

A SOUTH-WEST
Connection

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AN ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT STORIES

BY HENRIETTA ANDERSON & RAYNA SUN



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PUBLISHER’S NOTE

These stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination and used fictitiously to give the novel a sense of authenticity. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to

Maurice William Grangent, Jr.

April 2, 1972 – May 11, 2018

and

Duane DeMarcus Anderson

January 11, 1973 – April 8, 2022

Loved, Missed, Never Forgotten.

WARNING

Some stories contained in this book depict violence, erratic behavior, and relationships of sexual nature. If you are triggered by any of the above, please proceed with caution.

Some content may be triggering to individuals who have experienced violence or sexual abuse or drug abuse.

All stories are purely products of the authors' wild imaginations, strictly for entertainment purposes only and not meant to offend. We, the authors, do not condone this type of violence, drug use/abuse, domestic violence, or irresponsible behavior in any way, shape, or form. Neither do we encourage acceptance of abuse, be it emotional, physical, or psychological. Always be responsible while reading and in your actions.

Grief is a hard emotion to navigate. Please seek therapy—**therapy works**.

And remember to take care of yourself and others.

With love,

The Authors

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FOREWARD

Henrietta Anderson

I give thanks to God for my life. I am also deeply grateful to people like Stevie Anderson, Sungee Grangent, Linda Moore, and Patricia Winfield, who motivate and support me in writing these short stories.

ANDERSON DOWN 2 EARTH PUBLISHING CO., LLC
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FOREWARD

Rayna Sun

This is a work of fiction and an admission to the many people and personalities that run around in my head. I hope you enjoy my little pieces of these miniature worlds that come from my brain as much as I have enjoyed creating them.

I want to thank God for seeing me through some of the most difficult times of my life. It is through prayers and the support of family and friends that has allowed me to push forward.

Thank you to my parents for raising me and continuing to instill in me integrity, love, and patience. Maurice III—you know how I feel about you... you are my sun, my moon, my stars, my world. Hang in there with me. You didn't come with instructions, and I'm still trying to figure it out. I love you with every breath in my body.

Tom, you believe in me, you love me, you cherish me. Your support has sustained me when I needed it the most. I appreciate you, and I'm so glad that you came into my life.

To my family and friends who have been on this journey with me for quite some time. Thank you for riding with me.

To my cover graphic designer Tinique, as always it's been a pleasure working with you. You are a talented and beautiful spirit.

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To Monique, my "kindred". Enough said LOL.

To my editor Denise Renee, you push me to be a better writer, thank you.

To my fellow writers Henrietta and Steve, thank you for your input. Let's get it! Write, Rest, Eat, Repeat. What's next?!

Rayna Sun

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BABY SISTER

Henrietta Anderson

The morning sun filtered through my window, painting soft golden streaks across the kitchen table. As I sipped my coffee, I listened to the gentle crunch of fallen leaves drifting across the yard. Life has a way of moving quietly—slipping past in small, almost invisible moments—until suddenly I realize that years have passed, leaving behind memories both heavy and tender.

Today, like so many mornings before, my thoughts drifted to Baby Sister.

We were twins in heart but not in age—bound by love, laughter, and the countless little moments that shaped our lives. In every falling leaf, in every familiar corner of her artfully arranged home, I can trace our past. And today, I knew I would be walking back into that past, even if only for a few precious hours.

I glanced at myself in the mirror—my long, mixed-gray hair, my 155-pound frame—and for a moment, it felt as though I was staring at her. People always said we looked like twins, and standing there in the quiet morning light, I believed it more than ever.

I was born in February; she came in March the next year. I loved to cook; Baby Sister loved to eat. I found joy in cleaning; Baby Sister wanted things spotless—but she hated doing the cleaning herself.

She loved it when I cleaned it for her, and I did. She did not like it when I rearranged her furniture, but that never stopped me. I move my own furniture around at least twice a month. Most of my friends

say a blind person couldn't live in my house because nothing stays in the same place for long—and they are probably right.

This morning, I felt better than I had the day before. After watering the garden, I knew exactly where I was going.

"I'm going to see Baby Sister today," I told myself. "Five days is too long without talking to her."

I poured another cup of coffee and stepped onto the small patio outside my bedroom. The Autumn air brushed against my skin, raising a shiver along my arms, so I wrapped them around myself. When the chill became too much, I went back inside, grabbed a light blanket from the bed, and draped it around my shoulders.

What a beautiful morning it was. The leaves—orange, yellow, and soft brown—looked like a painting in motion. No matter how many years I've watched the seasons change, Autumn always steals my breath.

I picked up a book from the patio table and read a few pages, letting the rhythm of the words settle over me. Soon, I closed it gently.

"I'll finish this later, after seeing Baby Sister," I said.

I dressed in a gray sweatsuit to match my new smoke-gray Mercedes and smiled at the thought of telling her about it. I had planned to share the news last week, but that stubborn cough had kept me home.

After kissing my sweet dog, Daisy, goodbye, I stepped outside. The fallen leaves crunched beneath my feet like Corn Flakes—always Corn Flakes—and the familiar sound made me smile.

As I drove toward Baby Sister's place, my heart filled with that strange mixture of longing and comfort that always accompanied these visits. I had so much to tell her—things she already knew in spirit, but that I needed to speak aloud.

As the road curved beneath the soft blush of Autumn trees, I whispered, "I've got so much to tell you, Baby Sister."

And I kept driving.

"Some friendships are timeless—steady as the changing seasons."

Fall had arrived with its gentle chill, and as I drove down the

familiar road, I noticed how the world around me had shifted. People walked the sidewalks in layered sweatsuits, knit hats pulled low, scarves tucked neatly around their necks. A few had bundled themselves into heavy coats and shiny boots, ready for Winter's first breath. Something about Fall attire always comforts everyone wrapped in warmth, as if we have silently agreed to move through the season together.

My stomach growled at the thought of lunch, and I smiled.

I pulled into Q Time Restaurant already knowing exactly what I wanted: tender liver with brown gravy, soft cabbage, sweet yams, warm cornbread, and a slice of chocolate cake that tasted like someone's grandmother had made it with love. I planned to savor every bite later, sitting with Baby Sister, just like I always did.

When I reached her place, the familiar sight warmed my heart. Melvin and Andrew—fixtures there, as dependable as sunrise—were laughing about something only they understood. Seeing them bundled up in their Fall gear made me smile.

“Hello, Andrew and Melvin! How are you two doing on this beautiful Fall day?” I called out.

They exchanged a quick glance before grinning.

“Very well—because football season is here!” They chimed in unison.

I laughed. “Are you Falcons fans?”

“Yes—Falcons, Braves, and Hawks,” Melvin said proudly.

“That makes three of us,” I said. “Baby Sister and I had season tickets to the Braves for years. We never missed an opening day.”

I pointed to the back seat. “Look back there. I brought you both something.”

Andrew hurried over and retrieved the small gift bags. Inside were two hats—one a brown Big Apple hat, the other a bright Atlanta Hawks cap. Their faces lit up like little boys on Christmas morning. They slipped them on immediately, adjusting the brims with pride.

“You two look sharp,” I said, waving as I grabbed my pillow and

folding chair. They waved back, their new hats catching the afternoon light.

I walked the quiet, familiar path, crunching leaves along the way. No matter how many times I took this path, each visit felt different. Today, the crisp Fall breeze whispered memories.

When I reached Baby Sister's place, my steps slowed. My breath caught—not because I was unused to seeing her, but because love has a way of tugging at your heart every single time.

"Hello, Baby Sister," I murmured. I set down my pillow, opened my chair, and settled beside my twin. "I know you might be a little upset that I haven't been here these past few days. That cough had me down bad." I chuckled softly. "Don't worry—I'll do all the talking. You just listen."

The wind rustled the leaves, as if offering its approval.

"So..." I began.

"The past is never far when hearts are connected."

As I sat beside Baby Sister, the cool breeze brushed my cheeks. I folded my hands in my lap and allowed my mind to drift backward—as it always did here. The older I get, the clearer certain memories become, polished by time like treasured stones.

"Baby Sister," I whispered, "Do you remember that rainy night when Mae Frances came to get us from Greenwood? We were at Auntie Ruthie's house. She came rushing through that storm, and we had to leave our tricycles behind."

I smiled through the ache. "And those little black buckle shoes she bought you—Lord, you tried so hard to put them on just right. The times we rolled tires, played marbles and jacks, jumped rope—oh, and I know you remember us playing hide-and-seek and games like Red Devil."

More memories followed. "I know you remember when we would go eat Corn Flakes with bananas at Aunt Catherine's café in Greenwood when we were little girls. The goats would butt their heads against the fence, and it made you faint."

I chuckled softly. "Remember washing clothes in that big black

wash pot on Coleman Street in Pittsburgh? Afterward, Mae Frances would make lye soap, and when it got hard, she let you and me help her cut it into squares. We had so much fun doing that.

One early morning, Mae Frances woke us up and said, ‘Don’t open the door for anybody.’ Soon after she left, three men showed up, put our furniture outside, and sat us on top of it.”

I shook my head gently. “What a time. Not long after that, she came back with three men in a truck, and that’s when we moved to Mechanicsville on Garibaldi Street. I remember the burned Easter dress. Mae Frances bought me a yellow one, and yours was pink. You were standing too close to the heater in the front room, and your dress caught fire. You jumped out of it so fast. I thank God you didn’t get burned. I really love you, Baby Sister.

And remember when Mae Frances would send me over to Mr. Timothy’s house to buy cinnamon rolls? They were so good, especially after she put them in the oven. That was at 600 Whitehall Terrace. We lived in all four apartments on the top floor—apartments 9, 10, 11, and 12.

When Mae Frances didn’t have rent money, we moved in the middle of the night before they could come and put us out. And that radio—with the light on and no cover—people would come by and see it glowing. You loved listening to the song South Street on that radio. Girl I know you remember when we used to get government food. Peanut butter, powdered eggs, yellow grits, flour, meal, the cheese, the Spam, and then they started giving us chicken in a can. Mae Frances had food that she could make us a meal. Sometimes Mae Frances would send us to the store, and we would buy twenty-five cents of bologna and a loaf of bread. And that would be a meal for that day. But we made it Baby Sister.

On Crumley Street, we lived next door to Miss Wiggins’s store. The house had no windowpanes, and it was so cold in the Winter. We loved buying those big cookies with the horse on them from Miss Wiggins’s store. They were so good.

On Sundays, we had to walk across that wooden bridge on

McDaniel to get to Peter Street. You would cry and refuse to cross, and Mae Frances would have to go back across and pull you over while you cried.”

The wooden bridges. Our little fears and victories. Every memory felt alive. Every memory felt like us.

“Life is a journey measured in love and endurance.”

Richardson Street brought us something we hadn’t had in a long time—a little peace, a cleaner environment, routines, and a sense of stability. For the first time, Buster and Jerry came home, and all of Mae Frances’s children were under one roof.

“Lord Jesus,” she said, “This is the first time all my children have been under the same roof at the same time.”



The very next Sunday, she left us and went home to Jesus. Even after all these years, that loss still finds the most tender parts of my heart.

Greenwood saved us. Auntie Ruthie taught us so much. Mae Frances taught us how to make a way out of little or nothing. She did the best she could with five children, giving two away so they would have a roof over their heads, warm beds to sleep in, and food to eat. Granddaddy, Daddy, cousins, aunties, uncles, and other family members wrapped themselves around us like a blanket.

Auntie Ruthie taught us how to sew—month by month, dress by dress. We grew. We blossomed. We learned strength the hard way.

Sometimes Baby Sister and I walked to the store just to look at the scenery. It was so different from where we had lived before. We laughed, ran, and then came back to sit on Auntie Ruthie’s front porch. There was a green swing that Baby Sister and I loved to sit on. I didn’t know what she was thinking, and she didn’t know what I was thinking.

One day, as we sat on that swing, I asked her, “What’s on your mind?” She said she couldn’t wait to be grown.

I remember that Friday when Auntie Ruthie came home from work and told us to get our clothes and come with her. We put our clothes into laundry baskets. You and I were confused—we didn't say anything; we just looked at each other.

We got into the car, and she drove us to Greene Street. She handed me a key, and we walked into the duplex. It was a one-bedroom apartment with furniture. The living room had furniture. The bedroom had two beds and two dressers. The kitchen had a stove, a refrigerator, and a kitchen table. She told us we would be living there from now on.

At first, we were scared. You and I walked to our cousins' house, then rode back to the apartment. Looking back, that was one of the best things Auntie Ruthie ever did for us.

We survived everything—from burned Easter dresses to empty refrigerators to quick moves in the middle of the night. As teenagers, we lived in our apartment on Greene Street. You graduated from Greenwood High through night school. I had my son two years before you had yours. You worked, and I took care of our boys.

But through it all, we had each other.

“Life moves forward, but love roots itself deep.”

Sitting beside Baby Sister, I placed wildflowers at her resting place and whispered, “I come by your house every day—apples, peaches, figs, plums. Something is always growing, just like our memories.”

I smiled softly. “And yes, I finally bought that Mercedes. You'd fuss, but I know you would love it.”

I gathered my things and looked toward the hill where Andrew and Melvin were digging. Life does not pause—not for joy and not for grief.

As I drove home, the sun dipped low in the sky, leaving streaks of pink and orange across the horizon, like God's own watercolor. It was a reminder of the life we had shared. Memories filled the space beside me—laughing, crying, living, surviving. The past was alive in my heart, not as a burden, but as a gift.

I thought of all the times we had laughed, cried, and simply been

together. Life would continue, unpredictable as ever, yet anchored by the memories we carried. With the quiet hum of the Mercedes and the crisp Fall air brushing through the open window, I felt a deep sense of peace.

Some bonds are unbreakable. Some love is timeless.

I still go to your house and gather fruit from your trees—figs, apples, peaches, and plums when they are in season. The tenants take care of your trees, just as you always did.

And the love between us lives in every breath I take.

I love you, Baby Sister.

Forever.

BLACK THELMA AND LOUISE IN AN RV

Rayna Sun

*M*y first husband was a wealthy son-of-a-bitch. That allowed me to have enough money to enjoy my second husband, Richard, my only true love. I lost him in a bad car accident late one night while I waited for him to arrive at a party. By the time I'd met my third husband, I realized marriage was a joke. It's nothing but an organized institution for unhappiness, frustration, and aggravation. Love is only a myth that comes around once in a lifetime. But I foolishly tried one more time. After my fourth husband, I concluded that maybe, just maybe, marriage just wasn't my forte. So I decided I'd be adventurous in another way. Traveling.

Life is short. And after the two and a half years I've just had, I recently decided I'm doing all my living today. It's 2022, and the world has decided it is "back outside" after almost two years of quarantining due to COVID-19. So I'm going to be too. My ticket to freedom is a 1997 Fleetwood Jamboree Sport 25G Motorhome. It's been parked since the day I bought it back in 2020. Today, me and my favorite girlfriend in the Bay Area are hooking up. We're about to become the Black Thelma and Louise of California!

Except, she doesn't know it yet. And except, we ain't running no RV off no cliff! I love my life. It's taken me fifty-two years to finally appreciate it. I pulled up to Trina's house and killed the engine. I took in the exhaust through my lungs. That was the smell of freedom. I knew that I would have to convince Trina to go with me. And

this would be no easy feat. You see, she's not as adventurous as I am. And she lost her one and only true love, Watson, to cancer. He lost his five-year fight right after their 30th anniversary. She hasn't been ok since then.

But I'm here now! Me and my Fleetwood are going to pull her out of the depths of despair. For its first road trip, my RV did well on the drive from Napa to San Francisco. I had plenty of time to take in the beautiful views and to think about my plan. Today is the first day of a new adventure.

But first, I have an unknowing participant to recruit. I hope. She hasn't been answering her phone. I don't know what makes me think she'd answer her door, but I rang it anyway.

After a minute, I rang the bell again. I let two more minutes pass, then ring it a third time.

Hmmm. This might be worse than I imagined.

We haven't spoken or seen each other since the end of 2019. Not that we had a falling out or anything. It's just life; she's been grieving, and I've been coping with my own extenuating circumstances. I know she'll be happy to see me. No matter how much time passes, we always pick right back up like it was yesterday.

But I also know all too well that grief is a strange thing. You don't act like yourself because you're not yourself. Melody, Trina's 34-year-old daughter, told me she hasn't been doing well for an extremely long time. She explained that Trina only answers her calls. Trina only talks to her two other kids, Tracee and Kevin, when they physically come to the house and check on her. I forgive Trina for letting my calls keep going to voicemail. But now, standing outside of her house, trying to get in, the reality of my best friend's mental state is starting to set in.

Of course, her kids have keys to get in. I don't. If I planned this a little better, I probably would have coordinated with one of them. But sometimes, life doesn't wait for well-thought-out plans. As I contemplated what I was going to do next, the door slowly creaked open.

“Diane?”

I bucked my eyes. If I didn't lay them on her for myself, I wouldn't have believed it was her. I knew it was her voice, but I didn't recognize the person I was looking at. She looked like a frail, hollowed-out version of my bestie.

For Trina to be 5'7", she appeared much smaller next to my thick 5'9". She'd always been known for her cute, Coke-bottle shape. But it was obvious she no longer cared about her appearance. Her beautiful, long, natural hair was disheveled, and her grey sweatsuit swallowed her, making her seem all of five feet.

I worked hard to wipe the shock off my face.

“In the flesh!” I beamed her my brightest smile and threw my arms up in the air. In one sudden motion, she threw herself on me and draped her arms around me. I dropped mine around her and held my friend close.

“Diane!” Her voice quivered into my shoulder, soaked with tears. “What are you doing here?” She managed between sobs.

“Apparently saving your life,” I said, rubbing my hands up and down her back. But after a few more moments, I asked, “Can I come inside? It's really hot out here!”

Trina snorted. I guess it was her attempt at a laugh. She pulled away from me almost as suddenly as she attached. She slunk away into the dark house behind her. I thought it was dark because of the contrast of the sunny day outside. But once I closed the door behind me, I couldn't see a damned thing. Luckily, I'd been there so much during the course of our friendship that I didn't need a tour.

But I did need a nose plug. The smell was horrific. It was a mix of rotting food and funky shoes. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I could see straight through the open-concept living room, beyond the dining area, and into the kitchen. It was littered with carryout containers with half or barely eaten food. Soda and water bottles at various fill levels were strewn everywhere, as if they were dropped the second they had served their purpose. Wilted lettuce and other green vegetables—or was it mold—garnished rotting

food. A pungent whiff of moldy cheese or some other rotten dairy pricked my nose. Her small three-bedroom house wasn't built to contain the stench.

Trina's grief-induced depression was way worse than I imagined. I turned to her.

"This how you been living?"

She sniffled, hung her head, and let silent sobs take over her body. I scooped her up in my arms.

"Sweetie, I'm not judging. I just didn't know..." I paused to choose my next words carefully. "I didn't think that after two years, it could still feel so fresh for you."

"I... don't... know... how to... live.. without... him!" Trina's weight, what was left of it, collapsed in my arms. She felt like a ton of bricks. So did her words. I slowly walked her over to the nearest chair in the dining area.

"Let me check your fridge to see what you got to drink."

I opened the refrigerator only to be smacked in the face with the stench of the few stale items that remained. I picked up the carton of milk and side-eyed last month's expiration date. The empty take-out containers should have been my first clue. I closed the fridge with a sigh.

So much for surprising my friend, scooping her up, and burning rubber. My grand RV road trip was officially on pause. I had to get Trina out of this funk first before I could even let her know we were hitting the road for God-knows-how-long. I know she'd eventually agree.

She obviously needs a change of pace as badly as I do. Life had beaten us both up. But of the two of us, I handle grief and depression differently. I usually find a man to marry or a project to focus on. I'm done with marriage... at least for now. Traveling is my new project. And, apparently, so was Trina. I looked around, trying to figure out what I needed to tackle first, to turn this situation of a house and my friend's mental state around.

"Where your trash bags?" I asked.

She pointed towards the pantry. I grabbed a few and started by simply bagging the trash as Trina watched.



Gathering and taking out the trash throughout the house was enough to fill up an entire afternoon. I was hungry and tired after a few hours.

Now, I'm no stranger to hard work; you try owning a 40-acre winery like I did for more than 25 years! But this task was going to take me a few days. I didn't mind, though. I'd do anything to see my friend return to being her vibrant self.

First, I had to order something for us to eat. There was absolutely nothing in her refrigerator that I would put in my mouth. Plus, I needed the energy to tackle this project. I ordered In-N-Out burgers through Uber Eats simply because I didn't have to think about it. It was Trina's and my spot when we were at UC Santa Barbara together. Every time we've gotten together over the years, we always made a pit stop there. I knew her order by heart.

Next, I scribbled a list of priorities. While waiting for our food, I figured I could at least get started on sorting through as much of the rest of the mess of trash, clothes, and odd objects strewn about as I could. A few times, I turned around to find Trina skulking on my heels with dried tear streaks marking a path from her eyes to her chin. I always took a moment to hug her or rub her back. Sometimes, fresh tears would silently create new tracks.

When the food arrived, I ate while she barely picked at her fries, leaving them to go cold and stiff. If she spoke, it was a line or two about Watson. The rest of the time, it was a sallow look in her eyes that spoke volumes over her silence. Other times, she'd spontaneously start sobbing. Witnessing her pain was breaking my heart. I gave her as much grace as I could.

By my third day at her house, I'd finally cleaned the kitchen and put away all of the dishes. I'd straightened out the living room, plus

washed, dried, and put away all the laundry. I called Melody to find out how her bills were being taken care of and made arrangements to make sure she was good for a few months.

By 7 pm, I'd had enough. Trina had been in bed all day while I worked. I decided it was time to change that. I marched into her room. I did not come all this way to allow codependency on sorrow.

"We're done with this hot mess," I said, trooping around the side of her bed and snatching open the drapes. I didn't care that it was evening. A beautiful mix of moonlight and street lights cascaded into the room, giving it a magical glow. "Misery loves company. And I don't want none!"

Trina looked up at me with puppy dog eyes from under the cover.

