dianne had the troublesome task of protecting Nadine's reputation at all costs. Fortunately for Nadine, she was the best in the business. With Dianne's reassurance, Nadine calmed down instantly.

**CHAPTER 26**

Dora made it clear that she was in favor of honoring their mother's humble wishes no matter what Nadine said. She had gone to the funeral home across the street with every intention of doing just that. Her heart sank as soon as she stepped through the door. She nearly passed out from the strong smell of embalming fluid. She could not believe how quickly the funeral home had deteriorated.

When they were kids, the plush velvet draperies and thick pile carpet had made this place the talk of the town even among white people. The funeral home was a palace compared to the dollar down house they called home sitting directly across the street.

Ashamed of where they lived, Dora and Nadine had invited friends to meet them at the funeral home instead of Grandma Jenny's. The shabby tin roof house with its run down front porch and rusty outhouse in the backyard was a source of embarrassment.

"How could two beautiful princesses like us reign from such lowly quarters?"

They often wondered to themselves as children reading Snow White and Cinderella.

"We's prettier than they is." The two held up the storybook in the mirror and compared themselves to the lily-white faces on the pages.

"Why ain't we livin' in a palace? It just ain't fair."

They were completely baffled as the shabbiness of yellowed fraying curtains glared back at them. They were convinced that Snow White didn't wake up to the smell of mothballs and

dust every morning. And though Cinderella had it tough, nowhere did it say a thing about an outdoor toilet snuggled back in the tall bushes.

Their only hope was for their very own Prince Charming to rescue them and carry them off to his palace in some land far away from the strawberry, blueberry and tobacco fields of Wallace.

For right then though, the funeral home was the closest thing to a palace that they could find in their neighborhood. So they spent as much time as possible there.

Dora glanced back over her shoulders at the house they had grown up in. This was the first time that she realized that growing up poor and in her grandmother's house was not as bad as she had thought.

As long as they steered clear of Grandma Jenny's prized possessions, things went pretty smoothly.

There were certain things of Grandma Jenny's that they knew to steer clear of: her money—she squeezed a penny tighter than the pressure in a tea kettle the split second before it whistled; turning lights on during the daylight hours—running her light bill up was tantamount to robbing a bank; wood on her woodpile—“she ain't had no money to be takin' hardheaded lil' chil'rens to the doctor over some snakebite; the pan full of fish she fried up every Friday night—not matter how high the platter was stacked there was only enough for her; Budweiser beer--the doctor had “prescribed it for her rheumatism”; her peach snuff--the one and only thing in life that she splurged on; and Patches, the meanest rooster both sides of the Mississippi River.

**CHAPTER 27**

Patches was famous for chasing other chickens, dogs, cats and people. He left his mark by pecking out patches of hair or feathers from his victim thus earning him his name.

Dora looked down wondering if Patches had gotten hold of the carpet underneath her feet. She quickly dismissed the thought since Patches had been dead and eaten many years ago.

Dora guessed that her grandmother had loved that jet-black rooster because it was one of two things her only son Baby Bubba had left behind when he moved to New York. She had sold the other shortly after he left.

Dora had heard whispers from neighbors that Patches was the offspring of a vicious prized cock by the name of Blade. Blade had won cockfights throughout Duplin, Pender and Sampson Counties.

Everyone was surprised when Baby Bubba gave up his lucrative cockfighting practice in favor of liquor. Many speculated he was heartbroken over his father's untimely death. Others were sure that he was involved in Bubba Sr.'s mysterious drowning. After all, how could an expert fisherman and swimmer like Bubba Sr. drown? While it was a fact that he had died from drowning, everyone was convinced that there had been foul play.

Back in those days, Bubba Sr. was just one more poor dead nigger. Sheriff Boykins made it clear that he wasn't wasting time and money trying to figure out how a dead nigger got dead.

"Let sleepin' niggas lay." He was overheard saying.

No colored person dared challenge him. Harding Franklin had made that mistake. His body was found years later when they were dredging Rockfish Creek looking for a missing white girl. The rope was still tied around his neck.

In the midst of it all, days after his father was laid to rest, Baby Bubba was on a bus with his sister, Eva, heading for New York City. He left behind Blade and his offspring Patches. Grandma Jenny had sold Blade to put food on the table for the six hungry mouths left behind.

Dora giggled as she remembered the day Patches had met his end. It was one of the few times she and Nadine had worked together without it ending in a knockdown drag-out fight.

They had gotten tired of Patches chasing them away from their freshly made playhouse. The two girls paid little attention to Grandma Jenny's warnings.