"Up!" I commanded. "Go," I said, pointing. "Get into that bathroom, and I will be in there in a minute."

Trina hesitantly peeled back the covers. Then she moved slowly across the floor. I traipsed behind her, making sure she got in there. She plopped herself down on the closed toilet seat. I went out to my RV and brought back my favorite Dr. Teal's lavender foaming bubble bath, lavender Epson salt, and my special Aunt Norma's Pride Shampoo and Conditioner.

She sat wrapped in her raggedy terry cloth robe. The smell coming off my friend was making me angry and nauseous. And that hair! What once was a beautiful head of hair was now some type of matted bird's nest sprouting in every direction. I filled the tub with steamy hot, foamy water, and the pleasant smell filled the room. I clipped her fingernails and toenails. Then I stripped those filthy clothes from her.

"In," I commanded firmly. My patience had thinned. I inhaled. Then exhaled. I inhaled again, slower and deeper. The inviting smell of the lavender made my shoulders drop, and my voice soften. I smiled at her and gently helped her to the tub.

She slipped in and sat down. Her face relaxed a bit. I could tell she thought this was a good idea, also. I dipped a washcloth deep into the water and squeezed it out over her head and body. Warm water

rolled down my arm and streamed down her back. Trina closed her eyes and tilted her head down. I saw a little tension ease. That made me hopeful. So I kept running the water over her until her shoulders started drooping.

The trickling sound of the water was like a soothing lullaby. I was lost in the rhythm when Trina's voice disrupted the serenity.

"Why'd you show up here?"

That might have been the most coherent sentence she spoke to me in three days. Her eyes were still closed. I actually preferred it to the vacant, somber staring she'd been giving me. Without her looking at me, I didn't feel the need to rush my words. So I took my time to select them. Right now, I was focused on her; the moment wasn't about me. I kept up my rhythm with the water. I soaped up the towel and scrubbed her back. I lifted an arm to wash her pits. She didn't protest or push for an answer, so I continued filling the silence with dripping water until I was ready to speak.

"I felt like you needed me," I said, finally. Trina remained silent. So I kept cleaning my friend. I washed over her neck, her breasts, and even reached under the water to scrub her little va-jay-jay clean.

"Lay back," I said, motioning for her to dip her head under the water so I could tackle that hair. Gently working the pads of my fingers into her scalp was soothing me as much as it soothed her.

Truth be told, I was in just as bad a funk as she was; it just looked different on me. For the last two and a half years, I've been living in my own fog. Just before Watson died, I was forced to pause my life. Then, earlier this year, I got the news that let me press play again. But I didn't know what song I wanted to hear.

Alone in my Napa condo, I'd been working myself in mental circles, trying to figure out this next phase of my life. Nobody ever told a Black woman what she should be doing once she no longer has to be responsible for anyone else but herself. We're not used to putting ourselves first or even thinking of our own needs.

Children were always a priority, no matter how old they get. Husbands are a priority. Even elderly parents become a priority. But

what if you had a chance to reset your life? What if everyone is well taken care of and has moved on? What does a Black woman do with herself?

Husbands? Two died, and I divorced the other two.

Children? Grown. Tami is 27, and Rachel is 26. They've got their own lives on the other side of the country.

Parents? God bless their souls that they didn't have to experience the last few years with me.

Career? I finally sold the winery and got paid handsomely for it. And that was on top of the insurance money I already had from Pierre and Richard that I was still living on. Thank God for learning how to invest wisely while I continued working my business. Letting the winery go was hard because it was an integral part of my entire adult life. But I didn't have anything left in me to give to it.

Who am I without a man, kids, parents, or a business to take care of? That's why I decided this great RV adventure with my bestie was in order. I'm excited to discover those answers. I just didn't anticipate this pit stop. I came to get my girl, only to find out she looked as bad as I felt. I have a gut feeling that this trip is going to give us both the reset we need. Even though it hasn't started off the way I imagined, helping my friend pull herself together is actually helping me more than I am helping her.

I squeezed a dollop of Aunt Norma's Pride shampoo into my hands and scrubbed it into her scalp. Its scent blended beautifully with the lavender. Trina almost looked blissful with her eyes closed. I couldn't help but wonder what was going through her mind. I know she was having a real hard time getting Watson out of her head. They got married when she was 22, and he died on Christmas Eve in 2019. You don't get over 30 years of life together in just two.

Hell, I was only married to Richard, my second husband, for seven years. But they were the best years and the best love I've ever experienced. He's been gone for eight years now, and I had two husbands after him... but my heart still belongs to Richard. It probably always will.

Once I untangled her hair and conditioned it real good, I helped her up and ran the shower to rinse her off head to toe. Out of the tub, I massaged coconut oil into her skin until she glistened. I dressed her in a monochrome kaftan I found in her closet and some fluffy socks.

We moved back into the bedroom, and I sat on the edge of the bed, guiding her to sit on the floor between my legs. I parted, massaged, and oiled her hair, then prepared to put it into six big plaits. In the middle of me twisting her shoulder-length hair between my fingers, Trina looked up at me with the saddest look I think I ever seen.

“Diane. I’m all alone.”

I stopped braiding and thought for a moment. Then I put my hands on my seated hips.

“Well, what in the hell do I look like? Chopped liver?”

A shadow of a smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. But I was serious. I’m on the edge of rebuilding my life from the ground up, and I came here to do it with her. But she doesn’t know all that yet, so I had to calm down.

“I miss him so much.” She drew her knees to her chest with her arms as fresh tears flowed. I placed the comb on the bed. I got down next to her and pulled her into my arms. I rocked Trina like my mama used to rock me as a child. I allowed her to cry until it seemed she ran out of tears.

“I can’t tell you how to grieve or for how long,” I said after a long while. I paused my rocking and separated us so I could look at her face.

“But I can tell you that it’s time for you to start living again. Watson died, not you. And if anyone understands your pain, Sissy, it’s me.” I placed my hand under her chin and tilted her head up to meet my eyes.

“You still have so much more life to live. It’s gonna be hard, but you have to find a way to move forward. You’ll never stop loving him. And I ain’t gonna lie, you’ll never stop hurting. There’s a part

of me that will always hurt because Richard isn't here. But you've got to find a way to keep on going." I stood up.

"This is the last day that I'm gonna allow you to feel sorry for yourself. Understand?"

She nodded and sniffed. I think I got through to her. I love her, but I was tired of her constant crying, moping around, and looking like a hot mess. I was ready to fire up that pretty beast of an RV and get on the road to somewhere. *Anywhere.*

"Tomorrow, we're packing. And we're leaving!" My voice was authoritative and excited.

Trina looked up at me and wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

"Leaving?"

"Yep." I wasn't gonna let her wiggle her way out of this. "A road trip. You and me." I placed my hands on my hips and looked down at her as she thought.

"Where?"

"ANYWHERE! Anywhere the wheels can take us!"

Trina raised her eyebrows. "Okay," she said weakly. She moved toward the bed.

"Oh, no! You are clean and smelling good now! We're changing those sheets before you get back in that bed!"



The next morning, I was as excited as a kid on the first day of summer vacation. I was up around 9 am and DoorDash'd in some breakfast necessities that we could take on the road with us. The coffee pot was percolating, biscuits were baking, and I was ready to flip some omelets.

Trina slinked in, blinking and wiping her eyes. She looked "first-thing-in-the-morning" bad, but not as terrible as the day I arrived. The dark circles under her eyes didn't seem so dark. Two of her plaits had unraveled at the ends, creating curly spirals.

“Good morning!” I sing-songed. Apparently, my loud voice and cheery disposition were not something she’d been used to recently. “Hungry?”

“Uh uh,” she said, frowning and shaking her head no.

“Well, you have to eat something. We’re hitting the road today. Remember?” I scooped an omelet onto a plate and placed it right in front of her anyway. “Coffee?”

Again, she shook her head and turned up her nose. I ignored her and poured a cup of strong, black coffee, setting it in front of her. Normally, I would have been offended if someone didn’t eat my food. Today, I really didn’t care. I was more concerned with getting her out of this house, where every crevice reminded her of Watson. She needed some sun on that pale skin of hers. Her usual beautiful brown was more like a dingy taupe. I continued as if I didn’t see her sitting, staring into her plate.

“I packed for you.” I pointed to the suitcase I found in her closet, filled with mostly drab sweatpants that I found in her dresser drawers. “You know, a little color won’t hurt your wardrobe, ya know? Orange is a beautiful color on you.”

I fixed myself a plate and sat across from her. “It would look good on your skin... well, on the skin color you’ll get back once we get you some sun. Cheers.” I said, holding up my coffee mug in the air. I refused to set it down until she finally lifted her mug to clink mine. I ate and drank quickly. She sighed, never touching anything. When I finished, I picked up her plate, dumped the omelet, and poured out her coffee. A quick wash of our dishes, and I was raring to move.

“Let’s go!”

I led Trina back to her bedroom to dress her in something she could wear outside the house. I had her ready in a flash. I sprinted to the door, grabbed her suitcase and my stuff, and loaded them into the RV. Trina was frozen in the foyer, watching me go like I was the Road Runner being chased by Wile E. Coyote.

“I don’t have any money.” She said, “I don’t even know where my purse is.”

“Don’t worry. You don’t need money with me. Let’s just get up outta here! Where are your keys to lock up?” She pointed to hooks mounted to the wall behind the door. I grabbed Trina’s keys and her hand.

We hit that road so fast I thought my Fleetwood Jamboree would flip over. I wanted to put some distance between us and her house so she couldn’t change her mind. That was an irrational thought because she didn’t resist last night. I just didn’t want to stay stuck in her depression vortex and forget why I came in the first place. I made a quick pit stop before connecting to CA-1 South so I could get some gas and quickly swing through a hamburger drive-thru to grab something in case she wanted to eat.

Finally, around 12:15 pm, I was punching in a destination into Waze. The map app said my destination was seven hours away via the Interstate. But after my unnecessarily long trip to get to Trina, I wanted no parts of any highway unless it was called the Pacific Coast Highway. I forced the route to avoid highways. I didn’t care if the local route made the trip almost four hours longer. Driving down The Pacific Coast offers some of the most beautiful views in the State. Honestly, I didn’t care if it took us two days to get there; I was ready to enjoy every minute.

About 20 minutes into the trip, I looked over at Trina, sunken in the big bucket seat. She was so quiet. Had I shown up at her house three years ago or earlier with an RV and no plans, we would have been out the door within three minutes instead of three days. She would have been yapping about something Watson did for her lately, gushing over one of Melody’s or Tracee’s kids, or fretting that Kevin, her son, was wilding out in Atlanta and might never decide to settle down and get married. Maybe she was thinking the same thing.

I kept my left hand on the steering wheel and reached out to touch her with my right.

“It’s ok. I’m here. When you’re ready to talk.”

She glanced over at me, stretching her lips into a thin line that slightly curled up at the end. I think I saw a hint of her left dimple.

That's when I noticed. In the cup holders between us, next to the untouched fries, the hamburger had two tiny bites missing. Still holding her hand, I focused back on the road and tried to stifle my own smile.

"Where we going?" Trina asked.

"Santa Monica Beach."

"Santa Monica?"

"Yep! Or at least, we're headed in that direction. If we make it there, sweet. If not, we can always head somewhere else. It's all about our mood and where this baby takes us." I said, tapping the Fleetwood's dash.

"I just want to warn you. If I start crying for no reason out of the blue, don't be alarmed."

I had to turn my head real quick and look at her. I turned back to face the road but gave her a few side-eye glances.

"Girl! That is the longest sentence you've said to me in three days! All you BEEN doing is crying... and you ain't run me off yet!"

Trina's body heaved with a singular snort. I counted it as a laugh.

"Treenie, it's fine. Just be you, however you feel in the moment. Grief brings on all kind of irrational behavior," I said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her staring at me.

"My question is..." I started again. "How will I know the new irrational from your normal crazy irrational?"

Her eyes squinted at me, then she turned her head toward the window. But not before I caught a small smile showing her full left dimple. I beamed as I stayed focused on the road ahead.

"Remember Treen, I've known you since back in the day. I've seen you be irrational before!" I chuckled. So did she, but she tried to hide it with her hand as she kept staring out the window. I wanted to get a good belly laugh from my friend, and I think I know what will do it.

"Remember the Sigma party where we met The Twins?"

Something between a snort and a chuckle hitched in Trina's throat. Twice. Then it gave way to the first full-out laugh I'd heard from my friend in way too long. Under the grief, she was still there.

I stopped worrying.

Ever since we met in college, we always had great times and made great memories. I could tell that even in this season of life, we were about to make more. Our Black Thelma and Louise adventure was well on its way!

Now, we just need some tunes. I rifled through some CDs I had in the center console that I brought with me with my right hand. The Fleetwood had a CD player, and I was glad to have a reason to dig through my collection before I left. I pulled out a Maxell CD I burned probably 20 years ago. I had labeled it “Oldies Mix 2” in black Sharpie ink. I popped it in and toggled through a few songs until I heard Gladys singing *Midnight Train to Georgia*. I pumped it up. Trina leaned her head back and closed her eyes.



“Wakey wakey!” I nudged Trina till she opened her eyes. “I’m gonna refill the tank now so I don’t have to do it at night. If you wanna grab something, now’s the time.” I pulled into a large space at the convenience store attached to a Chevron station.

Trina sat up from her slumped position and rubbed her eyes. “Where are we?”

“Just outside Monterey.”

“I’ve been sleeping that long?” She wiped the drool from her lips and frowned.

“You had a good little three-hour nap, give or take. Come on, let’s roll.” I hopped out and trotted to the mini-mart’s door. Trina climbed out and followed.

When we got back on the road, Trina started picking at the ice-cold fries.

“You don’t have to eat that,” I said. “We can stop and get a really good meal. I’m actually famished.”

“I’d like that.”

“When was the last time we had crab legs together?”

Trina thought. “When we double-dated with Watson and Harold.”

“Ugh.” I shuddered. “Don’t remind me of Number Three!” I laughed. I claimed Pierre and Richard. But husbands Number Three and Four didn’t deserve me dignifying them by calling their names. Number Three and I barely lasted a year.

“Gosh!” I exclaimed. “That was back in 2016, just a few months before I decided I was done with his ass! Clearly, we are long overdue for replacing that memory with a positive crab leg adventure. Why don’t you Google us a place to stop?”

Trina pulled her phone out of her pocket and started searching. There was a place by the beach where I could park the RV. Trina had found a restaurant by the water, about a mile away, called Sandbar & Grill. Maybe we could have walked, but I didn’t feel like it. We Ubered over and arrived ready to throw down.

Most of the tables were lined up against the windows, so we had a great view of the docked boats. We ordered almost \$300 worth of anything we wanted: lobster tails, crab legs, shrimp, garlic bread, onion rings, and salads to keep it healthy. I started by ordering us some drinks with the intention of getting her tipsy so she could loosen the hell up. While we waited for the food, we stared out of the window in silence, soaking in the serenity of the water.

I thought the crowd at Sandbar was thick for 5:30 in the early evening. But then I realized it was Friday. Every table was occupied, and the bar was full. Incessant chatter came from the tables.

When the food came, Trina tied her crab apron around her neck and started eating like she hadn’t eaten in a month. She moved fast, breaking into the crab legs and ripping the meat out of the lobster tail. I just stared at her for a moment. She was smacking loudly and practically slurping down her food. I was afraid she might choke. The pendulum swung hard with her. It was either two bites or shoveling food into her mouth so fast, she looked like a hog eating out of a trough.

“Is it good?” I asked sarcastically. “Treen, when was the last time you had a good meal?”

She paused her intake to look at me. Her cheeks poked out like a chipmunk's. "I haven't felt hungry in a long time."

I smiled softly.

"Enjoy. But please slow down... I don't know the Heimlich maneuver!" She giggled.

Just then, the waitress came over and placed two large Blood Orange Margaritas on the table.

"I'm sorry, Miss." I reached for her arm as she turned to walk away. "We didn't order these. We ordered wine."

The waitress pointed in the direction of the bar. "The gentleman sent them over." She winked and walked off.

I leaned over to get a good look at a man about our age sitting in a suit at the bar. He was smiling in our direction, and when our eyes met, he raised his beer bottle to me. I smiled, wiggling my fingers "Hi" at him. This shit only happened in the movies! I touched my hair to make sure it was not out of place. I'm sure the grease from the food had long since wiped away whatever lipstick I had swiped on them this morning. But I still pressed my lips together to make sure whatever remained was evenly distributed.

I looked over at Trina. She had a confused look on her face. Her cheeks were covered with crab meat, and butter glistened on her lips. One of her braids was bent back on the side like a wayward devil's horn. Even with all of this, Trina was still a very pretty woman. A little bit of her natural deep honey color was starting to come back in since the sun beamed on her face through the RV window as she'd slept all afternoon.

I looked again in the gentleman's direction and smiled a wide, toothy smile. Trina turned to look over her shoulder at the man. She had the nerve to raise one of her crab legs at him. Trina turned back to me and rolled her eyes up to the sky. Meanwhile, that was all the invitation the man needed.

He strutted in our direction and stood over our table. He introduced himself as Gary. His smooth dark skin was framed by a neatly cut, mostly salt-colored beard and a dark fade on top. He reminded

me a little of my Richard. Underneath his beard, I suspected two deep dimples, which I'm a sucker for. It was easy to get lost in his smile. He was impeccably dressed in a tie-less button-down, giving his Tom Ford suit a casual vibe. When you've owned a business that caters to the wealthy for 20-odd years, you can instantly spot the luxury brands.

Gary looked at me in the eyes as he raised my hand and kissed it. He was straight-up flirting with me! I started batting my eyes so fast and hard I thought I'd get dizzy. I smiled when he told me how beautiful I was. I slid over to make room for him to sit next to me.

I was grinning so hard. *Could this be husband Number 5?* I wondered, before remembering I'd sworn off marriage. But nothing was stopping me from having fun! I just hoped there was no extra crab meat or butter on my face like Trina's. If there was, he was still sitting here. Suddenly, I was mad that I hadn't worn something more presentable, instead of these stretchy waist pants with a comfy matching T-shirt from Costco. But my plan was to drive all day, so it didn't require a fancy wardrobe beyond what I'd usually wear to BBQ's, buffets, and Thanksgiving.

"I was waiting at the bar because I'm meeting my business partner here," Gary offered. "We're starting our own fried chicken franchise."

"Like KFC?" Trina looked up on a quick break from her smacking.

"Better." Gary declared, snapping his finger and pointing at Trina with a smile and a wink. "Homemade! It's my mother's recipe and my partner Milton's peach cobbler recipe."

As if on cue, a portly, light-complexioned Black man walked into the restaurant by the bar, looking around. He definitely wasn't an athlete by any stretch of the imagination, but he had a kind face with nice eyes. Gary raised his hand. The portly man spotted Gary and started making his way to us. Trina was still chewing and sucking like she didn't care that we had company. I was starting to feel a little embarrassed.

Milton joined the table, and Gary ordered another round of margaritas. I was actually glad for the company. The men shared lively stories of their friendship and business journey. They were impressed with my success in owning a winery, so I was thoroughly engaged in the conversation.

Trina, with her 18-year career as a supervisor at the DMV up until she took a bereavement leave she never returned from, couldn't exactly relate. But she seemed content following the conversation without being required to stop inhaling her food. She contributed a few words every couple of minutes when her chewing allowed. She was so thoroughly enjoying her food that I doubt she noticed that Milton was totally digging her. It was comical watching him smile in her face while Trina obliviously remained focused on getting as much food in her little body as possible. She couldn't care less about that man.

The men excused themselves, but not before Gary gave me his card. Trina and I were tipsy and full-bellied by the time we stumbled out of the restaurant. Evening had settled in when I ordered another Uber to take us five minutes away, back to where the RV was parked at Monterey Beach. I tipped the driver \$20 in cash.

Trina and I clumsily climbed into the RV. I took a moment to straighten up the stuff in the front of the motorhome. When I looked over my shoulder, Trina was fast asleep on the full-sized bed in the rear. I smiled. She probably hasn't had a peaceful night's sleep in a while, so I wasn't gonna wake her with my restlessness.

I made myself a cup of coffee, grabbed a blanket, and slipped out. I walked the short distance to the water and sat down.

A few couples strolled by, but I was the only one sitting out on the beach at this time. I was close enough to the water's edge that the tide gently tickled my toes before retreating. I don't know how long I sat there deep in thought when stomping footsteps crunching in the sand behind me made my heart quicken.

Here I was sitting by myself out in the dark, and Lord knows what kind of crazy mad man or wild rabid animals could be out

here! How could I be so dumb? I swiftly turned around and saw the figure walking towards me. I panicked. The only weapon I had was my mug of coffee and my blanket. I figured I could throw the mug at the person, hitting them in the head, trip them with the blanket, and run. This was my plan. As the figure got closer, I realized it was Trina. I breathed a sigh of relief as she wildly looked around.

“What are you doing out here?” She fussed. “I woke up and couldn’t find you. I was so confused, and I didn’t know where I was for a moment.”

“Girl, you almost scared me half to death!” I exclaimed. “I’m sorry. I was feeling a little restless, and you looked so peaceful sleeping. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Trina looked out at the water, then sat down next to me on the blanket. We sat in silence for a bit, listening to the waves. It’s amazing how water is infinite yet dynamic. It never sleeps, ever.

I offered my cup of coffee, and she accepted it, taking several gulps. She didn’t hand it back. I guess I was done with it.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked.

Trina let out a long, hard sigh. “So much, Diane.” She picked up a handful of sand and let it sift through her fingers.

“Until you came, I hadn’t been out of the house in so long. It’s like I’ve forgotten how to exist in the world. How am I supposed to go on without him?”

Silence hung between us for a beat. Then I said, “I think you just start by deciding you want to go on living. Then you figure it out from there.”

“I’ve never been as great at figuring things out as you’ve been your whole life! I know there’ll never be anyone else like Richard for you, but you were still able to get married again. Twice! I can’t even imagine walking into a grocery store alone right now, much less being interested in a man! You had that guy eating out of the palm of your hand tonight! Had me feeling like I needed to break out my bridesmaid dress again! How do you do that? What’s your secret?”

“For husband Number Five?” I chuckled.

“I have a fifth dress. But only for you, Sis.” She responded with a sincere smile.

I chuckled and looked at Trina. “You don’t need my help in the man department! You’re doing great!”

Trina reared back a little. “What are you talking about?”

I threw my head back and laughed.

“Girl! I could tell you were clueless! My man Milton was all into you!”

She sucked her teeth and swatted her hand in my direction. “Please!”

“I’m telling you!” I said, mirth in my voice. “He looked at you like you was looking at that lobster tail!” I cracked myself up. Trina gave me the side eye.

“I don’t know how he had time to notice me. You all were just giddy, talking business. And you were in your element.” Trina shifted her body towards me and reached out for my right hand.

“I know you came to cheer me up, and I love you for that. And I know you have employees who can hold down the winery for you, but you can’t be down here with me that long. I don’t know if I’m coming or going. And I don’t know how or when I’m going to figure that out.”

I lowered my chin. She has no idea.

Trina leaned in closer to me.

“Diane? What’s that look?”

Ah! There’s my friend who knows me well. I didn’t have a plan for when I was going to tell her. But since she was finally showing signs of being aware of other things and people outside of her grief, I guess now was as good a time as any to start trickling in some information about what she’s missed these last few years with me.

“I sold the winery.”

“What?!”

“And the house. About a year and a half ago. Just before Christmas of 2020. I rang in the New Year in a quaint little condo about 15 miles away. I bought the RV then, too.”

“WHAT?!” Trina was stunned. “Why? What happened?” She stammered through her words. I looked out at the water. Was I being selfish if I told her? But I’d been keeping this from her for two and a half years. Not that she was picking up my calls for me to even have the opportunity to tell her, but I understood why she didn’t. It was the same reason I didn’t force it on her when everything first began.

“Diane, you’re scaring me!” Trina whispered. “What’s going on? Why did you sell everything and uproot your life?”

I let out a heavy sigh. I was just going to rip off the band-aid.

“I sold the winery and the house because I couldn’t manage it all while I was dealing with...” I paused. “Dealing with my chemo and radiation.”

There was a two-second delay, then Trina yanked her hand from mine and clapped it over her mouth. Two more seconds, and the weight of what I said really settled in. Tears instantly gushed from her eyes.

“Y-you have c-cancer?”

I rushed to reassure her.

“HAD cancer. Left breast. I just received the all-clear two months ago. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, but I didn’t know how.”

I could tell Trina was still stuck on hearing “radiation” and “chemo.” If I had the years-long battle with Watson she had, those words would paralyze me too. She hadn’t gathered her thoughts enough to tell me I had nothing to be sorry for. So I explained everything before she asked.

“I was diagnosed on November 19, 2019.” I paused to let it sink in. Trina’s eyes widened and instantly filled with water.

“Yes. That was the same day you called me to tell me Watson’s prostate cancer was back. Once you said that, I couldn’t bring myself to tell you my news. Plus, I hadn’t even had a treatment consultation yet. I didn’t know what I was going to do. And by the time all that was figured out a month later, Melody called me to tell me Watson lost his fight on Christmas Eve.”

Fresh tears flowed.

“I wanted to come to the funeral, but I was recovering from surgery. That’s why I sent that big-ass floral arrangement!”

Silent sobs overtook her body. I reached out to hug her. She hugged me back tightly.

“I’m... s-so... sorry!” She managed to breathe out.

“For what?” In my book, Trina had no fault in this situation.

“I... wasn’t... th-there for yoooooooo!” She howled. I pushed her off my shoulder a bit so I could lift her head and look her in the eye.

“Don’t be sorry, girl. I didn’t tell you! You already been going through it. Five years of dealing with Watson’s cancer... what kind of friend would I be to re-traumatize you at the same time your soul mate was losing his battle with the same damned disease?” Her tears slowed down as she absorbed my reasoning.

“I would have come to check on you way sooner, but then COVID hit just when I was starting chemo. I couldn’t come and risk getting sick. I was kind of glad you weren’t answering my calls because I didn’t have the heart to tell you all of this over the phone.” Words kept welling up, so I just let them continue flowing.

“I tried my best to keep everything together while I wasn’t sure if I was going to live or die. My kids told me long ago they weren’t interested in the business. I felt the best thing was to find good owners for the winery that I knew would take care of my staff. It was hard to let go of where I spent so much of my life... but my life had changed. I needed to lighten my load so I could focus on healing. So I did.” I inhaled. It felt good to finally come clean to Trina. “I prayed like hell during that time.”

Trina grabbed me and held me close again. I hugged her back. The sound of the waves soothed us both for a bit. In the distance, I heard someone shout at us.

“Get a room!”

Prick. I pulled away from Trina and turned my head in the direction of the voice. I almost fired back, “Go screw yourself!” But I remembered that I’m Black and decided against it. Trina either didn’t

hear or didn't care. We settled into a mutual side hug. She rested her head on my shoulder. A few minutes later, she broke the silence.

"You're so brave."

"How do you figure?"

"You've had so many twists and turns in your life, but you're never down for long. You just face it head-on and move into the next thing for you. How do you do that?"

I thought for a moment. "Well," I finally responded, "You can't hide from life. No matter how many times you try, it'll find you. Trust me."

"I never saw cancer coming. And to sell the winery? After Pierre and his family spent generations building it? I married into that wealth. I felt guilty as hell making the decision to turn it over to strangers, but I didn't see any other way. And I'm glad I did. My life was in limbo for two and a half years. I only had enough energy to fight for my life. Getting the news that I was cancer-free two months ago felt like the doctor was confirming that I won. I got the second chance to live my life I was fighting for."

Trina sniffled.

"We don't know what's coming around the corner in life. I don't want to be ungrateful and waste this second chance that God gave me. I don't know what things will look like a year from now. But I know one thing... I'm going to enjoy living through it!" Trina bobbed her head up and down slowly.

"I want to get back to living," she said. "I just don't know how."

Hearing her say that broke my heart. It reaffirmed part of the reason I'm here. I felt like crying for her. But my job was to give her a little bit of what I got.

"You just have to do it," I said

"Do what?"

"Live your life." I reached for my cup of coffee, which was undoubtedly cold by now, but she didn't hand it over. She just took another loud slurp from it, then said,

"I dunno."

“Do something wild! Something that’ll get your heart pumping again.”

She let out another huge sigh, and her shoulders drooped. “Like what?”

“I don’t know, something spontaneous!” *Like selling your house and business, and running off in an RV*, I thought to myself.

The water pushed up against our feet. I swooshed mine around. The night was warm, but the water was chilly. I wiggled my toes, shaking off some of the sand and sediments that accumulated on them.

“Jump in that water,” I said out of the blue.

“Huh?” She slurped from the cup again. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re grown and it is against the law. Besides, I don’t have a swimsuit. And what would jumping into water do to improve my life?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “It would be something spontaneous. Something you didn’t plan to do or have ever done before. You just do it to do it.”

“No.”

“Do it!” I said again, pushing on her arm. She shook her head at me.

Trina’s stubbornness is made out of steel. So I didn’t waste my energy going back and forth with her. There was only one way I knew I could get her to do it. I popped up, peeled my shirt over my head, and tossed it to the sand. Ever since having a steady stream of doctors, nurses, and specialists stare at my breast, I had lost any embarrassment about them. I unsnapped my bra and dropped it on the blanket.

“What are you doing?” Trina said, looking wildly around. She hastily set the cup into the sand. The last of its contents spilled out, creating a dark sandy clump by the edge of the blanket.

“Let’s go!” I quickly slipped out of my stretchy waist pants and underwear in one motion. Trina jumped up.

“Diane! No! We could get arrested!”

But it was too late. I was feeling wild and free. I took off running into the cold water. As soon as the chill hit my body, I regretted it. I squealed and jumped, but forced myself to keep wading in it.

I could see Trina gawking at me from the blanket. Even in the distance, I could see her mouth hanging open and her eyes balloon as she watched me shiver.

It wasn't any fun suffering alone. I was just about to retreat back to the sand because I felt like a total dumb ass. But then, I stopped. Because the impossible was happening in front of my eyes.

Trina snapped her mouth closed and started ditching her grey sweatshirt and baggy pants. Naked in seconds, she came charging toward the water. Shock, surprise, and glee hit me all at once, making me forget how cold I was.

"Treeenie!" I squealed like a teenager! She squealed too when she felt the water. The cold and the adrenaline rush had my heart beating so fast.

I splashed foamy sprinkles in her face and her hair. She flung water right back at me. In seconds, we were acting like two seven-year-olds, splashing each other. We were naked as the day we were born and just as carefree in that moment. It was pure exhilaration.

With every icy drop that slapped my face and shocked my body, I literally felt some of the stress of the last two and a half years melt into the foam and get carried away to join the depths of the Pacific. I don't know how Trina felt, but I didn't have a care in the world. I felt like God and nature were baptizing me back to life.

We were so caught up in having so much fun that I didn't know anyone was watching us. Suddenly, a beam of light landed on my backside. We froze and instinctively hugged each other, shielding the other's most private parts. We blinked and covered our eyes from the light with our hands.

"Ma'ams. You can't be in there like that." It was a man. He sounded white. From his silhouette near the water's edge, I could tell by his bulky midsection that he must have been a cop.

Oh God! Why did Trina have to be right about getting arrested?

We trotted towards the shore as the waves pushed up against our calves, then our ankles. As we reached the sand, I confirmed the officer was a white man. He tried to avert his eyes from our elongated bare breasts.

“Now, I could take y’all both down to the station for indecent exposure, but if you dress quickly, I’ll let you two elderlies off with a warning this time.”

Elderlies? I was offended. But now was not the time for a sassy retort.

“Sorry, officer.” We both mumbled at the same time, all four of our eyes cast downward. Embarrassed, we scurried to gather up our scattered clothing and scrambled to get dressed. I could say that this one moment was the most embarrassing moment I’d had in my life. But that would be a big fat lie!

We fumbled dressing quickly. “Thank you, officer,” I said. “Again, we’re sorry. I don’t know what came over us.”

“And please.” He pleaded, waving his beam over our now clothed bodies. “Don’t be out in public like that again.”

I didn’t care for his tone. But we took our warning and scurried back to the RV, where we cackled about the incident and other past crazy fun moments we shared until we fell asleep.



The next day, Trina was awake before me.

“I’m hungry,” was the first thing she said to me as soon as I opened my eyes. I was shocked. I didn’t think she should be hungry after last night’s feast. She had eaten almost everything in the sea. Maybe something about that water must have awakened something in her. But we Googled a breakfast spot near the beach and set off.

After another hearty meal, we started talking about the rest of the day as we waited for the Uber to take us back to the RV.

“Should we hit the road?” I asked.

“Where to now?”

“Anywhere,” I said, sweeping my arms out in a big gesture. “Anywhere you wanna go.”

“It’s so pretty here. Can we stay another day?”

I smiled. “Sure. Anything you want. But first, let’s get you some better-looking clothes. Something with color.” I said, looking at the grey sweat clothes.

When the Uber arrived, we redirected the driver from destination RV to head to Canary Row so we could do some shopping. When the sun got hotter, we stopped for snacks and water. Trina had to have an ice-cream cone. I swear... where was she putting all this food? She wasn’t a big woman. But I would buy her all the ice-cream cones she wanted just to see her look and act more like herself again.

The last time Trina cried about Watson was over 24 hours ago. Hearing about my cancer ordeal last night made her cry, so that didn’t count. Her appetite for food had clearly returned. Maybe her appetite for life was reemerging, too. She certainly seemed in much better spirits.

We walked in the sunshine, soaking in the vitamin D. Trina attacked her ice cream like a little kid trying to get it all before it melted. In her bag, I’ve bought her a few cute, colorful shirts, blouses, and even some pretty earrings that look good on her small ears. We left California Classics and were standing in Sharkey’s Shirts looking through some shirts. I held up a pretty orange blouse in front of Trina’s chest.

“I like this for you. You like this?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Which color?” I ask, putting the orange one back, and picking up a blue version. I switched them back and forth in front of her face, trying to see which one would look better on her.

“The orange one looks better on her.” A male’s voice interrupted us.

We turned to see one of the guys from Sandbar & Grill. It was Milton, the one who looked like he wanted to lick the butter off of

Trina's face. What were the odds he was in the same store as us at the same time?

He stepped up to Trina and looked into her eyes. She stopped licking her ice cream. "The orange will bring out the soft browns in her eyes." He said.

We both stood there, staring at him, speechless. He sensed the discomfort and cleared his throat.

"Uh, Milton? From last night? Sandbar & Grill?" We still didn't respond. It was more out of shock than rudeness. Because we certainly did remember him. I think Trina finally saw what I saw. The man was totally into her!

Milton didn't bother waiting for words from us. He gently took the orange blouse out of my hand. I let him. He pulled a slim wallet out of his pocket and made sure we saw that he unsheathed a platinum American Express.

"Please, allow me." He headed towards the register and paid for the shirt. We continued watching him in stunned silence as he sauntered back toward us.

"Trina, right?" He asked, handing her the bag with the purchased blouse.

She nodded. "Thank you," Trina said in a sheepish voice, barely over a whisper.

"I'm surprised you two are still in town. Last night you said you were hitting the road first thing in the morning." Milton actually sounded elated that we hadn't. "What do you ladies have planned for the rest of your day?"

"Just shopping, getting some summer threads." I offered, seeing a different type of doe-eyed look creep onto Trina's face.

"I'm hanging around town until Monday afternoon. Do you ladies mind if I join you?" Somehow, I didn't think he really meant both of us.

"I don't mind." Trina jumped in hastily, surprising me.

"Sure." I agreed with a mischievous grin directed at my friend.

We left Sharkey's Shirts with Trina and me in the lead. Trina im-

mediately ditched the remainder of her ice cream cone in the trash bin just outside the door. Milton slipped up next to Trina's other side. We walked in and out of a few more stores. Very quickly, I was like a little puppy dog, trailing behind them.

Milton purchased a few more items for Trina, including a cute little hat to match the orange shirt he bought in Sharkey's. Milton offered his elbow to her, and she took it. They walked arm in arm like a couple, while he carried the mounting bags of merchandise.

He was so into Trina that he didn't seem to care about her hair. Of those six plaits, three were halfway unraveled, and the one still bent outward from the side that she slept on at night. He said something, and she let out a girly giggle. That's when I decided I didn't want to be their third wheel anymore. I looked for my nearest "out."

Trina must have felt the same thing because she turned around and looked at me. The two of them stopped to let me catch up. And then my friend had the nerve to say to me:

"Milton invited us to lunch! His treat." She had the biggest smile on her face. Milton had the same smile plastered on his lips. They weren't fooling me. That smile said "we" want to eat lunch together without "you."

"Actually, Treen, I think I'm gonna pass. But you two go ahead. I'm not really hungry, and I have a little headache coming on." I tried layering the excuses to sound believable.

"You sure?" Milton asked to be polite. But it was obvious he couldn't wait for me to be gone. He'd already turned his attention away from me.

"Yes, I'm sure, thank you for the invite though." I smiled pleasantly at him. I looked at my friend. "Treen, you gonna be alright?"

"Absolutely. I know where the RV is."

"Okay, well then. I think I'll walk around a little longer and pick up a few more things. You two have fun."

"I'll bring her back to your RV," Milton said. He pulled out his wallet, and this time he produced his business card. "That's my cell number," he said, handing it to me. "I hope you don't mind me tak-

ing some time to get to know your friend a little bit better.” He directed his words to me as he looked directly into Trina’s eyes.

She handed off her bags to me and walked off with Milton. I decided to continue strolling in and out of shops for a few more hours. At one point, I stopped for some coffee and people watching.

Finally, around 4 pm, I was ready to head back to the RV to drop off the bags and take a shower to cool off before finding some place good to eat and settling down for the evening. I wanted to be refreshed and ready to drive in the morning.

As I got out of the Uber and approached the RV, I could tell from a little ways off that something wasn’t right. The RV door was slightly opened, like someone had broken in. Instantly, I panicked. I looked around the parking area. There were people walking on the beach a ways off, but no one was in the immediate vicinity.

I gathered my courage and slowly walked up to the vehicle. But before I reached the door, I heard something. Was that Marvin Gaye crooning? I stopped moving. It sure was; I recognized one of my “mixtape” CD’s playlist. But now that I was still, I noticed something else. The RV was rocking slightly. I took a couple of steps toward the door, but hesitated when I heard a sound coming from behind the cracked door. Was that moaning?

I clapped my free hand over my mouth, eyes wide! I couldn’t believe it! Trina was getting it on with Milton! I tiptoed away, giggling as I went. I found a bench that was close to the street to sit on. I looked back. The whole damn thing was now rocking, bouncing, and shaking! Milton must have had Trina touching every part of that RV! I hoped Milton’s stout, portly ass didn’t tear up my shocks!

All I could do was sit there watching with my mouth wide open. I was shocked, mad, flabbergasted, a little jealous, and happy for my friend all wrapped in one! I just had to shake my head, chuckle, and find something on my phone to amuse myself with. He didn’t seem like an “all-night” type of brother, so I didn’t think it would be long.

About thirty minutes later, dusk was starting to settle. That’s when the RV door opened, and Milton and Trina emerged hand in

hand. They walked up toward where I was sitting. Milton had a huge smile on his face. Two more of Trina's braids were unraveled.

When the pair saw me, they both blushed and giggled. Milton leaned over and gave Trina a kiss on her lips and waved at me as he strutted down the street whistling. Trina sat down on the bench next to me.

"Feeling better now that you released some stress?" I asked sarcastically.

She giggled, then reached over and hugged me really tight, her face pressed into my shoulder.

"Yep!"

I couldn't help but giggle along with her. This was the Trina that I missed.

"Girl, come on!" I said, standing up and gathering the bags. "We're hitting the road first thing in the morning."



Trina was awake before me again. When I sat up, she was sitting at the table, reading a magazine she'd bought while we were out shopping. She had undone her braids and combed her hair out into a pretty wavy mass. She wore the orange blouse that Milton had bought her. Her lips had a light sheen of gloss. Her dark circles were fading. I smiled. My friend was looking more like herself.

"You ready to roll?" Trina asked me. She stood up to hand me a cup of coffee that she made. I noticed orange earrings tinkling as she handed me the cup.

We hit the road after my coffee, shower, and a quick stop through a drive-thru for breakfast burritos. Today, the ride was magnetic and full of energy. We sang through almost all of the songs on another one of my "mixtape" CDs, and gyrated in our large bucket seats as we rocked out to the classics. It was such a feel-good moment, I didn't want it to end.

As we rolled along the Pacific Coast Highway, the water sparkled

underneath the beaming sun. Trina rolled down the window and let some fresh air in. She closed her eyes. The wind fluffed up her hair like a beautiful peacock as the sun revived her melanin.

After three hours, we stopped to take a break and grabbed a meal that we ate in the RV. Trina pulled a pack of UNO cards from one of the bags from her and Milton's shopping spree. I showed no mercy, spanking that ass each round. Finally, she gave up, and we decided to get moving again.

We drove a couple of more hours until night fell. We were looking for a safe spot to park for the night. I pulled off the freeway onto a road and pulled into a Chevron station. I parked the RV toward the back, by an alley, to leave room for smaller cars. I ran into the little market to get some chips and drinks.

When I came out, Trina was standing outside the RV talking to a young man. But something seemed off. When I got close, I saw he had a gun pointed at her. Immediately, I froze, dropping my bag with the snacks, and instinctively raised my hands. The glass soda bottles in the bag shattered. The gunman's head whipped around. He quickly surmised I was with her, so he waved me over with his gun. I scuttled to stand next to Trina.

That's when I noticed she wasn't talking but crying. The nearby street light illuminated a part of his brown face. He couldn't be more than 20. Either of us could have easily been his mother.

"Gimme your purse!" he yelled at me. Trina whimpered as I quickly thrust my purse at him. He quickly rooted through it, wildly ripping my belongings out. When he found my wallet, he snatched it up, letting the purse fall to the ground. He pulled out the only cash I had in there, fifty dollars. My cell phone was in my back pocket.

Ironically, I had way more cash on me than that... about \$20,000 in stacks of \$20s and \$100s. It was steps away in the RV, tucked in a secret location. It was wrapped in a pair of smelly socks, which were under my panties, which were under my bras, that were inside a secret compartment. My logic was that even if someone ever found the hiding place, no one would dig past the bras. The panties were

strategically placed to prevent further snooping. Trina didn't even know I had that much on me. And I certainly wasn't about to offer that info. I didn't survive cancer to die like this. I just wanted to live through the next few minutes and get the hell out of here to safety. I prayed the \$50 would satisfy him.

The young man stuffed the money into his pocket, then pointed the gun at a shivering Trina again. My breath hitched. Oh God! We can't go out like this. Please! That was my prayer in my head. I prayed harder than I'd prayed when I got my cancer diagnosis.

"Come on, gimme your purse!" he yelled at Trina. She sniffled then sobbed.

"I already told you, I don't have one."

"Yo ass is lying!" He seemed nervous.

"She's not lying," I offered. "I just showed up at her house a few days ago and surprised her with a road trip. She really didn't have time to grab anything. I gave you what I have. Can you just let us go, please?"

"Yo! You talking too much!" He shouted, shifting the gun to me, then pointed it back at Trina. "You look too nice. You gotta have a damned purse! Gimme it now or empty your pockets!"

Trina dropped her head and sniffled a little. Then she lifted her head and opened her mouth.

"No."

The air shifted. I was stunned. The robber seemed confused. He glanced at me, the gun following his gaze. He shifted his eyes and gun back to Trina.

"Bitch, is you crazy or something? I said gimme your purse or whatever you got!"

Tears streamed down Trina's face, but there was something different about them and about her. She straightened her back as the gun remained pointed millimeters away from every vital organ in the middle of her body. She lifted her chin and squared off against the robber, who was several inches taller than she was.

I didn't know what was going on.