"I'm warnin' you gals that you's gonna' git up on one of them there diamondback rattlers on that there woodpile. Now stay off'n it."

Her warnings fell on deaf ears. Dora and Nadine tossed what fear they had to the side in their quest to build a playhouse. After rummaging through the woodpile, they found the perfect boards to build a playhouse and make furniture to boot. They enjoyed the peace of Patches being away, no doubt terrorizing anything that moved in the neighborhood.

Patches returned home to find the girls invading his precious territory. He chased them around in circles until they finally left. What Patches had not realized was that they were away plotting his demise.

Dora and Nadine hid behind bushes and lured Patches straight into their trap.

Angry squawking had made Grandma Jenny run out of the house with broom in hand ready to battle whatever wild beast was attacking her prized rooster. She dropped the broom at the sight that met her eyes.

Dora and Nadine had pinned Patches' wings to the low end of the clothesline. Patches pecked and clawed at them with his body swinging wildly in the wind. The two girls took turns landing blow after blow on Patches' wide underbelly with the precision of prizefighters. Each blow made his large frame swing faster.

Grandma Jenny shooed her granddaughters off. When she tried to unpin Patches from the clothesline, he made the fatal mistake of pecking her between the eyes.

"You son-of-a-bitch, you could'a pecked my eyes out."

Before she could stop herself, Grandma Jenny grabbed Patches by the neck and wrung the life out of him.

Dora and Nadine looked on. All the times they had pissed their grandmother off flashed before their eyes. Giggles stuck in their throats as they ran around the house to the front porch where their great grandma Raleigh Boy sat reading the Bible. For a change, they sat quietly by her feet with their knees curled up to their chins.

They had forgotten the incident by suppertime. They plopped down at the wobbly metal table coming face to face with Patches once again. Only this time he perched featherless and roasted golden brown in a pan in the middle of the table.

"Eat up, childrens." Grandma Jenny demanded.

Though they struggled to swallow they dare not defy her in light of Patches' fate. Patches was as tough in their mouths as he had been in his territory.

**CHAPTER 28**

A large blowfly buzzing by her ear snapped Dora out of her trip down memory lane. She swatted at the creature relieved that she had missed.

When they had been growing up, the funeral home had been one of few places in the neighborhood with a telephone and running water. It was a real treat for Dora and Nadine to listen out for the phone when Mr. Patty, short for Fitzpatrick, had to go pick up a body.

Now Dora looked around in horror at the drab surroundings. Dust tickled her nose into a bout of nonstop sneezing. She felt Nadine breathing down her neck.

“I told you so.”

Ignoring Nadine between sneezes, Dora was in the middle of a conversation with Willie Bryan. To Dora’s surprise, Willie grabbed a nearby yardstick and swatted at a lizard scampering across the ceiling.

In a desperate attempt to escape, the lizard dived towards the dirty window. Unfortunately, Nadine was in his path and he landed in her hair. Nadine went wild with hysterics. She frantically jumped around and beat at her smooth locks.

The flailing of her arms thwarted Willie’s attempts to remove the frightened creature that was now in the tangled mess atop Nadine’s head. Finally the lizard untangled himself and with the precision of a kamikaze pilot darted through a hole in the window.

It took several moments for Dora and Willie to get Nadine calmed down. Nadine snatched the paper fan from Willie's hand. He was not fanning her quickly enough to cool her off. She turned and rolled her eyes at her sister.

By now, Dora's focus had turned to the window. Her eyes lingered on the draperies. Dust had faded the rich burgundy to dull red. A few splashes here and there were the only remnants of the plush pile of the velvet fabric. The once elegant swag was missing all but a few of the crystal beads that one time sparkled like diamonds before their eyes.

Heavy traffic had worn the carpet down to bare threads. The few remaining patches carried stains from God knows what. It was definitely not the same place that had captured their imaginations as children.

As hard as she tried to hide her feelings, Dora turned her nose up in repulsion. She was having a hard time understanding why their mother had been so adamant about this place to the point of putting it in her last will and testament.

“Was this decision the only real possession Mama felt she had to leave behind?”

Dora wondered as she thought of the scanty items included in Edna's will. She finally dismissed it as a bad case of misplaced loyalty.

For the first time since this ordeal began, Dora and Nadine agreed.

“Wishes be damned, Mama deserves better than this.”

Though the two had come to the same conclusion, they were miles apart on choosing another funeral home. Nadine insisted on the opulent funeral home reserved for the upper crust of the town's white people. Dora thought it best to stick with a funeral home in the Black community. The one in Warsaw held definite possibilities.