“No.” Trina repeated.

“Trina...” I started, but she shushed me. She actually shushed me right in front of a man who had a gun trained on us! He shifted the pistol back and forth between us, confused, not sure why things were going off script.

“I’m not going to let you ruin or take my life today.” A scary voice that I’d never heard her use before escaped my friend’s body. It was deep and serious. Almost like Maya Angelou had jumped into her body... complete with the accent. I don’t know where it was all coming from, but she kept talking.

“Listen here, young man,” new Trina continued. “I have been so depressed that I couldn’t get out of bed for two and a half years.” She didn’t yell or raise her voice a hair. It remained steady and scarily composed.

“Do you know how long that is? That’s well over 750 days. My husband died, and grief had me tied up for over 750 days. Have you ever had anyone you really, truly love die?”

He blinked and took a tiny step backward. She must have struck a nerve. Trina kept going.

“Do you?” She demanded, raising her voice, the pain in it caged but ready to erupt. The robber’s lips quivered like he wanted to answer, but simply didn’t know what to do next.

“Do you know what happens when someone you love dies? They don’t come back! Know what happens to you after they’re gone? Your heart breaks! Into a million fuckin pieces! You can’t breathe! It’s damn near impossible to live!” Trina’s voice was like a shrill growl. The intensity of the release had her shaking.

“This saint of a lady!” she said, pointing at me. “Three days ago, she showed up at my house and dragged me out from under my bed. I hated being alive for over seven-hundred-and-fifty-fucking days! But this woman single-handedly helped me find my will to live again.”

Trina was like a woman possessed by Life itself.

“No amount of money, no jewelry, no nothing you take from me

can make me feel that bad again. And I will NOT let you take this FRACTION OF FREEDOM I FINALLY FOUND AWAY FROM ME! I. WILL. NOT!!!!”

Trina’s loud voice echoed in the alley. She was panting hard. I was paralyzed, wide-eyed. I didn’t know when it happened, but the gun was no longer raised at us. The robber was dumbfounded. His eyes darted back and forth between us until he rested them on me.

I hunched my shoulders. “She’s telling the truth,” I said.

Then he did the strangest thing. He raised both his hands in surrender, gun pointing up at the sky. He took a step backwards, away from us, while eyeing us suspiciously. He took another two or three slow backwards steps. Then he turned and tore off running.

Trina was frozen in place, still panting hard. I quickly snatched my things up from the ground, grabbed Trina’s arm, and shoved her into the RV. I revved up and tore out of that alleyway.

After the gas station was a few miles behind us, I looked over at Trina. She was breathing deeply, but not as wildly as before. Whatever had come over her seemed to be subsiding. I silently prayed this didn’t slip her back into a depression.

“Honey, are you ok? I’m so sorry I got you out here and put us in danger.” She didn’t say anything. So I continued.

“This is not how I hoped this trip would turn out. We can head back to San Francisco in the morning. I’ll take you home.”

“Home?” Trina snapped her neck around to look at me. Then she started laughing. Then it turned into a cackle. The kind of menacing laugh villains in movies make. First, I was worried she’d slip back into depression. Now I wondered if she was having a nervous breakdown. Did I need to pull over?

I stole a quick glance at her. She caught me looking. I started laughing too. In seconds, we were both cackling manically like two crazy women who’d lost their minds, as we sped down the highway.

Trina rolled down her window and stuck her head out. She let out a harrowing scream at the top of her lungs. It was a guttural sound, mixed with a banshee-type shrill. When she pulled herself back in,

her hair stood in every direction. Her chest was heaving in and out. Snot and tears streaked across her face.

“You okay?”

“Are you kidding me?!” Trina chortled. “I haven’t felt this alive in years!

My eyebrows raised as a big smile spread across my face.

“You got enough money?” she asked.

“Girl!” I retorted with a raised eyebrow. “You know I do!”

“Okay, then.” She said, reaching over and buckling her seatbelt.

“Where are we going next?”

I gave her a big grin.

“Where you wanna go?”

“Mmmmm, *there!*” She pointed to a large billboard ahead advertising the Bellagio in Las Vegas.

“Aye, aye, captain!” I saluted, then prepared to steer the RV east. My girl was back! It seemed like she was gonna be just fine.

THE CLOWN FAMILY

Henrietta Anderson

Twenty houses lined Greene Street, each one filled with families connected through blood, marriage, and decades of shared history. Life moved slowly here—steady as the rhythm of the seasons—yet it was full. Full of love. Full of laughter. Full of challenges. And full of secrets quietly waiting for their turn to unfold.

In one of the modest houses, Gladys stood at the stove preparing breakfast for her children and husband, unaware that new neighbors would soon arrive and set in motion a chain of events that would change lives for generations.

The sun had barely risen, casting a soft amber glow over the small South Carolina town. Morning fires crackled in chimneys, blending the scent of wood smoke with blooming flowers and freshly turned earth from nearby gardens. Greene Street woke gently—doors opening, screen doors slamming, roosters crowing, dogs barking as children chased each other through yards.

Gladys, in her early 20s, moved through her kitchen with grace. Her long brown hair framed a face as smooth as porcelain, and her dark chocolate complexion shimmered in the morning light. Neighbors often said she looked like a doll—beautiful, soft-spoken, and gentle. Married to Jimmy Lee, she was now a mother to four lively boys.

Their home sat on a stretch of land rich with gardens, fruit trees, and animals, chickens scratching in the dirt, hogs grunting in their

pens, and horses grazing lazily in the pasture. Jimmy Lee came from a large, well-established family. His father, Harold, owned over 75,000 acres of land and supplied lumber to the nearby lumber yard. Life in their world was predictable: men working at the lumber yard or box factory, women tending children and gardens, and evenings filled with family gatherings on porches.

Gladys often sat on her own porch after chores were done, rocking gently as she watched her boys run wild in the yard. Family members drifted in and out of her home without knocking, laughing, or calling out greetings. She could have worked if she wanted to, but Jimmy Lee preferred she stay home and raise the boys.

"She'll never have to break her back at the factory if I can help it," he always said.

Still, even with all the comfort and routine, Gladys sometimes found herself yearning for something more than the quiet predictability of Greene Street.

Harold, Jimmy Lee's father, had always done business with Henry Lewis, a White man from Estherville, S.C. In those days, White and Black families did not live in the same neighborhood—certainly not in Estherville, a small town just outside Anderson, South Carolina. But Harold trusted Henry. Over the years, they bought, sold, traded, and worked side by side on projects.

One afternoon, Henry approached Harold. "My daughter's place burned down," he said. "She and her family got nowhere to go. You think you got a house they could rent?"

Harold thought for a moment, nodding slowly. "I got one open on Greene Street. If she can handle living in a mixed community, I'll rent it to her."

Henry grinned with relief. "She will take it. Thank you, Harold."

And so, a few days later, Sare and her family moved into the only White household on Greene Street.

Before, their home had been a small, worn house with cold floors and an outhouse in the back. So, when Sare stepped into Harold's large rental frame house with oak hardwood floors, a large kitchen,

three large bedrooms, a laundry room, a large front and back porch, and an indoor bathroom, her eyes filled with tears.

“Billy Ray, look at this place!” She said with astonishment in her voice.

But Billy Ray only frowned. He hated the idea of living in a Black neighborhood. He had a temper, a drinking habit, and a deep stubbornness in him. Sare tried to ignore his grumbling and focus on the blessing of having a safe home for her children.

Sare’s joy only deepened when she met Gladys. They became fast friends. Sare invited Gladys to help her at the store where she worked, and after talking it over with Jimmy Lee, Gladys accepted the job.

But inside Sare’s home, trouble brewed. Billy Ray grew more controlling, angry that Sare now had a car her father bought her. He had once wrecked their only vehicle, drinking and driving, so her father put the new car in Sare’s name only.

“That man better not touch that car,” Henry warned.

At home, Billy Ray stewed in resentment. Sare ignored most of his yelling, focusing instead on her children, her work at the store, and her growing friendship with Gladys.

Jimmy Lee bought Gladys a new washer and dryer, and Gladys asked her brother-in-law, Willie, to repair her old set for Sare. When Billy Ray discovered it, he raised holy hell.

“You better not wash my clothes in that damn thing!” He shouted.

Sare stayed quiet, used to the storms he stirred up. She tucked the washer into a corner and washed her children’s clothes at night, hoping Billy Ray would forget his anger by morning.

Every Monday, Gladys brought Sare a plate of Sunday dinner—collard greens, fried chicken, cornbread, and peach cobbler. Sare savored every bite. Sunday dinners at Harold and Lula’s house were legendary. All the daughter-in-laws arrived with their best dishes, and the big table overflowed with food, laughter, and stories. Years passed in the rhythm of work, family, and community.

Gladys' boys grew taller, learning to work with their grandfather and uncles at the lumber yard. Gladys became pregnant again and later gave birth to another healthy baby boy named Steve.

Sare also gave birth—this time to a beautiful red-haired daughter named Nancy. The babies were only two months apart, and Sare and Gladys helped each other through long nights of crying infants and busy days at the store.

When the children reached kindergarten age, something happened that no one expected: Sare's daughter, Nancy, and Gladys' son, Steve, became inseparable.

From the first day, they sat together. When the teacher separated them, they found their way back to each other every single time. There was only one kindergarten class, so the teacher eventually gave up.

When they reached first grade, they were assigned to separate classrooms. But at lunchtime, they always sat together, sharing sandwiches and giggling at inside jokes.

The gossip started early—whispers from parents who disapproved, fueled by Billy Ray's growing anger at home.

Every night, Sare endured Billy Ray's complaints: "You need to stop that girl from running behind that boy. People talking'. My co-workers talking'. I am not having it and plus we are the only white family living in the neighborhood."

Sare sighed every time. "Billy Ray, nobody else would rent to us. Harold did us a favor. We are lucky to be here at all. You know you do not always pay the rent on time." His pride did not like that truth.

Sare's father continued helping her, slipping her grocery money, buying the children clothes, and reminding her she deserved better.

Years rolled on. Nancy grew into a spirited cheerleader, Steve into a tall, handsome athlete with his mother's deep chocolate skin and his father's quiet strength.

Walking home from school became part of their routine. When Steve had practice, Nancy waited. When Nancy had cheer practice, Steve waited. Their friendship deepened into something more un-

spoken, but obvious to anyone paying attention.

One afternoon, Billy Ray waited for Nancy at home. When she walked through the door, he slapped her across the face.

The neighbors heard them yelling. Sare screamed his name, “Billy Ray! Don’t you dare slap her again.”

For a while, Nancy and Steve avoided walking home together. But young love always finds a way, and the two continued their friendship in secret.



Time continued its steady march on Greene Street. Children grew taller, houses weathered storms, and families settled into their predictable routines. But beneath the surface, something new simmered—a quiet tension that followed Nancy and Steve wherever they went.

By the time they reached middle school, their bond had grown even stronger. They did not call each other boyfriend or girlfriend. They did not need to. Everyone could see it in the way they gravitated toward each other, how their shoulders brushed as they walked, how their laughter blended like two melodies sharing the same tune.

Most folks on Greene Street smiled softly when they saw two children raised side by side, shaped by the same soil, air, and community. But outsiders did not see it that way. Especially not Billy Ray.

He had become more bitter with each passing year, anger fermenting like spoiled whiskey. Losing job after job did not help, nor did the whispers he claimed to hear at work.

One afternoon, Steve waited outside the school for Nancy like he always did, tossing his football between his hands. When she finally came out, her red hair bouncing in the sunlight, she smiled. “Sorry, I am late! Mrs. Jackson kept us after class.”

Steve shrugged. “I am not going nowhere without you.”

Nancy laughed and bumped his shoulder. “You’re sweet.”

They started their usual walk home, their backpacks bouncing against their hips. As they turned onto Greene Street, Mrs. Poole—the same neighbor who always sat on her porch shelling peas—watched them closely.

She gave a slow nod of approval. “Y’all be careful now. A storm is coming.”

Nancy looked up. “Storm?”

Mrs. Poole’s eyes were soft but serious. “Not the kind you see in the sky, baby.”

Nancy did not understand, but Steve did. Adults had been warning them for years—subtly, gently, with the protective fear only grown folks understood. But kids rarely grasp the full meaning of adult warnings. They only feel the edges. Still, the closer they got to home, the quieter Nancy became. Steve noticed. “What’s wrong?”

She hesitated. “Daddy’s been in one of his moods.”

Steve’s jaw tightened. He knew exactly what that meant. That evening, the sound of shouting echoed down Greene Street. Billy Ray’s temper was usual, but its intensity this time drew neighbors’ attention to Sare’s house.

Nancy’s voice rose too—not screaming back but crying.

Gladys, stirring a pot of beans in her kitchen, paused. She set the spoon down, wiped her hands on her apron, and stepped onto her porch. The distant argument clawed at her chest.

Jimmy Lee joined her, leaning against the doorway. “That fool is drunk again?”

Gladys nodded slowly. “Kids shouldn’t have to hear that.”

Jimmy Lee sighed. “Ain’t nothing we can do. That is their home.”

“But Nancy’s just a child,” Gladys whispered.

Jimmy Lee lowered his eyes. He loved his family fiercely, but what happened inside another man’s house was not something he felt he had the right to step into.

Across the street, Sare was doing everything she could to keep the peace—shielding Nancy with her body, pulling Billy Ray back, taking the blows meant for her daughter.

Later that night, Nancy slipped out of the house and sat on their porch steps, staring into the darkness. The cicadas buzzed loudly, masking their snuffles.

Steve quietly crossed the yard, making sure Billy Ray did not notice him, before taking a seat a short distance from Nancy.

“You okay?” He asked softly.

Nancy nodded, but tears kept falling. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.”

She did not argue. Instead, she leaned her head against his shoulder. Steve wrapped an arm around her without thinking—a simple gesture, pure and instinctive.

And that was the moment Billy Ray burst through the screen door. He saw them. He saw his daughter leaning against a Black boy—the very thing he had feared, hated, and warned against.

His face twisted with rage. “Get your fucking hands off her!”

Steve jumped to his feet.

Nancy cried out, “Daddy, stop!”

Billy Ray charged toward Steve, but Sare grabbed him from behind, struggling to hold him back.

“You’ll leave that boy alone!” She screamed.

Neighbors spilled onto porches. Lights flicked on. Doors cracked open.

Jimmy Lee arrived within minutes—he always did when trouble threatened one of his own. He stepped between Steve and Billy Ray, towering over him.

“That’s enough,” Jimmy Lee commanded.

His voice was calm, but the warning beneath it was unmistakable. Billy Ray froze, breathing hard, hatred burning in his eyes. Sare pulled Nancy inside. Steve did not move. He stood beside Jimmy Lee.

Billy Ray finally turned away, slamming his door so hard the frame shook. The street fell silent. Jimmy Lee placed a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Come on, son. Get home.”

As Steve walked away, he looked back once at Nancy’s darkened

window. He was unaware that tonight would be the end of childhood and the start of life's challenges.



After the night Billy Ray tried to attack Steve, Greene Street changed—not in loud, obvious ways, but in quiet, heavy ones. The kind you feel in the air long before anything happens.

Neighbors watched Sare's house more closely. Gladys checked on Nancy every chance she got. And Steve, he walked differently now. More guarded. More aware of the world beyond childhood.

Billy Ray, however, became more unpredictable.

The situation remained stable for several weeks. He kept to himself, spent evenings on the porch drinking beer instead of yelling, and ignored Sare's attempts to make peace. But everyone knew it would not last.

Billy Ray's silence was never peaceful. It was a pressure building behind a dam.

Nancy had grown quieter since the incident—not because her feelings for Steve had changed, but because she now understood just how dangerous her father's anger could be.

One afternoon on the way home from school, she spotted Steve waiting behind the old oak tree near the corner of Greene Street instead of in front of the building.

"You're not walking with me?" She asked softly.

"Not right now," he said, looking at the ground. "I don't want your daddy coming after you again."

Nancy shook her head fiercely. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I know," he said, "But that don't matter to him."

She took a deep breath. "Steve... I don't want to stop being friends."

Steve's eyes lifted. "I don't either."

"Then what do we do?"

He hesitated, then said quietly, "We will just...be careful that's

all we can do.

Nancy nodded, even though it hurt. “Okay.”

They chatted briefly about school and his mom’s cooking ordinarily, comforting topics that helped them feel at ease.

Before they parted ways, Nancy reached out and gently touched his hand. Just for a second. Just enough to say, “I’m still here.”

Steve watched her walk down the street until she disappeared behind her front door.

Storms kept building inside the house. Sare moved quietly, as if loud footsteps alone could trigger Billy Ray’s temper. She carried herself like a woman who was always bracing for impact.

Her father visited often, checking on her, bringing food, paying a bill or two when Billy Ray failed to. Every time he saw her bruised arms, which she tried to hide, his jaw tightened.

“You don’t have to live like this,” he told her.

But Sare would shake her head. “Daddy, where would I go? Who would take all of us?”

Her father sighed. “You know I’d take you in a heartbeat.”

Sare smiled sadly. She believed him. But she also knew Billy Ray would never let her leave.

Meanwhile, Billy Ray stewed in his resentment. He hated feeling like a failure. He received Henry’s help. Hated that the neighbors knew his business. But most of all, he hated the idea that his daughter felt safer with that Black boy than with her own father.

He was angry daily. A shirt left unfolded. Dinner is too salty. The kids were too loud. And Nancy, always Nancy, he watched her like she was the reason for every problem in his life. Until one night, the pressure finally broke.

The night everything changed, it was late—later than usual for Sare to still be awake—and she was folding laundry at the kitchen table when she heard the front door slam.

Billy Ray stumbled inside, drunker than usual. His eyes were glassy, and his steps uneven. “What are you doing up?” He slurred.

“Just finishing the clothes,” Sare said calmly. “Kids are asleep.

Please don't wake them."

"Don't tell me what to do," he barked, swaying.

Sare stayed still, hands trembling only slightly.

Billy Ray leaned over the table, his face inches from hers. "Where's Nancy?"

"In bed," Sare answered carefully.

Billy Ray slammed a fist onto the table so hard that a glass top-pled and shattered.

"She thinks she can sneak around with that boy," he growled. "She thinks I'm stupid!"

Sare's breath caught. "Billy, please..."

He grabbed her by the arm, pulling her to her feet. Tell her she can't leave without my permission. You hear me?"

Tears welled in Sare's eyes. "Billy, let go. You are hurting me."

He shoved her back against the wall.

And that was when they heard the sound—small, frightened, and heartbreaking—of Nancy crying on the stairs.

"Daddy, stop!"

Billy Ray turned toward her, rage curling his face into something unrecognizable.

"That's it," he hissed, stepping toward his daughter.

But before he could reach her, Sare grabbed his shirt and yanked him back with a strength born of pure terror.

"Leave her alone!"

Billy Ray stumbled, shocked that Sare had the courage to fight back. His shock turned into fury. And the next blow he threw meant to teach her a lesson. But it never landed. Because the front door burst open.

And standing there—breathless, terrified, fists clenched even though he'd never thrown a punch in his life—was Steve.

He had heard the screaming from across the street. He had run without thinking. And now he stood between Billy Ray and the people he loved.

Billy Ray roared, "What the hell are you doing in my house?!"

Steve did not back down.

“She doesn’t need saving from me,” he said quietly. “She needs saving from you.”

The room froze. Sare gasped. Nancy choked out a sob. And Billy Ray—shaking, enraged—took a slow step toward the 14-year-old boy who dared to stand up to him.

“Get out,” Billy Ray growled. “Or I’ll kill you.”

Steve’s voice shook, but he did not move. “You aren’t touching her again.”

Nancy cried harder. Sare grabbed her daughter and pulled her close. And at that moment, just before Billy Ray swung at Steve, a deeper voice rumbled from the doorway behind him. A voice that meant danger had arrived for the right man.

“Touch my boy,” Jimmy Lee said, “And you’ll answer to me.”

Jimmy Lee did not raise his voice often. At over six feet nine inches tall and weighing 295 pounds, he did not need to. His presence alone shifted the air.

As he entered Billy Ray’s doorway, the entire room grew tense, as if even the walls paused in anticipation.

Billy Ray turned—still swaying, still furious—but when he saw Jimmy Lee standing there, broad-shouldered, stone-faced, and deadly calm, something inside him faltered.

“What’re you doing in my house?” Billy Ray barked, trying to sound bigger than he felt.

Jimmy Lee did not flinch. “I came to get my son.”

“Well, you get him,” Billy Ray snapped.

Jimmy Lee stepped forward, slow and deliberate. “That is my son. He is my blood. And tonight, you threatened him.”

Billy Ray’s jaw twitched. “That little bastard barged into my house—”

“That ‘little bastard,’” Jimmy Lee said sharply, “Came in here because he heard screaming. Because he thought a woman and her children were in danger. Something you ought to be ashamed of.”

Sare lowered her head, tears sliding down her cheeks. Nancy

clutched her mother's sleeve the way she used to when she was five years old.

Billy Ray tried to step towards Jimmy Lee, but Jimmy Lee planted his feet and stiffened silent warning.

"You lay a hand on the boy," Jimmy Lee said quietly, "And you'll find out really quick whose land you're standing on."

Billy Ray froze.

Jimmy Lee commanded respect not through volume, but through years of hard labor, steadfast dedication to his community, and a reputation that no one dared to challenge.

Finally, Jimmy Lee turned to Steve. "Son, let's go home."

Steve did not want to leave. His eyes darted to Nancy—pale, shaking, silently pleading. But Jimmy Lee's tone left no room for argument. "Now."

Steve swallowed hard, nodded once to Nancy, and stepped past Billy Ray, holding his head high. Sare whispered thank you as he slipped out the door.

At the porch steps, Steve looked back—just once. The image of Nancy clutching her mother burned into his memory like a scar.

In the days after the confrontation, Greene Street buzzed with quiet conversation. Not loud gossip—families there were too close-knit for that—but whispers carried from porch to porch like ripples on water.

"Jimmy Lee stepped in himself?"

"Billy Ray had it coming."

"That poor girl. That poor woman."

"And that boy... he's got courage."

But behind the sympathy came something darker, fear.

Fear of what Billy Ray might do next. Fear of how far he might take things. Fear for Nancy. Fear for Sare. Fear for Steve, even fear for Sare two sons.

Even Jimmy Lee—usually calm as river water—was on edge. He checked the locks twice each night, watched the yard more closely, and kept Steve nearby.

“Don’t go nowhere by yourself for a while,” he told his son. “You hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” Steve answered. But worry did not stop him from thinking about Nancy.

Nancy did not go to school for three days. She stayed in her room, curled against the wall, staring at the small picture frame Gladys had given her years earlier—the one with pressed flowers behind glass. A quiet gift from a woman who had come to love her like a daughter.

Sare did everything she could to comfort her child, but Nancy barely spoke. Nancy managed to get ready for school on the fourth morning. Sare braided her hair gently, careful not to pull too hard near the yellowing bruise beneath Nancy’s ear.

“You don’t have to go,” Sare whispered.

Nancy nodded. “I do.”

She did not explain why. Sare did not ask.

Steve spotted her the moment she stepped onto the school grounds. Nancy looked different—smaller somehow, like a bright light had dimmed inside her.

He approached slowly. “Hey.”

She forced a tiny smile. “Hi.”

“You okay?”

Nancy looked down. “No.”

Steve stepped closer. “You wanna talk?”

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“Because of him?”

She nodded, eyes shining with unshed tears.

Steve’s jaw tightened. “Nancy... you know I’ll protect you.”

That made her look up—really look at him.

And for a moment, just a moment, Nancy flickered back to life.

“I know,” she said softly. “But you can’t save me from everything.”

He did not like that answer. He did not understand it. Not yet. Still, he reached out and gently squeezed her hand. The contact lasted only two seconds. Two seconds before she pulled away, eyes wide.

“He’s watching me closer now,” she said. “We can’t keep... being like this.”

Steve felt something in his chest crack. “So what? We stop talking?”

“No,” she said quickly. “Just... not as much. Not for a while.”

Steve shook his head, frustrated. “That isn’t fair, Nancy.”

“It’s not about fair,” she whispered. “It’s about staying alive—and making sure he doesn’t hurt my mama.”

That sentence settled between them like cold ash.

And from that day on, Nancy moved like a shadow—appearing and disappearing, cautious and quiet, always looking over her shoulder.

A week later, Billy Ray made an announcement at home. “I am the king of this castle,” he said in a tone no one dared challenge.

“We are leaving Estherville right after school ends. We might not never come back. I got a cousin in Georgia with work.”

Nancy’s breath stopped. Sare’s heart dropped into her stomach. Tommy and Bob froze. He was not threatening now. He was deciding. Controlling. Separating.

Nancy ran to her room, slammed the door, and collapsed onto her bed. Silent sobs shook her shoulders. Steve did not know yet. But he would soon.

Two days after Billy Ray’s announcement, the house felt like the calm before a hurricane—still, heavy, charged. Sare moved from room to room with a quiet panic, and she tried to hide from the children. Nancy barely slept. The boys were confused, not knowing their lives would soon change.

Billy Ray packed slowly and loudly, slamming drawers and muttering curses under his breath. He wanted everyone to know he was in control. That this move was his decision alone. Sare had no say. Nancy had even less.

The morning of their departure, Nancy sat on her bed, holding a worn piece of paper. A note for Steve.

Nothing poetic. Nothing dramatic. Just the truth a 14-year-old

girl could manage in the middle of heartbreak.

I do not want to go.

I am not leaving because of you.

Please do not forget me.

Nancy.

She clutched it in her fist, heart pounding. There was no time for anything else—Billy Ray was rushing everyone, barking orders, yelling about the car, the bags, nothing, and everything.

Sare grabbed the last suitcase. “Nancy, honey, we have to go.”

“Just a second,” Nancy whispered.

She ran to the window and looked across Greene Street. And there he was. Standing on his porch. As if he had sensed her. As if he had been waiting all morning.

At first, he looked confused, then his eyes widened as he took in the packed car, the suitcases, the tension in the air. His chest tightened, and he stepped forward. But Billy Ray stepped outside.

And Steve froze.

“Get in the car!” Billy Ray shouted.

Nancy pressed her hand to the glass, tears sliding down her face. Steve lifted his hand in return.

“No,” Sare said suddenly. “We are not going anywhere.”

“NANCY!” Sare screamed.

Billy Ray spun around. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

But Nancy did not stop.

She reached halfway across the yard when Steve jumped the ditch and met her in the middle. He grabbed her hands, breathless.

“You’re leaving?” He demanded, his voice cracking.

She nodded. “He’s making us.”

“No—no, I’ll talk to my dad, to your mom, to—”

“You can’t fix this, Steve,” she sobbed. “You can’t.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I don’t want to go.”

They clung to each other for three desperate seconds. Three

seconds that felt like a lifetime. Then Billy Ray's roar shattered the moment.

"GET AWAY FROM HER!"

He stormed across the yard, face red, fists clenched. Jimmy Lee leapt off his porch but could not reach them in time.

Steve released Nancy's hands only when Billy Ray was close enough to grab him.

"You touch my daughter again, boy," Billy Ray hissed, "And I'll put you in the ground pushing daisies."

Steve did not flinch. "She isn't property."

Billy Ray swung, Sare screamed, and Jimmy Lee caught his arm from behind before the blow could land.

"That's enough!" Jimmy Lee bellowed.

Chaos erupted, shouting, pulling, neighbors rushing out of their homes. In the middle of it all, Nancy pressed the folded note into Steve's hand.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Sare dragged her back toward the car, tears streaming down both their faces.

Billy Ray slammed the door, started the engine, and sped off before anyone could stop him.

Nancy twisted around in the back seat, watching Estherville disappear through the rear window—the oak tree, Mrs. Poole's porch, Harold's big yard, and finally, the faint silhouette of Steve standing alone in the dust cloud.

Sare cried quietly beside her. Nancy pressed her palm against the glass, wanting Steve to know she had not left by choice. The car turned around the corner. Greene Street vanished. And just like that, everything changed.

Steve did not move for a long time. He stood in the road as the dust settled around him, clutching Nancy's note so tightly it nearly tore. He hasn't cried yet. The shock was too thick.

Jimmy Lee finally placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "Come on, son."

Steve shook his head. “She’s gone.”

“For now,” Jimmy Lee said gently. “People circle back in life. You will see her again.”

Steve did not answer. He did not believe him. Not really.

As they walked back toward the house, Steve unfolded the note with trembling fingers. The handwriting was shaky. The words were few. But they cut deeper than anything Billy Ray could ever swing.

Please do not forget me.

Steve closed his eyes. He knew one thing with certainty: he never would.



Time did not stop when Nancy’s car turned that corner—though for Steve it felt like it should have. The days kept coming, one after another, like waves that didn’t care whether a person was ready to stand or not.

He kept Nancy with him like an unseen scar—lasting and quietly felt. Estherville without her. Greene Street was quieter.

No flash of red hair running through the yard. No soft knock on the door right after supper. No laughter drifting across the ditch where she used to sit with her knees tucked under her chin.

The unimportant things Steve used to overlook became reminders: the dusty path that they walked between their houses, the apple tree they climbed, the cracked sidewalk where she scraped her knee, and he carried her home.

He still passed by her old house every day on his way to school, even though it hurt to look at it. Sare had tried to keep the place tidy before leaving, but once they were gone, the silence settled in like dust.

Mrs. Poole sometimes waved him over with a bowl of peas to shell. “She’ll write, you know,” she said one afternoon.

Steve did not look up. “Maybe.”

Mrs. Poole’s voice softened. “A bond like y’all had? Don’t just dis-

appear.”

He wanted to believe her. But believing still hurts.

Every day, Steve checked the mailbox before the mail carrier finished closing the lid. Nothing. Days turned to weeks. Weeks turned into the start of Summer.

Jimmy Lee tried to encourage Steve with sports, with handy-person projects, and even with outings with his brothers, cousins, and friends. But Steve moved through life partly present, partly somewhere far away—somewhere with Nancy.



Meanwhile, Nancy, in a cramped rental house with peeling paint and strange neighbors, struggled to adjust. Billy Ray acted like the move had fixed everything. It hadn't. The house was not better. The neighborhood was not safer. His drinking was not less.

Nancy's brothers were unhappy, confused by the sudden change. Sare did her best to comfort them, but she seemed thinner now—in face, voice, and spirit.

Nancy spent her evenings on the back steps, staring at the neighbor's fence, wishing it were Greene Street's ditch instead.

She missed Mrs. Poole's gentle warnings, Harold's booming laugh, Jimmy Lee's jokes, and the whole neighborhood that had raised her. But she missed Steve the most. She wrote him letters she never mailed. Dozens of them. Some long, some short. Some angry, some full of love. Some were stained with tears. Some written in the dark after an argument. Some written on notebooks, napkins, and scraps of grocery bags. Sare called Gladys one night, sobbing, very upset asking if the house was still vacant because things weren't working out with Billy Ray and she was coming back to Estherville.

But she had nowhere safe to send them. Billy Ray checked everything. And Sare was too afraid to help. So, Nancy tucked the letters into a shoebox under her bed, where they stayed—unseen, unread—a quiet archive of love interrupted.

A late July evening, while helping Jimmy Lee fix a neighbor's fence, Steve paused mid-hammer swing. Jimmy Lee looked over. "What's on your mind, son?"

Steve did not answer right away. He wiped sweat from his brow, staring at the sky. Finally, he said, "I don't think she's coming back."

Jimmy Lee set down the drill and leaned against a post. "Not soon. But life is long. You don't know where the roads lead."

Steve shook his head. "Feels like she's a thousand miles away."

"Maybe she is," Jimmy Lee said, "But feelings don't respect miles."

Steve met his eyes. The man smiled gently. "You love her, don't you?"

Steve swallowed. "Yeah. I think I always will."

"It's alright," Jimmy Lee said, patting his son's shoulder. "You hold on to what's good. Even if it hurts."

Steve nodded, unsure whether the words comforted him or made the ache worse.

A slow drift into tomorrow. The next school year came. Steve grew taller. His voice changed. He remained on the football team. Teachers praised him, girls noticed him, and boys respected him. From the outside, he looked like he was thriving. But inside, every milestone hurt a little because she was not there to see it.

Nancy, miles away, experienced her own changes: her face grew more defined. Her hair grew longer. Her voice steadied. Her mind sharpened. She found new friends, but none felt familiar. She excelled at school, but every high mark felt strangely hollow.

On her 16th birthday, Sare baked a small cake. Nancy blew out the candles and made only one wish: the same wish she had made every night since leaving Greene Street. *Let me see Steve again.*

Two years passed. Neither of them forgot the other.

Steve kept Nancy's faded note pressed between the pages of his Bible. Nancy kept her shoebox of unsent letters hidden where no one could find them. They grew up in different houses, different towns, different worlds—but the thread between them never broke.

And though neither knew it yet, life was already working in the background, preparing for the moment their paths would cross again, where both would grow older, lives would change in ways neither expected, yet their connection refused to fade.

Two years can change a person, especially during the fragile shift from childhood into young adulthood. As the world grows and duties increase, certain memories persist. For both Steve and Nancy, those years became the foundation of who they were becoming.

By the age of seventeen, Steve had grown into his height and into the quiet strength that came naturally to him. Kids who had teased him now asked him for advice. First-year students trailed behind him in the hallways, hoping to copy the way he wore his coat or laced his shoes.

Teachers saw potential. Coaches saw talent. Girls saw something more. But none of it impressed him.

Every compliment, smile, and note slipped into his locker reminded him only of the one girl he wanted—the girl who had sat beside him on the ditch wall, swinging her legs, telling him secrets she trusted no one else with.

One Saturday afternoon, while helping Jimmy Lee with yard work, Steve spotted a red ribbon tangled in Mrs. Poole's rose bushes. It was not Nancy's—but something in him tightened anyway. He picked it up. Jimmy Lee watched with a soft expression and said nothing.

Later that night, Steve placed the ribbon next to Nancy's note in his Bible—a keepsake for a memory he did not dare let fade.

One night, Steve was sitting on the back porch swing when he heard a truck pull up. It was Nancy's family. He ran to the front porch and saw them. He told his parents, and Gladys called Sare the next day. Sare explained that things were not working out with Billy Ray's cousin. Nancy and her family had just returned that night.

Nancy had not spoken to Steve yet. She went back to school. Everything had changed—but she still felt the same about Steve.

At school, Steve waited for her in the cafeteria. He told Nancy

they needed to talk. She agreed. She planned to ask Mrs. Booker about joining the cheerleading squad if there was an opening. Sare had gotten her job back, and Gladys had received a promotion. Gladys was now Sare's boss, though it did not matter—they worked together anyway.

As Sare looked around the store, she realized she had been gone for two years. Everything had changed. She thanked Gladys for being a good friend.

Nancy had changed, too. Her face had lost the roundness of childhood. Her eyes carried more truth than any girl her age should have had to hold. Her voice had gained a calm, steady tone that made people listen when she spoke.

But behind that calm, she carried storms. Billy Ray's mood had grown more unpredictable, more dangerous. Some nights he came home loud; other nights, silent—both equally frightening.

Sare worked long hours, doing everything she could to keep the family afloat. Nancy helped, washing dishes, doing laundry, and keeping the house clean, taking a burden off her mother.

There were good days, too—days filled with music, jokes, whispers, and dancing barefoot on the porch. But there were also nights when Nancy locked herself in her bedroom, holding her breath, unsure what Billy Ray would be angry about. In other moments, she wrote letters to Steve in her head. Not on paper—she had stopped risking that after Billy Ray nearly found the shoebox—but the words were always there:

I am okay.

I miss you.

I wish things were different.

I wonder if you still think about me.

I still think about you.

They had no option but to keep going. Steve worked hard, playing sports. Nancy studied hard and became the valedictorian of her school. Both endured their own worlds.

But every now and then, something small tugged the thread be-

tween them: a song on the radio. The smell of rain. A dream they could not shake. A flash of red hair in a crowd. Neither spoke it aloud, but the pull was always there.

Steve got his driver's license, and Jimmy Lee surprised him with a used pickup—rusty, loud, but dependable enough to get to school and part-time work.

He was asked one afternoon to collect lumber from a hardware store located across the county. On his way home, he saw a large red rose bush. He got out of the truck and picked twelve roses, placing them on Nancy's front porch—an offering to hearts still learning their rhythm. Though miles had separated them, the meaning remained.

At school, it was prom season. Steve and Tom were best friends. Steve asked Tom to ask Nancy to go on a date with him to make it seem to Billy Ray that Nancy had a white boyfriend. Tom agreed, and Nancy went along with the plan.

Tom went to Nancy's house. They talked, laughed, and Billy Ray was pleased. Previously, he had insisted that Nancy “should go with a White boy.” Tom already had a girlfriend, Leslie, who was Black. Tom was on the football team with Steve, and his dad was the president of the bank.

Steve asked Nancy about prom. She was excited, but her mother could not afford a dress. Steve reassured her she did not have to worry.

Steve told his mother Nancy needed a gorgeous prom dress. One of Gladys's sisters-in-law was a seamstress; Gladys arranged for Nancy to go to Beverly's house on Greene Street and helped make sure she looked as beautiful as the other girls.

The next two weeks were spent preparing for prom. Sare and Gladys helped Nancy with her gorgeous silver dress. Her long red hair cascaded down her back. Gladys let her wear pearl earrings and a matching necklace. Even Billy Ray smiled when he saw her.

Tom arrived in a black tuxedo, and the two couples looked stunned. Steve had bought a corsage for Nancy, and Tom pinned it

on her. Nancy daydreamed that it was Steve doing it.

Inside the auditorium, the room was beautifully decorated. Tom escorted Nancy to Steve, and all eyes were on the two couples. They had a wonderful evening.

After prom, they went to Tom's father's fishing cabin. There, Tom, and Leslie danced and enjoyed drinks. Nancy, still a virgin, felt scared. Steve assured her she did not have to do anything for which she was not ready. She told him she wanted to, and he supported her choice.

At school, Nancy and Steve were preparing to graduate. Coaches talked to Steve about a football scholarship, though he had always wanted to become an architect. Nancy intended to pursue a career in nursing and subsequently submitted applications to multiple educational programs.

One night, Nancy did not speak much to Steve over the phone. He offered to have Tom come over so they could meet, but she said she had a headache. Over the next few weeks, Nancy began feeling unwell. Sare noticed and asked if she needed to see a doctor.

Meanwhile, at work, Sare seemed happier. Men often flirted with her, but she ignored them—they knew her husband was no good. Even Gladys' brother-in-law, who came to buy supplies for the lumber yard, brought her candy and admired her.

Steve arranged for Tom to pick Nancy up for a drive-in. During that time, Nancy confided that she was pregnant. She became emotional due to apprehensions regarding her goals in nursing school. Steve requested information regarding her intentions. She said she wants to keep her baby. Steve comforted her and assured her he would take care of both her and their baby. When Steve went home he told his parents that Nancy was going to have a baby.

Tom dropped Nancy off at home. Billy Ray sat on the porch, drinking a beer, raising hell with Sare. Gladys and Sare talked about Steve and Nancy, and Gladys trusted Steve to make the right choice. Nancy and Steve had loved each other since kindergarten.

Nancy checked on her mother and noticed her makeup smeared.

She realized Billy Ray had struck her. Steve's parents asked what he planned to do.

"I want to marry her," Steve said, and promised to ask Nancy the next day.

Jimmy Lee asked about college. Steve replied, "College will have to wait."

The following day, Tom drove Nancy to the drive-in. Steve proposed. Nancy accepted, happy, though a shadow crossed her face as she thought of Billy Ray. Steve assured her, "Billy Ray will never give you hell. You will be my wife."

Gladys and Sare hosted a small wedding celebration at Harold's house. After the ceremony, Steve and Nancy moved to Atlanta with Leroy and his family. Leroy is Harold's younger brother. Leroy secured Steve a job at the printing company where he worked.

Steve and Nancy had a small apartment in Leroy's large home in the Grant Park area. His wife, a registered nurse, helped Nancy decorate and gave her books to study while waiting for the baby.

Nancy kept the household running, preparing dinner when Steve came home. They loved each other.

At Sare's house, she endured Billy Ray's abuse daily. Nancy called her mother every day.

Nancy gave birth to a baby girl with red hair, naming her Sare Jane after her mother. Steve earned enough to afford their own apartment now. Nancy began nursing school, and Steve worked nights, caring for their daughter while Nancy studied.

Both Steve and Nancy were growing stronger. Both were becoming wiser. Both were becoming someone the other would one day recognize again. Their lives were no longer drifting apart.

Nancy asked her mother why she had never left Billy Ray. Sare explained, "I stayed for your brothers. I love my sons just as much as I love you."

Billy Ray remained a drunken, difficult man.

Nancy and Steve continued to thrive. Nancy was in her second year of nursing school. She told her mother she was pregnant again,

and Steve rejoiced. Sare was proud that her daughter would have a better life than she did.

Billy Ray continued to rage nightly, but now also against Nancy's brothers, Bob and Tommy.

Life moved quickly. Steve and Nancy welcomed a son, Jerry, who shared her red hair and complexion. Gladys beamed with pride over her grandchildren.

Sare got sick at work, and the ambulance took her to the hospital. She stayed there a week. Billy Ray was there every day. Gladys went every day to see her. Gladys was deeply concerned for her friend.. Sare lost weight, worrying her friends, and confided in Gladys that she was okay. Sare asked Gladys not to tell Steve and Nancy about her going to the hospital. She did not want to worry Nancy. Gladys promised not to tell.

When Sare went home from the hospital Billy Ray waited on her hand and foot. He was really worried about Sare. Gladys made soup and brought it to Sare. Gladys gave Billy Ray a bowl, which he took. Nancy sent her mother photos of Sare Jane and Jerry. Gladys and Sare were delighted to see photos of their grandchildren. Nancy told Steve I want to see my mom. Steve told Nancy that Billy Ray was not a threat if she visited her mother.

Nancy finished nursing school. Steve pursued architecture, taking online classes. Together, they saved enough to buy a beautiful home.

Nancy continued to try to convince her mother to move in with them, but Sare refused. Occasionally, Nancy cried after these conversations, unable to understand why Sare would not come live with them.

Gladys continued to support Sare, preparing soup and meals for her. Billy Ray treated Gladys respectfully, leaving quickly when she arrived. Sare slowly regained her strength, eventually returning to work, and she and Gladys shared quiet pride in their children and grandchildren. Sare expressed her desire to see her grandchildren in person, not just in pictures.



Gladys' cousin, Deborah, was the manager of the circus that came to town every year. One Sunday, Deborah came to Gladys' house for dinner. During the visit, Gladys told Deborah that she wanted to surprise her good friend, Sare.

Gladys called Steve and Nancy and told them the circus would be in town that weekend. She asked them to meet her there. Then Gladys told Sare that she wanted her to go to the circus with her on Saturday. Sare was so happy and excited.

Bob and Tommy came home to see Sare, and their arrival filled her with joy. She was overjoyed to see her sons, though they could not help noticing that their mother looked a little sickly. Still, Sare felt an overwhelming pride in them.

When they eventually left, her heart was light. More than anything, she hoped they would never end up like Billy Ray. Both men were tall and strikingly handsome. Bob wore his long black hair, so much like Billy Ray's, while Tommy had inherited Sare's red hair. Tommy had recently married, and his wife, Tersita, was a beautiful Hispanic woman.

When Tommy introduced Tersita to Billy Ray as his wife, Billy Ray shot Tommy with a dirty look and walked out of the house. Billy Ray came back an hour later and behaved in a truly friendly manner. He had gone out and drunk a couple of beers and finally began thinking about how well his children were doing—despite the way he had treated them. Billy Ray felt ashamed of himself and realized he needed to change.

Gladys collected Sare, Tommy, his wife Tersita, and Bob, carefully placing Sare in the front row, which had just five seats in that section. Later, Gladys met Steve and his family at the circus. She invited Nancy and the children to join her, and together they headed to the makeup tent, where Deborah introduced them to Jane, the makeup artist.