Charlene was unengaged as usual.

“I ain’t paying for none of it. Let them do what they want.” She declared to herself.

With slow Carolina drawl and polite Southern manners, she was treating the whole thing with chilling indifference.

“Death is a natural part of life.”

Charlene offered with the authority of a trained scientist, which she was not. Science had never been her strong suit in school. She had always struggled just to get a passing grade and now she sounded like she knew what she was talking about. She giggled like a schoolgirl. The looks from her sisters let her know that she was dangerously close to being drawn into their drama. She quickly clammed up.

Charlene reasoned. “Why should I get my dandruff up? Those two never listen to a word I have to say anyway.”

She gave Dora and Nadine the innocent look that usually melted their hearts. This time it seemed to be getting on their last nerves. There was no doubt that the few things she had said were rubbing them the wrong way.

Charlene had become a master in masking her true feelings in a deceiving web of innocence. She delighted when one of her remarks did what she secretly intended: Cut deep and drew pain.

“Why shouldn’t the two of them suffer like I’ve had to all my life? It’s about time they see how it feels.” Charlene justified her actions.

Whenever she sensed that they had begun to catch on, she disarmed them with the smile that they had yet to resist.

No matter how Charlene truly felt about her sisters, she was no fool. She would never let her feelings stand in the way of her livelihood.

“Heck, with the money they’re making they can afford whatever I ask for. They should be grateful that I don’t ask for a whole lot more.”

The way their lives had turned out tormented Charlene. She should have been the one with the fame and fortune. From the earliest age, she had taken dance, piano, singing and even acting lessons. As far as she knew, Nadine had done none of those things. Charlene quickly put a stop to the chaos that played out in her mind.

“Feelings are feelings but business is business.” Charlene muttered often under her breath whenever she had to deal with Dora and Nadine.

Her two sisters provided quite well for her. She knew how to push the right buttons to get what she wanted from them. They gave into their guilt no matter how many times they swore never to give Charlene another dime.

At each of Charlene’s many requests, Dora and Nadine had compared notes and agreed.

“That girl’s more than a few years into adulthood. It’s time for her to start acting like one.”

In the end, they sent Charlene whatever she asked for and more. One thing was for sure. Charlene had pushed the limits this time. If she uttered, “What’s the big deal! A dead body is a dead body!” one more time, her two sisters had vowed to rip out the long strands of thick black mane sitting atop of that pretty head of hers. They delighted in the thought of plucking out one strand at a time.

With time running out and still no agreement between the three, their hands had been forced. They had to use the rundown funeral home across the street from their mother’s house. And so it was that Edna’s wish had been honored.

**TANGLED ROOTS – PART II**  
**FORGIVENESS STUDY GUIDE**

Let us pray before we renew our journey:

Father, thank You for the blessing of opening my heart, soul, spirit and mind. Thank You for the peace that You are showering upon me so that I might continue this journey with You as my guiding light. Open my eyes wider, Father, so as You reveal to me all unforgiveness that is buried in my heart that I might see it as it really is. More importantly, give me the courage to walk on the path of forgiveness making amends and peace with myself and those whom I am holding captive with my spirit of unforgiveness.

We are now ready to delve deeper into our walk of forgiveness using the lives of the characters in the book.

**What new area(s) of unforgiveness have surfaced in the life of**

Nadine:

Dora:

Charlene:

Other Character(s) –Please write name of character(s) and area(s) of unforgiveness:

**Are any of these familiar to your life?**

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

Nadine:

Dora:

Charlene:

Other Character(s):

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

Nadine:

Dora:

Charlene:

Other Character(s):

Yourself:

**If yes, how?**

**If no, why not?**

**Is your experience with unforgiveness more like that of:**

(Note: Check all that apply)

\_\_\_Nadine

\_\_\_Dora

\_\_\_Charlene

\_\_\_Other Character(s)--List character

**Identify and list those areas that apply to you.**

**What can you do to overcome?**

**Will you do it?**

### **GOD'S PROMISES**

Refer back to God's promises that are outlined at the end of PART I. Which of these do you see at play in the lives of

Nadine:

Dora:

Charlene:

Other Character(s)—Please specify character(s):

Yourself:

**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:**

Abba, Father—Thank You for opening my eyes to that which has been hidden from my sight but has held me captive. Cleanse me, Father, of all unrighteousness. Renew my mind, heart, soul and spirit. Release me from all that would keep me from drawing closer to You. I call upon You now to forgive me of my transgressions and to give me a heart of true forgiveness. Amen.