Nancy was the first to sit in the chair. Nancy, the mother, whose laughter is as bright as her oversized yellow wig. She wears a polka-dotted dress in cheerful reds, blues, and greens, with pockets stuffed with juggling balls, ribbons, and small toys for her children. Her white-painted face is accented with a round red nose and a painted-on smile, but her eyes shine with warmth and mischief, revealing the love she carries behind the makeup. She has a clown horn or a squirting flower tucked somewhere, ready to lighten the mood or cheer someone up. Her shoes are exaggeratedly large, floppy, and striped, making a comical squish with every step.

Sare Jane was the second one in the make-up chair. She is a tiny whirlwind of energy, her orange ponytails bouncing wildly as she skips and hops around. Her face is painted with bright polka dots and a red nose, mimicking her mother's, and her oversized coveralls are covered in glitter, sequins, and confetti that spills out when she moves. Her shoes are comically large pink clown shoes, clumsily laced, but she runs and jumps with fearless joy. She loves performing tricks with her little magic wand, pulling scarves out of her pockets, and making her brother laugh uncontrollably.

Jerry was the last one Jane made up. He is a mischievous little clown with messy blond hair peeking out from under a floppy hat. His face is painted in bright white with blue triangles around his eyes and a round red nose, giving him a perpetually surprised expression. He wears a patchwork jumpsuit, a mix of stripes and polka dots, and carries a stick horse he pretends to ride everywhere. Jerry is full of playful energy, always ready to chase his sister, perform silly stunts, or honk a horn at the most unexpected moments.

The family is a chaotic, colorful blur of laughter, music, and playful antics. Their clown costumes clash in bright, cheerful patterns, their oversized shoes thump and squeak across the floor, and their voices carry the joyous, chaotic harmony of a family who loves each other deeply—even in the middle of comical mishaps. Despite the paint, wigs, and big shoes, it's their connection, humor, and heart that make them unforgettable.

Nancy had a radio playing music. She and the kids danced in front of Sare, pulling items from their bags and encouraging her to come onto the floor and dance with them. Sare was having so much fun. Nancy then pulled Tommy and Bob onto the floor, and everyone laughed.

Tears streamed down Nancy's face as she danced with her mother. She was overwhelmed with happiness to see and touch her mother and brothers. After the performance, they all returned to the makeup tent, where Jane removed the makeup.

As Sare stood there, she burst into tears, hugging her daughter and grandchildren. Bob and Tommy hugged and kissed their sister, nephew, and niece. Nancy looked over at Tersita, smiling through her tears. Tommy told her that Tersita is his wife. Nancy hugged her.

After leaving the circus, everyone went back to Gladys' house. Later, Nancy spoke to Steve and told him she was going to her mother's house to talk to her dad.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Steve asked.

"No, I'll be fine," Nancy said.

When Nancy stepped into the house, Billy Ray's eyes grew as big as golf balls. You would have thought he had seen a ghost.

"Hello, Dad. How are you?" Nancy asked.

Billy Ray stood frozen, tears streaming down his face. Then he walked to her and wrapped her in a tight hug.

Monday morning at work, Gladys brought Sare breakfast like she always did. Sare enjoyed the delicious meal, and Gladys told her to go into the office and relax.

In the days that followed, Sare seemed quieter, though her smile still came easily when family was near. She moved more slowly, pausing often, as if her body needed reminders to keep going. Gladys noticed first. She would catch Sare staring out the store window, hands folded, eyes soft and distant, as though she were watching memories instead of the street.

At night, Sare prayed longer than usual. She thanked God for every child, every grandbaby, and every laugh she had been given.

Sometimes she cried—not from fear, but from gratitude so deep it hurt her chest. She told Gladys she felt tired in a way sleep could not fix, but she was at peace.

“I’ve been blessed,” she said quietly. “More than I ever thought I’d be.”

Tommy called often. So did Bob. They promised to come back soon, but Sare told them not to rush. She wanted them to enjoy their lives and love each other the way families should.

When she spoke to Nancy, her voice softened even more. She told her daughter how proud she was of her strength, her kindness, and the way she loved her children. Nancy cried, sensing something she could not name, and Sare whispered, “I’ll always be with you, baby. Always.”

One evening, Billy Ray came and sat with Sare on the porch. The sun was setting, painting the sky in shades of orange and gold. He held her hand and apologized again, his voice breaking. Sare squeezed his fingers and forgave him without hesitation.

“We don’t have much time for bitterness,” she said gently. “Love is what lasts.”

On her last morning, Sare woke before dawn. She dressed carefully, brushing her hair and putting on her favorite sweater. She sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee that she barely touched. The house was filled with a kind of silence that felt holy. She smiled to herself, as if she could hear laughter from long ago—children running, bells jingling, music from the circus still echoing in her heart.

When they found her later, she looked peaceful. Her face was calm, her hands resting gently in her lap, as though she had simply fallen asleep after a long, full day.

Sare died surrounded by love—the love she had given freely and received tenfold in return. And though her chair was empty, her presence lingered in every story told, every laugh shared, and every family gathering that followed.

She was gone, but never truly lost.

The church was filled long before the service began. Soft hymns

played as people took their seats, some holding folded programs, others clutching tissues. Sare's picture rested at the front, her smile frozen in time—kind, familiar, and full of love.

Gladys sat in the front pew; hands folded tightly in her lap. Billy Ray sat beside Bob. Tommy sat with his wife's shoulders heavy with grief.

Tersita held Tommy's hand, rubbing slow circles into his palm. Nancy sat with Steve and the children, her head bowed, tears falling silently.

When the pastor spoke, his voice was steady but gentle. He talked about Sare's kindness, her laughter, and the way she opened her heart to anyone who needed it. He said she was the kind of woman who made people feel seen, the kind who turned ordinary moments into memories.

One by one, family members stood to speak. Tommy talked about his mother's strength and how she always believed in him, even when he doubted himself. Bob spoke next, his voice breaking as he remembered her hugs and the way she never let anyone leave without feeling loved.

Nancy stood last. She wiped her eyes and smiled through her tears. She told them about the circus, about the roses and laughter, and how her mother had danced without caring who was watching. "That's how I'll remember her," Nancy said softly. "Free, joyful, and full of love."

As the service ended, the choir sang Sare's favorite hymn. The sound filled the church, wrapping around the family like a warm blanket. People hugged one another, sharing quiet stories and soft smiles through their tears.

When they carried Sare out, sunlight poured through the open doors. For a moment, it felt as though she was smiling one last time—leaving behind a legacy of love that would live on in every heart she had touched.

THE LOST ART OF KITE FLYING

Rayna Sun

At thirteen years old, I had a number of firsts in my life. I had my first real crush on my teacher, Mrs. Giles. I smoked my first blunt in the alley behind my apartment complex. I fingered my first girl under the school bleachers. And I got my first black eye in a fight on the school bus. But a major first for me that year was meeting my father.

One afternoon, I came home from school to the tiny two-bedroom apartment that my mother and I shared and instantly knew something was up. I remember it clearly because my mother's 90s-styled stereo system, which she got at a yard sale, was blasting her favorite Teddy Pendergrass cassette. It was no match for the little earbud headphones pushing sound into my ears from my iPod shuffle; the dude from the '70s drowned out Lil Wayne's "Lollipop."

I pulled the wires out of my ears and paid attention. The old-school love song was my first clue. My second and third clues? The lights in the den were low, and the place smelled like clover. I wish I had had a fourth clue because I wasn't prepared for what was next.

My mother suddenly appeared from her bedroom. She must have sensed me coming through the door because I don't know how she would have heard me. She seemed fussy as she moved swiftly to turn the music off. She tied her robe, nervously raked her fingers through her tussled hair, and flicked a few wild strands from her face. Her usually butter-colored skin crimsoned when she saw me. She looked as though she'd just run a mile or two, and sounded equally winded.

My mother doesn't jog.

Before I could speak or place my backpack in its usual spot on the dinette table, a tall, dark man emerged from my mother's bedroom and walked up behind her. I froze. His eyes had the same slanted intensity as my own. His skin was as deep and smooth as my own. His beard was so immaculate that it looked as though he had painted it on. His shoulders were broad, and his arms looked refined by physical labor. His nose was a larger, grown-up version of mine. I felt like I was looking at myself 30 years in the future... if I took steroids and worked out every day from now till then.

"Ray, this is your father. He's going to be coming around sometime," my mother announced, matter-of-factly. She raked her fingers through her hair again. She then abruptly moved toward the kitchen to look for something to cook or bake. Whenever my mother got nervous, she cooked. Whenever she made me mad or punished me for my wrongdoings, she cooked. Our kitchen wasn't always fully stocked, but she always made something good out of whatever she had.

"Boy, how you've grown." He stuck out his dark brown hand, but I didn't take it. I decided right then and there that I didn't like this man. I didn't trust him on sight. And there was no way that he was staying here in my house. I'd been the man of the house for thirteen years; I wasn't about to let a stranger move in on my territory. Me and moms were doing just fine by ourselves.

"Got homework," I mumbled, brushing past him with my lips poked out so far I coulda tripped on them. I glanced back at him before I shut my bedroom door.

That night, "Dad" (what my mother said I could call him) left in an old, loud, orange Chevrolet truck that sputtered all the way down the block. When he turned the corner, I heard it pop into a backfire. Immediately, I stormed out of my room and ranted to my mother about this stranger coming into our house. I insisted we didn't need him and lamented, asking why I wasn't good enough for her.

My mother patiently listened. She told me she understood my

frustration. Then she explained to me that a woman needs older male company from time to time. She then confirmed that he was no stranger; he was, indeed, my father. She ended the conversation by saying she did not want to hear anymore negative talk about “Big Ray,” and that I’d better get used to him being around. With a kiss on the top of my head, she went to bed with a smile.

Well, if she and “Big Ray” had plans, I now had plans of my own. I was going to run “Big Ray” away. I planned to have him out of our lives as quickly as he’d come in. I gave him two months, tops.

In the first month, Big Ray showed up every Friday and stayed for the weekend. Then he would leave for wherever he went on Sunday nights. Each weekend, I noticed he would bring and “leave” a few of his items. First, it was a toothbrush, then a pair of shoes. Next came a belt, a tie, and some pomade for his hair.

And each weekend, I was the rudest, most ungrateful young man anyone could imagine. I’m sure my mother was embarrassed, but she never said anything. I noticed she started combing her hair more. She started wearing makeup and choosing more colorful, fitted clothing.

One Sunday evening, I came home to find her smiling and dressed in a really pretty dress. She walked out in her heels and looked at me.

“Big Ray is coming over. Get dressed, he’s taking us out to dinner,” she said with excitement in her voice.

“I’m not going,” I said coolly. I planted myself on the couch.

When Big Ray arrived, I was still sitting in the same spot. My mother tried one more time to see if I’d give up my stubbornness.

“Please, Ray, get dressed.” Her voice was soft, but I could tell that I was frustrating her.

“Let him stay!” Big Ray said. “He’s a grown man now, right, Ray?” He directed the cynicism in his voice toward me. “And a grown-ass man can make his own decisions. If he wants to stay home, let him.”

I was in the same spot when they came home, watching TV.

My mother breezed in, swooning. “Oh, Ray, you missed it! It was such a nice restaurant, the food was great.”

My stomach grumbled. “Did you bring me something to eat?” I asked.

Big Ray chuckled. “No big man.” He took his jacket off and laid it on the edge of the couch. “Remember? You a grown-ass man! And a grown-ass man don’t wait for his mama to feed him. A grown-ass man gets his own food. With his own money that he gets from his own job.”

I frowned, sank into the couch, and shot him a look that I thought should have sparked fear in him. But he met me with an even scarier look as he took a seat. I lowered my gaze. There wasn’t any food in the kitchen, and I thought they’d bring me a plate, or at least left overs. It was going to be one of those nights I wouldn’t eat... and I blew my chance for a good meal.

Big Ray leaned back into the couch cushions, cracking open a beer he brought in with him, like he hadn’t any plans of going home this Sunday. I bolted up from the couch, fuming as I stormed off to my room.

I stayed in my room, brooding, watching the clock, hoping this motherfucker would get up and leave. Big Ray hung around for a few hours. I tightened my arms around my stomach as it rumbled, revolting, reminding me that I had purposely skipped a free meal.

I eventually snuck out of my room and crouched behind a door. I watched them from my hiding spot. My mother was giggling and flipping her hair over her shoulder. She giggled as I had never seen her giggle before. And I had to admit: she looked younger than she’d looked in a long time. Even her smile was different. It was wide and toothy and curled up in the corners. Before Big Ray started coming around, her smiles only formed in the middle of her face, with the sides sloping down in the corners. But this smile tonight was not that.

I saw Big Ray stretch and bring his arm down to drape over my mother’s shoulder.

“I’m gonna hit the road.” He said, nuzzling his face into the side of her neck.

“Nooooo,” she whined. “Stay.”

He leaned over and kissed her long and hard on the lips. I was outraged! I wanted to run out into the den and sock him in his jaw. Instead, I turned my head away.

“You know that’s not a good idea right now. He needs to adjust.” He stood and pulled her up with him. “Did you enjoy yourself to-night?”

She gushed. “Absolutely.” Then she ducked her head shyly. “Thanks for coming back.”

Big Ray smiled. In that moment, I could see why my mother was head over heels for him. He was charming. But he wasn’t fooling me. And I had to admit the situation was more dire than I’d imagined.

“Have a good night, beautiful,” he said, walking to the door. “Same time next weekend?”

She nodded her head, and Big Ray slipped out the door. Once I heard that engine backfire around the corner, I stormed into the den, startling my mother.

“Ray.” She cooed. She placed a hand over my angrily furrowed brows. “I thought you were fast asleep.”

“Why does he have to come here?” I pouted angrily.

“I thought you would be thrilled to have your father back in your life.”

“He’s not my father!” I thundered, sounding a little like him when he spoke sternly. “I don’t even know him!”

“Doesn’t mean he’s not your father,” she said, smiling. I could tell that none of my tantrums would ruin the good time she had tonight.

“I’ve never seen this man before in my life.” I protested begrudgingly.

“Yes, you did. When you were five. You used to idealize him,” she said wistfully.

“That doesn’t count!”

“Give Big Ray a chance.” She licked her finger and wiped something off my cheek.

“Check this out.” She waved me over to the couch where she’d

left her purse. She reached inside and pulled out a napkin. "I saved you some dessert." She unwrapped it to reveal a strawberry piece of cake, my favorite.

I looked at it. My stubbornness didn't want to take it because it came from Big Ray.

"Go ahead. It's really good." She prodded, pushing the napkin closer to me.

I was starving, so I relented. We sat on the couch. She rubbed my head, smoothing down the back of my head while I devoured the cake, making sure no sweet crumb got left behind on the napkin.

"Big Ray makes me happy." She said, looking into my eyes as I slowly licked the last of the frosting from my finger.

"He don't make me happy!" I scowled, crossing my arms over my chest. "I don't see nothing that he do that's special. I thought I was enough to make you happy."

"You are honey. You will always make me happy." She started slowly. "But sometimes, women need adult men to make them happy, too."

I covered my ears. This was not a conversation I wanted to have with her.

"But why does he have to come around so much?"

She hunched her shoulders. "I don't think he comes around enough." She stood up. "Now, I'm tired. Have a good night, Ray." She kissed me on the forehead and hummed all the way to her room, where she shut the door behind her without so much as a backward glance at me.



Ray took my mother out to eat two more weekends in a row. Both times, I refused. I was hungry, and he knew it. Both times, he made me regret my choice.

Then, on the weekend of my fourteenth birthday, my mother was getting ready for another dinner date. I sat, brooding on the couch

with my jacket on my lap. My mother was trying to convince me to go for a birthday celebration at Big Ray's request.

"It would make Big Ray happy if you went."

"I don't care what makes him happy!"

She walked over to me, her high-heeled shoes clicking across the floor. "It would really make ME happy. Plus, I hear they have some good fried fish."

"I don't care about no fish." My stomach rumbled. I knew she heard it.

"Come on, Ray. It's your birthday." She kissed me on my cheek as only a mother could do. And raised my chin with her finger. "It would mean a lot to me."

I was stubborn. Starving and stubborn. But hearing her softly plead made me relent. The growling pull of my empty stomach was a close second. Besides, if Big Ray was paying, I planned to eat everything I could and make his pockets hurt!

"Happy birthday, man!" Big Ray boomed when he walked in the door. "Can't believe you're fourteen now. Becoming a young man." He kissed my mother on her cheek. "Y'all ready to go? This is gonna be some of the best fried fish y'all ever tasted!"

I was in the backseat of the fancy car he rented for the occasion with my arms crossed before he even had a chance to help my mother get her coat on and get out the door. Ray drove us to the restaurant in a long, slow, agonizing ride filled with old-school music that suggested things that I didn't need to hear about. Giggles bubbled from the front passenger seat.

I loudly blew out air, complete with spit, when I heard my mom carrying on like that. I was furious when I saw Ray's fingers inch across the center console and squeeze my mom's knee. I was mortified! If it weren't for my growling stomach, I would have jumped out of the car at the next red light.

Inside Freddie's Big Fish Restaurant, we waited to be seated. My mom cooed and fawned over Big Ray like he was the only man she'd ever seen. It was sickening. I immediately regretted coming. Then

the smell of the food hit my nostrils. And I remembered my diabolical plan. I was going to order all kinds of food on Big Ray's tab.

I looked greedily at the menu, plotting my order. Deserts. Drinks. Maybe something to take home. I got ready to have a birthday feast... on him! Once we were seated, people started coming up to Ray, patting him on the back, and laughing loudly. Obviously, everyone there knew who he was. So much for my birthday: he was the life of the party.

The food was much better than I'd expected. The place was pretty upbeat with lively music. I spent most of the time shoveling food into my mouth while ignoring the laughter and chatter of the adults around me.

A robust man with shoulder-length locs walked into the restaurant and made a beeline for Big Ray. The man clapped Big Ray on his back so hard I thought Big Ray's shoulder would pop out of its socket. He grabbed Ray's hand and pumped it up and down vigorously while smiling and grinning at my mother.

"Is this Nikki?" His eyes bugged, and a large grin spread across his face. "I haven't seen you in ages! Girl, you ain't changed a bit! Still looking good! How you stay so young-looking? Do you ever age?" He gushed as my mom giggled, swatting at him as if she'd never heard that before. "And don't tell me this is Little Ray? Hey, man!" He leaned his face down toward mine.

"I'm not 'Little Ray,'" I said with an attitude. The adults were stunned.

"Just Ray," my mom said, reaching over and rubbing her hand up and down my arm. "He goes by Ray." I frowned and slightly pulled away from her. A little mirth left her eyes. I felt bad, but my pride wouldn't let me apologize.

"...I was there when you was born." The man continued slowly. The adults eyed each other. "Has it really been 14 years?"

"Yeah, celebrating 14 years!" Big Ray boomed with pride. I rolled my eyes, but he didn't see me because he let out a booming laugh. I groaned, sinking further down into my seat.

I excused myself, mumbling something about the bathroom. Instead, I went up to the counter to order another piece of fish and a roll. I didn't have room in my stomach to even think about eating one more bite. But I was determined to stick it to Big Ray. I also ordered two pieces of strawberry cake to go.

As I waited at the counter, I shot daggers at the back of Ray's head. I would NEVER call him "Dad." EVER. As far as I was concerned, he broke into my life, stole my mother from me, and rearranged some shit that didn't need rearranging. He would always be "That Man" to me. Nothing more, nothing less. It would be a cold day in hell before he got my respect.

The ride home from Freddie's Big Fish was longer than the ride there. At least my belly and take-home container were full. As soon as we hit the driveway, I bounced out and into the apartment without even a thank you to Big Ray. My mother stopped me in my tracks at the threshold of my bedroom.

"I know you are not about to go in that room without thanking Big Ray for all that wonderful food you scarfed down tonight." She raised her eyebrows. "I didn't raise you like that."

My eyebrows sank like anchors over my eyes. I poked out my lower lip and turned back toward the den.

"Thank you," I mumbled in Big Ray's direction and slinked into my room to savor my two slices of cake stuffed into the to-go container with my fish and roll, still in my hand.



Ray showed up like clockwork every weekend after that. He was always gone by the time I got up to go to school on Mondays. On Sundays, he constantly tried to "bond" with me by organizing different activities. He tried wooing me by building a birdhouse together one weekend and fixing a bike the next. I wasn't interested. I was annoyed. Big Ray didn't seem like he was going anywhere.

My mother rarely dated when I was younger. Not because she

wasn't a pretty woman; she had beautiful, brown, shoulder-length hair she kept pressed. It perfectly framed her honey-colored skin, light brown eyes, slender nose, and pretty smile. Men always stared at her whenever we were out at the grocery store. But I think she held herself back because she was concerned about how I might react. I could be a nuisance when I got ready. I remember running off a guy or two when I was around 8-years-old.

But my powers didn't work on Big Ray. He was sticking around like white on rice. And my mother was completely under his spell. I couldn't deny how much happier she was now. But the happier she got, the more I moped around like a zombie.

By winter, I was so damn tired of Big Ray telling me what to do, as if he had the right. One Saturday during the following spring, I came home to find a kite lying across my bed. It was a big, colorful dragon-looking thing with multicolored fusion streamers hanging from it. How old did he think I was?

"Fuckin' idiot," I mumbled as I violently kicked it onto the floor. Why in the hell would he buy me a damn kite? I cursed to myself. After fourteen years of absence, he could have at least bought me some new kicks, or upgraded my iPod Shuffle to a Touch like all my other friends' fathers.

The next morning, I walked right over the kite like it wasn't there and went out to hang with my friend, James, who lived a few doors down. By the time I got back, the kite was propped up right in the front room. So as soon as I walked in, there it was, staring at me. If I wanted to go back out, all I saw was this big, hideous dragon with fake, bright yellow and orange flames shooting from its nostrils.

I just looked at it, rolled my eyes, and left it right there. I continued with my routine: school for the rest of the week, soccer with my friends on Fridays, and basketball in the park on Saturdays. I don't know why Big Ray had to leave something that reminded me of him when he wasn't there every day.

The following Sunday morning, when I woke up, Big Ray was sitting on the couch, smoking a cigar and watching TV. Instantly, I

frowned and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Where my mama?” I said with an attitude.

“She went to church today. Said she’d be back after she stops at the grocery store. She cooking something special tonight.” He puffed on the cigar, his cheeks caving in with each hit.

“I’m supposed to take you out.”

“Out?” I scoffed. “Out where?”

He hunched his shoulders. “Go get dressed so we can be back before she get home.”

I stood there, staring at him, contemplating my next move. My face was so tight I could feel the tension in my scalp.

Big Ray puffed again slowly on his cigar and brought his eyes from the television to my face. His eyes bore into me, sending my stomach straight to the floor.

“I don’t make no habit of repeating myself.”

He wasn’t playing, and I wasn’t feeling lucky enough to take any chances. They didn’t call him Big Ray for nothing. I seethed silently as I walked off heavily, just shy of stomping.



On a sunny day, folks mill about Bovine Park, which is not too far from our apartment. In the winter, the homeless take over. They huddle under trees and sprawl out atop park benches. But for some reason, there was a corner of the park that seemed to be immune to this type of riff-raff.

Big Ray pulled up to this part. I sat in the passenger seat with my arms crossed. I leaned over and looked out. Small groups of people ran with Frisbees and strolled with leashed dogs. Little kids invaded the swings and slides like a swarm of ants. The sun was out. On any other occasion, this might have been a nice outing.

I glanced over at Big Ray. He gave me this really weird, tight smile. Was he about to kill me? He got out of the truck, pounded his fist on the side of the truck, then told me to get out. I could see him

in the rearview mirror, digging into the back of the pickup truck. He pulled out that damn dragon kite and went to an open space and called for me.

I shook my head. I wasn't going out there. From the window, I watched as he tossed the kite in the air and took off running. The kite spiraled defiantly, then took a nose-dive into the dirt.

"Fucking moron," I mumbled to myself.

I didn't know why my mother was torturing me like this. I stayed put in that seat until after a few futile attempts to get the bulky dragon into the sky, Big Ray finally gave up and hopped back in the truck. I could tell he was frustrated with me. That suited me just fine. With a smirk on my face, I slipped my earphone buds back into my ear and let Tupac pump through my ears, while I started texting my man, James.

If Big Ray said something else, I didn't hear it. My head was already nodding to the old school boom-bap styled song. He packed the kite back into the truck, looked at his watch, hopped back in to the seat, and steered it back to my place.

A week passed. Once again, when I awoke on Sunday morning, Ray was sitting on the couch, waiting for me.

"Where my mama?" I asked just like the previous Sunday. Got the same answer, too. On this second trip to the park, I refused to get out. I watched Big Ray toss the kite and fail again. Was this about to become a ritual, I thought? I was already tired of it.

Sadly, my worst fear came true. So I made sure I always had fresh tunes loaded up in my iPod Shuffle. The next couple of times, I sat with my arms crossed and head bobbing as my playlist rotated from Kanye to Kid Cudi and from Lil Wayne to Lupe Fiasco.

At one point, Big Ray actually got the kite up in the air for a little while before it toppled to the grass. Having crashed so much, the kite was starting to look a little beat up. Week after week, Sunday after Sunday, we repeated the same tiring scenario.

One day, about two or three months in, we pulled up. Big Ray killed the engine and looked over at me. I guess he figured today

might be the day I get out of the truck. But I had plans on busting his spirit once again. I could tell that he was at his wits' end.

"I thought you liked kite flying?" His face was tight with frustration.

"Who told you that?" I said, taking one earbud out, and furrowing my brows.

"Your mother."

"Naw. I ain't never been kite flying in my life."

"Well, why did she tell me that?"

I hunched my shoulders. It looked like we'd both been played by my mother.

"Well, I'll be damned." He chuckled, then thought for a moment. "Young man, I think we have both been duped by a very beautiful woman."

I didn't say anything to him.

"I, for one, do not want to upset her. So we got to figure something out." He roughly rubbed the top of his head. "What is it that you like to do?"

"Not kite flying," I said with attitude. "Kids nowadays don't fly no kites."

"My grandfather used to take me out to fly kites."

"You old!" I said, as I sent James a text, letting him know I was still out with the idiot.

"What do kids do now?"

"We fly drones. Not kites."

"Drones?" He said, shocked. "I ain't got no money for a drone. I heard those things was expensive!"

"You asked," I replied, sarcastically. I put my headphones back in. And for a while, Big Ray didn't say a word. I almost forgot he was there until I opened my eyes and saw him staring at me.

"Tell you what." Big Ray looked like he had a bright idea. "You get that kite up and flying for a minimum of 20 minutes, and I'll buy you a drone, somehow."

I stared at him but didn't say anything. The deal was sweet but

not that sweet. I guess he was reading my expression.

“And, I’ll leave you alone.”

“You’ll leave me alone?” He had my attention now. Now that was a sweet deal! “And buy me a drone? Any one I want?”

“Within reason.” Big Ray nodded his head.

“What does that mean?” I asked, frowning again. This sounded like a set-up to me.

“It means I ain’t got a lot of money.”

“Ten minutes?” I asked again. Even if he couldn’t afford what I wanted, getting him out of my face was gonna be priceless. I was thinking this was going to be the easiest bet I’d ever made.

“Fifteen. That’s my final offer.”

I thought about it. Fifteen minutes for no Big Ray? I get my Sundays back? Flying that kite looked easy as fuck.

“Cool.” I said. I plucked the earphones out of my ears, dropped my phone on the passenger seat, and swung the passenger door open.

“Uh, uh, uh...” he said. “You forgetting something?”

I thought for a brief second. “Nah, old man. I’m good.”

“Old man?” He shook his head and chuckled. “What if you lose?”

“Ain’t worried about losing. Fifteen minutes ain’t but that...” I snapped my fingers. All I could think about was getting that drone into the sky and possibly flying it over Charlene’s house while she dressed for school.

“If you lose, you gotta keep coming with me each Sunday until I say stop. And you gotta be a man of your word. And at home, you gotta do what your mama tells you to do with no problems. Deal?”

I lifted my chin up at him as I tilted my head, acknowledging that we had an agreement. I didn’t worry about the extra stipulations he tried to slide in under the gun because it wasn’t about to be all that. This kite was going to be in the air in no time!

I hopped out of the truck. Big Ray trailed behind me. I walked over to his kite-flying spot. I tossed it up and it crashed straight down before I could even take off running. I repeated this act a few

times to no avail.

Big Ray had positioned himself on a bench close by and seemed to be quite amused at my failures. Although I was up for the challenge, I quickly realized flying that damn kite wasn't as easy as I thought. I started to worry.

After a few more attempts I had to admit defeat. At least for today. But I had my heart set on that drone and more importantly, on him leaving me alone. I drug that dragon up and down the grass for over an hour before I finally drug it back to his truck.

"Ready to go?" Big Ray asked with a smug look on his face. "Same time next week, huh?"

I rolled my eyes and put my music back in my ear. I hated losing. Especially to him.

Two more Sundays rolled around and I was getting tired. Each time, my mother already slipped out to do her thing. Obviously, this was a set-up. I think she was just happy that we were spending time together. But for me it was torture

"Your mama said you been getting into some trouble?" This was Ray, prying. Looking at me like any of my issues was his business. I sat on the bench, huffing with frustration, with the damn dragon by my side. I was being stubborn today. I wasn't interested in even humoring him. "She don't deserve that." He said.

I scoffed with a deep snort. How would he know what she deserved? He just started coming around. My mother was a sweet woman, always smiling, singing, and baking.

"How long I gotta do this?" I asked. "You proved your point."

"What point is that?" Ray looked upset. "What exactly is the point you think I'm trying to make out here, huh?"

I shrugged.

"You think I'd rather be out here with you and your bad-attitude-having ass? And watch you throw your temper-tantrums with your thumb up your fucking ass? Nah! Trust and believe young blood, I'd rather be snuggled up under your mama instead. Shee-it, I ain't the one trying to make a point. You gotta be a man of your word. Every

Sunday until you get that kite in the muthafuckin sky for fifteen minutes. That's the agreement!"

He hopped up and jogged to the truck with me right behind him. I hated him.

When I walked in from another dragon-defeated day, I went straight to my room and stayed there. An hour later, I could hear my mother come home and call for me from the kitchen, I didn't move. Several minutes later, she opened my bedroom door with a strained smile on her face. "Did you get it to fly today?"

"No," I scowled.

She walked over to me and smoothed her palm against my cheek. I could see Big Ray standing in the kitchen from my open bedroom door. "I'm sure it will happen soon." She said. She turned and gave Big Ray a look that I couldn't read.

"Go get washed up for dinner, Ray." She planted a kiss on my forehead. She stepped back a little bit, looked at me with a faraway gaze, and smiled. That smile held back many words I couldn't access. A sudden wave of panic rushed over me for a reason I couldn't explain. It made me want to obey her without fuss.

While I was in my bathroom washing my hands, I could hear my mother's harsh whispering. And then what sounded like her whimpering. I dried my hands and slipped quietly back into the hallway between my room and the kitchen.

"That's what they said." I heard my mother say.

I heard rustling, so I peeked around the corner. I saw Ray pull her into an embrace and rub his hands up and down her back. From where I squatted, I could see him wipe a tear from his face. I didn't know what was wrong, but something in me stirred. He held her like he would protect her from harm. In his embrace, my mother seemed smaller, weaker, needy. I wasn't used to seeing her that way. Perplexed, I went back into my room and got into the shower to wash the day away and that sight from my memory. I had lost my appetite.



Way back, when I was 10, I stole a Snickers from the grocery store. Actually, it was a Snickers bar, a pack of Pop Rocks, and a few sticks of rock candy. In that order. I remember walking down the aisle, swiping the items in that order as I made my way towards the door. Mr. Olge, the store owner, caught me red-handed right by the cash register. He knew my mother. I guess he didn't want to press charges because of her. She had that effect on people. He told me something that day I'll never forget.

"You know, Ray, when you are doing wrong, YOU are the first person to know. You knew you were doing wrong long before I saw what you did."

He was right.

Mr. Olge let me go without calling the cops. But made me put the candy back. From then on, I was hyper aware of my choices. I always knew whenever I was about to do, or was in the middle of doing something wrong.

Five years later, I knew I was in the wrong when I walked into the boys' bathroom at my high school to meet Chuck and Daniel, even though I should have been in class. So, when Mr. Brown came in behind us, searched my backpack, and found two marijuana pens and a couple of blunts, I already knew I was in deep shit.

Sitting in his office, I periodically peeked through the office window at Chuck and Daniel as they waited for their parents to be called.

The principal flipped open a file folder and looked at me with furrowed brows.

"We can't get a hold of your mother. Is she working?" he asked. "Do you have a work number for her because I don't see one in your file."

The look on my face must have been comical because my mother didn't have a work number, per se. She worked from home, baking

cakes and cupcakes. She wanted to open a bakery one day but for now, she settled with making cakes for church functions, barely making enough money for us to keep the lights on.

“Nah, I ain’t got no work number for her.” I said with a smirk.

“Ok, then. Who is Raymond Styles?” he asked, the tip of his finger on a spot on the page that I couldn’t see.

“Huh?” I asked, my heart quickening. Then I played it off by shrugging. “I ’on know.”

“Says here that he is your emergency contact.” Mr. Brown looked up at me from the folder. “He your father?”

I would NEVER call him my father! I said in my head. Outwardly, I shrugged again. “Nah, he just one of my mom’s friends.”

Mr. Brown looked at me like he knew my ass was lying. “Well, I’m going to give this friend a call!”

My eyes ballooned and my mouth fell open as I watched him dial Big Ray’s number. Things just went from bad to worse. I definitely didn’t wanna have to deal with that clown. I blew out air in a loud exaggerated sigh and tried to seem uninterested. In reality, I was nervous. Usually my antics broke my mother’s heart. I didn’t like doing it, but lately, I couldn’t help it.

But Big Ray was a wild card. I could tell there was a real force behind his eyes that he always kept restrained. Honestly, I was always afraid it would jump out one day if I pushed too hard. I was hoping today wasn’t that day.

My stomach churned into knots as I sat in the lobby waiting for Big Ray to arrive. When he did, he told the Principal that my mother was ill. I didn’t know that. Big Ray said that he would be taking me home and would be responsible for me.

The bottom fell out from my heart. Big Ray had been in our lives now for a year and I still wasn’t used to him being around. I usually made myself as scarce as possible when he was there. What did this all mean?

When we hopped in Ray’s old beat-up truck, he didn’t utter a word to me. I thought he was gonna yell, put his foot in my ass, or

punch a hole in my chest. I deserved it. But his silence was worse than getting a beat down.

When we got home, my mom was asleep. She must have been exhausted. I felt guilty. I knew I was partly to blame, but I tried convincing myself it was Big Ray's presence. That day, I couldn't convince myself. I had to man up... at least to myself.

I was 15 now, and certainly knew right from wrong. I knew my lifestyle choices were stressing my mom out. I had turned to petty crimes, stealing, selling vape pens, blunts, did a little drinking. I knew my being disrespectful to Ray weighed heavy on her. But how could I respect him... where was he the first 13 years? Did he really think he could just pop up one day and be dad of the year? He pissed me off. I'd rather get high and stay there, than be anywhere near him. Because while I was high, it was easier to blame my problems on him and everyone else, instead of just taking accountability.

I left Ray in the kitchen and went straight to my room and waited for the shoe to drop. I just knew Ray would tell my mom what had happened at school today. I counted down the minutes till I heard her voice to shrill my name throughout the apartment. But after an hour of high anxiety, nothing.

At dinner, she was her normal, smiling self, buzzing around both of us like she had gotten a sudden boost of energy. Strange. Because just two days ago, she looked like she could barely hold her head up.

She kissed me on my forehead when she saw me. During dinner, she chattered on about her day. Afterward, Big Ray cleaned the dishes and the kitchen. Actually, he did a better job than my mom. Then they both retired to the living room, perched in front of the television. So I left them to slink to my room for the night and to do my homework.

The next morning was the same. My mother acted like she didn't know anything. Every day for the following week, I expected to be snatched by my collar by either my mom or Big Ray. But nothing ever happened.

On Sunday, when it was our time to go to the park for kiting,

I managed to get the kite up for 4 minutes. That was my personal best. And it wasn't easy. This wasn't an ordinary kite shaped like a diamond with an easy string. No. This was a dragon with a boxy build and had so many strings that I almost tripped over them a few times. I just couldn't understand what was wrong. Why, in a year, couldn't I get that damned thing to fly for fifteen friggen minutes?



At one point, a few Sundays later, we were sitting on the grass. I was highly frustrated. Ray had been quiet all morning. Normally, he would have had some slick shit to say, but I could tell that something was on his mind. I pushed the dragon to the side, and leaned forward.

“How come you didn't tell my mom about what happened at school that day?” I yanked a blade of grass from the ground and scrunched it in my fist.

“Wasn't no need. It was handled. Plus, it would have just broken her heart. She don't need to know who you really are right now because you are still changing and growing. Next year, hell, next month, you probably won't even be the same person. So there ain't no reason for her to see that side of you right now. She thinks you're perfect.” He fumbled with a plucked dandelion, then tossed it into the grass. “I know what a little shit you really are. Your mama is like a delicate flower. Too much stress can crush her.”

“Hmph. So why you leave her?” I crossed my arms over my chest in defiance, cutting him off from finishing his sentence. “YOU crushed her!”

Ray blinked slowly. He let silence grow between us before finally saying, “You have every right to be mad.”

Damn right! I said that to myself, not out loud. I'm stubborn, not stupid. There was a reason they called him “Big” Ray. I softened the words I chose to leave my mouth.

“You gon' answer my question? Why did you leave us?”

Big Ray inhaled deeply, then let out a deep sigh. He pulled a cigar out of his back pocket, lit it, and took a few puffs. He looked up at the sky, licked his lips, and took a drag on the cigar. He blew smoke up into the air. The vapor trailed up, dissipated, melting into the clouds. Finally, he spoke.

“I’d do anything to help protect her from getting hurt anymore... I’ve done enough of that in her life in the past. I’m not going to let either of us hurt her again if we can help it...”

I frowned.

I was participating in petty crimes around the neighborhood, constantly making my mother cry. Twice, she had to borrow money to get me out of my dumb choices. Most Black men in my neighborhood didn’t live to be 21 years. I assumed that would be my fate too, so I surrendered myself to the streets. Then Ray popped into my life. And after being around for about two years, this was the first time he was offering a reason or an excuse for being absent... at least not to me.

“There are some things young boys can’t understand.”

“Well, I ain’t no boy. I been the man of that house... still is.”

“Oh yeah?” Ray chuckled. That just fueled my inner fire further.

“That’s right.” I puffed out my chest.

Ray paused and looked me in my eyes. “You right, young’n been the man of the house, taking care of your mother while I was gone... but I’m here now.”

“What if we don’t need you now?”

“That you talking? ’Cause your mama don’t seem to have a problem with me being around. Besides, your mother and I had a situation-ship and understanding long before your little Black ass was even a thought. So if anybody should be around, it would be me.

“Your mother is a good, good woman, like royalty. I wasn’t shit, and that’s putting it lightly. Sometimes, it takes a man a while to realize what he is. And I’m here now because I have grown. Back then, if I had come around y’all, well, you don’t like me now. Let’s just say that you definitely wouldn’t like me then...”

“Hmph! You said it, not me!”

“Listen here, young man. You got life all fucked up. Don’t nobody owe you shit... not even me. You think you the only one who didn’t have a father around? Well, I didn’t either. And I realized that was his mistake. But I’m here trying to fix my mistake with you. And your little shitty attitude ain’t helping!

“You think your mom deserves you to be running around here acting like you ain’t got no sense or respect for her or yourself? Huh?” Big Ray stuck his face closer to mine. I didn’t dare flinch at the stale cigar smell on his breath.

“She don’t deserve that! As hard as she worked to keep that roof over your head and the little food on your table.” His eyebrows furrowed down. A few creases settled into his forehead.

“Shit! You better start thinking! I mean, really thinking about who your enemies are and who your allies are. ’Cause once you get out into them streets, the real world, you better know the difference. And it ain’t easy out here.” He stubbed the cigar out on the heel of his shoe and hoisted himself up.

“Let’s go. We done dragging that shit up and down this park today.”

He got in his truck, and I followed and stood outside by the passenger door. After that conversation, I looked down at the kite with confusion. I needed to get out of this agreement fast. I just couldn’t understand why this damn thing wouldn’t fly. I picked it up and turned it over a few times. That’s when I noticed there was obviously a piece missing on the kite. Why didn’t I notice before? Has it always been like this? I couldn’t remember.

He must have seen me puzzled because he got back out of the truck and walked up to me.

“A bird can’t fly with a broken wing,” he said, knowingly.

I turned the kite over a few more times. It was undeniable. There was a missing part. There was a space with two unattached hinges where a little wooden stick about six inches long should have been.

I’d been duped! We’d both been thrown together by my mother,

and I'd been forced to stay by this clown. I stomped to the back of the truck and tossed the damn kite into the back of the pickup. I got in without a word.

He started the orange pickup, pulled something out of his pocket, and tossed it to me. My quick reflexes caught it. When I opened my hand to see what it was, I fumed. Right in the middle of my hand was the motherfucking missing piece to the kite! I shot daggers at Big Ray. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I'll be damned!" His voice dripped with sarcasm. He was like the cat that swallowed the canary. "Where did that thing come from? You so damn grown, you say. You got to pay attention to shit. Took you long enough."

I slipped the ear buds into my ears, and let Jay Z's old school "Where I'm From" express my frustration for me. I pumped up the volume and crossed my arms over my chest. The ride was silent the rest of the way home. Later, I skipped dinner, telling my mom that I didn't feel well.

All night, I rolled around in my bed, mad at Big Ray. He'd been playing me this whole time. It took me a week to calm down and get over the betrayal. And in that week I noticed some things. I realized the meaning behind Ray's deception.

My mother really was happier with him around. Although she'd been moving slower and breathing heavier lately, I noticed that her face lit up when he came into the room. She laughed more. Not that little fake laugh that puffs out of her mouth when she talks to the ladies at the church. It was a real hearty laugh, like it had been rolling around in her belly for a while, ready to burst through her throat. She also dressed better, combed her hair and wore make-up whenever Big Ray was around.

I didn't want to admit it, but he made her happy. Genuinely happy. If anyone deserved happiness, it was my mother. And honestly, I wanted my mom to be happy. If that was something I could give her, well, I was willing to start trying.

At the dinner table, I worked on my math. Adding and subtract-

ing numbers was easy. However, when asked to add and subtract letters, I struggled. I stared at the page as the algebraic equations floated around in patterns. My mother stood by the stove with her hands on her hips.

“Mac and cheese or rice?” She asked, rocking her hips up and down. She grabbed a pot to fill with water. “I’ll make mac and cheese since it’s your favorite.”

I watched her gather the mac and cheese from the bag and get the Velveeta from the refrigerator. She chattered about her day and how she was working on baking a coconut cake for Lady Bryant at church.

“Rice.” I said without looking up from the floating letters. “Big Ray likes rice. Make that for him.”

She stopped in her tracks. A small, slow smile worked its way onto her face and she nodded ever so slightly with a whispered response. “I’ll make both. Yeah, both.”

“Also on Sunday, can you make us a lunch?” I asked. “Sometimes, we get hungry.”

“You’re going back?” She asked surprised. She half turned but I could see the smile deepening from the side of her face. “To do the kite thing?”

“Well Ma, I *am* getting older. And I have to be a man of my word.”



The kite was in the air, sailing against the wind and I could see the dragon’s fire streaming from his nostrils. If I were to be honest, I was stoked! Even Big Ray seemed impressed. Once we fixed the “problem” it worked like a charm.

“Did you know that you were almost born in a taxi?” I shook my head “no.” My mother never mentioned that.

Big Ray chuckled and pulled out his cigar. “I was working at the cement factory at the time. And when your mother went into labor I was deep into them pipes. Back then, we didn’t have cellphones. So

your mother had to call a cab. A neighbor's kid had to ride his bike all the way to the cement company to tell me that she was in labor. Your grandmother was not happy with me. Blamed me for leaving your mother alone. But what was I supposed to do? I was out making money so we could buy diapers."

"Grandmother?" I frowned, taking a bite of the apple that my mother packed for us. "You knew my grandmother?" It had always just been me and my mother. No other family ever came around.

"Of course. I told you, I been around long before you was even thought of."

"So what happened to y'all? Where you been all this time?" I asked. The happy, nostalgic look on Big Ray's face dissolved. He squinted up into the sky and folded his bottom lip into his mouth.

"I, uh..." His voice trailed. He fingered his cigar and lit it. He took a long puff before answering.

"I was scared. Scared of ruining you. Scared of messing up. I wasn't no good for you or your mama back then."

"Well, you did. Mess up." I said. "Did you think staying away from us was better? For you to leave us alone and broke? You think we was better off without you?" I said, shaking my head. "That wasn't better."

"Right now, you don't understand. But when you become a man, you'll understand, get it? I been with a lot of women in my life. But your mother was the only one that I loved. The *only* woman that I loved. And you don't understand this, but that is one of the reasons I had to stay away. And if I ever regretted anything in my life, it's that I wasn't there for y'all." He looked over at me and paused for a moment. Then he said to me, "I'm sorry."

I opened my mouth to protest, but stopped short. Sorry? I hadn't expected that. I finally found my tongue. "You think sorry 'gon get it? You think sorry is enough?"

"Nah. Abandoning you and your mama deserve much more than that, but that's all I got right now." He blinked rapidly. "And being here now. That's why I'm here."

Something welled up in my chest. A throbbing heat rose towards my face. I wasn't sure what it was, but I had never felt that way before. I couldn't stop the first tear from falling because I didn't expect it. I was mad at myself for letting it happen. All I ever wanted was for me and my mom to be accepted and loved.

Big Ray looked real deep into my eyes with a soft look on his face. Then, he pulled me into his chest and hugged me. Tight. Now, why the hell did he do that for? Because I unleashed a torrent of tears, right into his shirt.

I had to admit: after that cry, I felt better. Lighter. In that moment, I decided that because Big Ray was here now, that's all that counted. I was going to stop being shitty to him and my mom.

Big Ray told me my mother wasn't feeling well, so we went back to the house. Telling her the good news about flying the kite seemed to cheer her up.

I started looking forward to our time together flying kites. I didn't even worry so much about the drone, even though I had the kite flying for a few weeks. I was an expert now.

It became our time. I used it to ask all the questions I couldn't ask my mother. Big Ray talked to me about sports, life, women, careers, everything. I realized he wasn't such a bad guy after all. And after two years, I finally accepted that Big Ray was a fixture in our lives. He was still only coming around on weekends. My mother never questioned it, so neither did I. We were both just happy to have him to ourselves for the three days. We both got excited when we heard that old orange truck backfire on Friday evenings.

It was almost like we were a real family. The three of us did things together, like having dinner or going out to the movies. Saturday evenings, while I was knee deep in my video games with my friends, Mom and Big Ray had their alone time together. Sundays, Big Ray and I were at the park flying the kite and having our deep conversations.

During this time, I learned so much about Big Ray and my mother. Most importantly, I grew and learned about myself.



When I turned seventeen, my mother passed away. Big Ray moved into our apartment and took over full-time. I never questioned what happened to the place he used to go to during the week. It's like that whole part of him just died and disappeared with my mother. He, like my mother, informed me that he didn't have much money for the bills, so we struggled together. But he made a way for me. He went to work every day and made sure that I had food and shelter.

One day, I came home to find out he had signed me up for the Electrician Trade School. That was the first day that I noticed his hair had turned almost completely white. He didn't even say much. He just dropped the completed application with an acceptance letter and a check for \$50K that covered tuition and books.

"Report tomorrow at eight o'clock, don't be late."

I don't know why, but I did as I was told. I went to school, and I studied hard. Each night that I came home, dinner was ready for me on the table. We had such a productive and peaceful co-existence together, almost like he'd been in my life the entire time I'd been on this Earth.

Our Sunday kite-flying days were over. They ceased when my mother passed. But we talked every night at the dinner table. Ray never lost his charming personality, but there was an obvious void that lingered in the depths of him. A void that I realized could only be filled by my mother. The sadness in his eyes when we spoke of her, the longing that hovered about his head, was palpable. We both hurt deeply in her absence. It was a sad bond that we shared only in her memory.

Big Ray taught me all that I needed to know as a man. He taught me how to shave, bought me my first tie, and taught me how to tie it when I went for job interviews. He basically saved my life. As I grew, I realized that the kite-flying sessions were merely his and my

mom's way of making sure that we bonded. She knew that she had fallen sick, and reintroducing Big Ray into our lives was her way of preparing me to be without her. She always had that uncanny way of persuading men to do what she wanted them to do.

My kite-flying time together with Big Ray gave my life a foundation it was lacking. It gave me a place to have "man time," where I could talk to him about things that Mom was too delicate to hear about. I talked about my feelings for girls, and how I planned to be a better father than he was because, well, quite frankly, I planned to be there for my kids. Those kite-flying trips turned out to be the most crucial, memorable, spectacular years in my life. At my graduation, Big Ray broke down. His tears mixed with pride, grief, and relief.

It wasn't until later that I learned the truth behind Ray's return to my life. Ray was married. He had an entirely different family on the other side of town. As an adult, when I dug deeper, I found out that I was the extra-marital child. My mother and Ray had an affair years ago, and he chose not to leave his wife and family. My mother decided that she would take me and raise me by herself.

When I was getting out of line and causing her emotional pain, she reached out to Ray to come back into my life to help her out. She knew she was sick and knew that I would need someone in her absence. I don't think Big Ray initially knew her intentions. The kite flying was never about learning to fly the dragon. It became our bonding time. It became about us learning to grow together. She knew that I would need someone in my corner when she finally succumbed to her illness. She also knew that Ray needed me as much as I needed him. And it worked.

Ray confided in me that my mother was the only one that he truly loved. And as an adult man, I truly believed him. When my mother transitioned, Big Ray left his family to dedicate the rest of his life to me. By that time, we were bonded. We leaned on each other when the times were too tough for us to bear the loss of my mother. I don't know if I ever told Ray thank you. And even though

the words never left my mouth, I think he knew. I think he knew all along how I truly felt about him. I think he knew that I loved him.

Today I stand in the same park where we flew my kite years ago. At thirty years old, I now understand the importance of the lost art of kite flying. It provided me with the tools needed to become a man and deal in this world that is hard on Black men. I plan to pass that same knowledge down to my two boys. These are the tools that I would not have learned if my mother hadn't had the foresight to bring my father back into my life.

And I realized as I got older, it wasn't the kite flying per se, itself. It was the quality time spent, not sitting in front of a television, playing video games, or engrossed on the phone. It was the time we spent in nature, in the park, listening to birds chirp, and watching squirrels gather nuts for the winter. It was the art of communication and the ability to think and work through issues and problems. I learned how to keep a clear mind and stay focused without distractions. I wanted to instill this into my children. I made sure I created our time together out there, running, throwing the kite up with everything inside of you, and try after try, finally seeing that kite sail up high. I know that sense of accomplishment, pride, and success. It's a feeling that can't be described, but space can be made for my kids to experience it. It becomes a seed implanted, ready to grow.

I look over at my wife, Candace. We've been married for three years. My two sons are nearby. Raymond III is 3 years old. Camden is six months old. I plan to instill as many of Big Ray's teachings as I can, complete with kite-flying lessons. Right now, we are buying time at the park up the street from our church.

Candace stepped closer to me. She offered a tight smile and placed her hand on my shoulder with a soft squeeze. "It's time."

I was supposed to be giving a speech that very moment at Big Ray's memorial. I told the Bishop I would come. I nodded my head. "Let's go."

Candace gathered the boys, and we piled into the car. The church was visible from the park, so it only took a few minutes to drive and

park. We arrived just in time before the church doors closed.

As I sit in the pew, nervously bouncing my knee up and down, I think about my life and how different it became when Ray walked into it. I glanced over at my kids. No way I would ever walk out on them.

The church was packed to capacity. Hand fans flipping in unison as smiles mixed with tears. Ray touched many hearts in our community.

I stared at the casket. Big Ray came into my life at the right time for the right reasons. He prepared me for the most important role that I would ever have in life, Father. My mother loved him. And I had grown to love him also. She would have been proud right now, smiling her beautiful, infectious smile. I wiped a tear from my wife's cheek, then did the same to my own face.

When it was my turn to speak, I slowly walked to the pulpit with dignity and pride. As I'm walking, I glance to the left of me and I see Big Ray's other children. Crystal, Carlton, Timothy, and Johnny peer up at me. A total of five of us, Big Ray's offsprings. After Big Ray's passing, I reached out to them and they all lovingly accepted me as their brother. Crystal, the second oldest and only female, waved a little with a sad smile. Regardless of our upbringing, we were all Ray's seeds. I was at peace with this fact. This man saved my life. This man took care of my mother. He took me under his wing and taught me all that he knew. This man taught me the importance of the lost art of kite flying.

I cleared my throat, straightened out the paper I had clenched in my grip, and was ready to give the written speech I'd practiced over and over in my head.

"Big Ray..." I started but paused. I cleared my throat. The words burned coming out of my mouth. "My dad, Big Ray..." I said. I cleared my throat again. "My father... Ray... Big Ray... my dad..." I looked out into the pews at the sea of waiting faces, filled with anguish from our loss.

Right then, I imagined Big Ray up in heaven, tickling my mother's

toes and nuzzling his face into her neck like he always did. I pictured them together again, as she giggled at his touches. A gush of emotion surged up my chest, and I collapsed onto the podium and cried. It had just dawned on me that this was the first time that I'd ever called him father or dad. I just hoped he heard me.

PANSY

Henrietta Anderson

The whole week, people poured into Cedar. Autumn had settled over the town, turning the trees into a quilt of red, brown, and fiery orange. Leaves drifted lazily to the ground, like soft, colorful snow. The Fall festival had brought in crowds from every direction, but this year held something special—it was also time for Jack and Minnie Anderson’s family reunion.

Cedar was once a quiet, familiar town that had blossomed into something larger, bustling with new shops and faces we didn’t recognize. But beneath it all, the heart of Cedar remained—the same warmth, the same old stories, the same roots reaching deep into the earth.

As Daisy and Dee Dee drove down Main Street, they spotted Mister’s Boutique and pulled into the parking lot. Mister had returned from New York years ago, bringing her sense of fashion and creativity back home, and had opened Uptown, a boutique that quickly became a Cedar staple.

They rushed inside, embracing Mister with loud laughter and excited chatter. They had been inseparable since childhood.

“Oh, Mister, your shop is stunning,” Daisy said, running her fingers over a display scarf.

“You’ve outdone yourself,” Dee Dee added. “Everything looks like it belongs in a magazine.”

Before leaving, they bought several items—more out of love than

necessity. Then they drove past the places where they had played as girls—the old schoolyard, the vacant field where they had practiced cartwheels, and finally, Miss Betsy’s house.

Dee Dee burst into laughter. “I remember when Miss Betsy told Grandmother Rose that we sassed her. I used to get so mad because she insisted we were sisters! I’d say, ‘We are cousins!’ How many times do I have to tell you that, Miss Betsy?” Dee Dee planted her hands on her hips, pointed her finger, and rolled her eyes in perfect imitation.

Daisy shook her head, laughing. “And I didn’t even say anything! You got us both in trouble, Dee Dee. I just took my punishment quietly.”

“Grandmother made us stay in the yard for a whole month,” Dee Dee added, still amused. “Turns out Miss Betsy was right all along.”

When they reached the family property, the driveway was crowded with cars. Through the window, they saw Aunt Pansy sitting gracefully at the gazebo, surrounded by her paintings. She looked peaceful—like someone who had survived storms and learned how to sit still in the sunshine. They hurried outside.

“Hello, Aunt Pansy!” They called together.

She rose to greet them, giving each of them a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Daisy glanced at the artwork. “We see you’re doing what you love.”

Dee Dee studied a row of nine paintings, each of a woman whose face remained hidden.

“Aunt Pansy... who is she?” she asked. “And why can’t we see her face?”

Pansy smiled gently. “Honey, I have been drawing her for years. I know exactly who she is... but I cannot remember her face. When it comes back to me, I will give her the look she deserves.”

Inside the house, Rose, Lillie, and Petunia sat around the kitchen table, enjoying tea and conversation. Soon after, Jarrod and his family arrived. The women greeted them warmly, commenting on how

much his children had grown.

Jarrold approached Pansy with a wide smile. “Sister Pansy,” he said, embracing her. “Still working on the lady with no face?”

Pansy nodded. “I have tried to give her features, but they never feel right. One day, they will. You know, we lost so much time with our family. You were living in the same neighborhood as Cynthia’s son. And when I came home... I found out I had a brother. I remember Mother telling Daddy—and anyone who would listen—about Iris having a sibling born with her.”

Jarrold’s eyes softened. “I was fortunate to have two mothers, siblings, and a whole family around me. Daddy taught me everything I know. Cynthia loved me like her own child—blood never mattered. When I learned I had a sister born on the same day, everything made sense. Mama and I would often see Iris and Mother Minnie at the graveyard. Iris and I played together many times. Mother Minnie was hurt for a long time, but one day she and Mama talked for hours at the graveyard. Mama explained that she needed me, and she knew Mother Minnie had missed me all her life. Eventually... it all worked out.”

Jarrold and Pansy sat for a long time, sharing memories that were both painful and healing.

Later that afternoon, Pansy, Lillie, Petunia, and Rose visited the floral shop to purchase flowers. They placed them on the unknown grave—the one that had once been believed to be Pansy’s. Their mother had insisted it remain unmarked, but the family had never let it go bare.

The next morning, Pansy rose early. She cooked a full breakfast and baked her famous cinnamon rolls from scratch. The sweet, buttery aroma drifted through the house, drawing the family into the kitchen one by one.

After setting everything out, Pansy stepped outside to the gazebo. The late afternoon light settled softly over the yard, and the scent of fallen leaves lingered in the air. Mattie soon joined her, pausing to admire the paintings arranged nearby. One caught her attention—a

woman standing alone in a cemetery, dressed in black.

Mattie studied it closely.

“Aunt Pansy,” she asked, “Who is this lady?”

Pansy was quiet for a moment, then she began to speak.

“That was a woman I met a long time ago,” she said. “The weather had started turning cold, and I needed to find a place to stay for the winter. One morning, I was walking along the road when I saw a truck parked outside a café. The driver had gone inside to eat. I pulled the truck door open, and inside were coffins. I climbed into the back and lay down inside a blue one.

“It was plush and soft, and before I knew it, I drifted off to sleep. I hadn’t slept well during my travels, so the rest came easily. When the truck stopped, I climbed out quietly and found myself near a cemetery. That’s when I saw a little house sitting just beyond the headstones.

“There was a woman there, wearing a long black dress. Her face was covered with a veil. Every time I tried to look at her directly, she would turn her head. She spoke to me once—said her name was Ella and that she lived in the area. The next moment, she was gone.

“I went inside the little house. It was a simple bed, a small kitchen, candles resting in holders. I set my bag down, took out my drawing supplies, and began to sketch. The next day, I walked through the cemetery, reading the names on the headstones. Most of the people buried there were family, generation after generation.

“I would see Ella sometimes and try to get close enough to speak with her, but she always moved away. When I looked again, she was gone. I stayed there for several months. Someone was buried every week. After the families left, I would return to the burial site and sit quietly.

“There were twin babies buried there once lost in a house fire. I remember that day clearly.

“When I ran out of candles, I went to the funeral home nearby to get more. I had been there several times and eventually met the owner; her name was Ella Mae. I asked if she needed help, since I

was living in the little house at the cemetery. She told me she had seen me there often. I woke early every morning to draw, and she said she loved my pictures.

“One day, after a memorial service, Ella Mae Taylor walked with me through the cemetery. She told me stories about the people buried there—who they were, how they lived, who they loved.

“Early one morning, I went back to the funeral home for candles. As I walked down the hallway, I saw her picture hanging on the wall—the woman I had seen on my very first day. The plaque beneath it said she was born in 1801 and died in 1901. Her name was Ella Taylor. She was the owner’s great-grandmother.

“We talked for a long time. She told me her brother had lived in the little house where I was staying and that he had passed four years earlier. She said I could stay there as long as I wanted.

“I always felt comfortable in cemeteries,” Pansy said softly. “I saw Ella Mae often, especially early in the morning while I sat and drew. I stayed there until Summertime.”

Mattie smiled. “Aunt Pansy, we’ve heard stories about you all our lives—how you could name every flower, and how you knew every cat that Great-Great-Great-Grandmother Lizzie ever had. Even that one named Mercer.”

Then Mattie hesitated and asked quietly, “Aunt Pansy... why doesn’t the lady have a face?”

Pansy sighed, her eyes drifting toward the distant trees. “I know who she is,” she said, “But I can’t remember her face. I dream of her often, but the details slip away before morning.”

She turned back to Mattie and studied her gently. “Child,” she said, “Tell me—how is it that Daisy and Dee Dee are sisters? I never found the right moment to ask anyone.”

Mattie took a breath. “Petunia and I went to the same college, though we barely saw each other. Before I got pregnant, Petunia and I were unknowingly dating the same man. Later, when Bennie and I married, I learned he was Dee Dee’s father. Daisy and Dee Dee had grown up together their whole lives, so finding out they were sisters

didn't upset them. It just made sense."

Pansy nodded, relieved. "I'm glad I asked. Thank you for telling me."

Mattie held up a painting of the faceless woman. "Will she ever have a face?"

"One day," Pansy whispered, "I wandered through so many places, and time slipped away from me. I write memories in my journal when they return. Faces come and go. Some day... hers will stay."

After Mattie left, Daisy came and sat beside Pansy. The air had grown quieter, the light softer.

"You want a cup of tea, Daisy?" Pansy asked.

"Yes," Daisy said gently.

Pansy poured the tea and handed Daisy the cup. Daisy's eyes drifted toward one of the paintings—two women seated beside a well.

"Aunt Pansy," she asked, "Who are those two ladies standing by the well?"

Pansy followed her gaze and smiled faintly. "That's Alice and me," she said.

She settled back in her chair and began. "One day, while I was wandering, I met a woman carrying many little bags. I asked her if she needed help, and she said yes. I went home with her. She lived deep in the woods in a small house, surrounded by fruit trees. There was a pond and a well on her land.

"She asked where I was headed, and I told her I didn't have any particular place in mind. She said I was welcome to stay with her—and I did.

"We went shopping early in the mornings. Alice said we always had to go then, because nighttime was dangerous and people could hurt us. We'd go to the shops, gather food, and whatever else we needed. We stopped at the café for coffee and took extra napkins to use as tissues.

"After shopping, we'd come home, cook something simple, and sit outside by the well. I drew the water because I was strong, and

Alice was very small. Every time I pulled the bucket up, I saw two women's faces reflected in the water. One was Rose. The other... I could never quite recognize.

"Sometimes I went to the well just to draw water, hoping it would help me remember something I had lost.

"Alice was so good to me. I had wandered many places before that, and people had been cruel. We stayed up late talking, sharing stories. There was an old man who lived nearby—he checked on us regularly.

"In the Winter, we stuffed rags into holes in the walls and floors to keep the cold out. Over the months, Alice grew sick. I did all the shopping then.

"She told me she had once been a professional tap dancer. She showed me pictures of herself when she was young—so beautiful, full of life. Even in her older years, she carried that same grace.

"Some nights, she would take her black tap shoes out of their box and shine them. She was so proud of those shoes.

"I asked her once about her family. She said she had family, but they didn't care about her anymore—not since her money was gone.

"Alice loved me like family," Pansy said softly. "And I loved her just the same."

Pansy paused, her voice trembling.

"One morning, when I came back from shopping, Alice looked very bad. I begged her to let me go to the neighbor and ask him to take her to the doctor. She made me promise I wouldn't.

"She told me she was tired.

"That night, she took her tap shoes from the box and asked me to put them on her. I did. Then I went to the kitchen to make her some tea. While she sipped it, she told me how much she loved me.

"I cried. She wiped my tears away and told me not to cry.

"I fell asleep with my head on her bed. She woke me later and gave me a letter. Then she took a handkerchief from her bra and placed it in my hand. She said it was for me.

"She told me that when she was gone, I was to go to the neighbor

and ask him to call her family.

“The next morning, when I woke up... Alice was gone.” Tears streamed down Daisy’s face.

“I went to the neighbor,” Pansy continued. “I came back with him and waited while they took her away. I stayed in the house for a week after that... and then I left.”

She swallowed hard.

“Oh, child,” she said, “I had such a hard time dealing with Alice leaving me.”

Daisy reached for her. “Aunt Pansy, I didn’t mean to bring back memories that would hurt you.”

Pansy squeezed her hand. “There isn’t a day that goes by,” she said quietly, “That I don’t think about Alice.”

Just then, Petunia joined them. The three women embraced hugging and crying together, three generations holding pieces of the same story, bound by memory, love, and the quiet understanding that nothing truly loved is ever lost.

Later that evening, relatives began to arrive at Aunt Pansy’s house. Lonnie, Pansy’s husband, wrapped her in a warm embrace and walked arm-in-arm with her to the gazebo. Daisy noticed a painting of a man wearing a western hat and smiled knowingly at Lonnie.

Dinner, as always, was a family affair. Minnie’s daughters, nieces, and granddaughters all knew how to cook. After the meal, Pansy, Lillie, Rose, and Petunia visited the cemetery again, checking on the graves. Fresh flowers had been added to the unknown grave.

“Did any of you place these here?” Pansy asked.

One by one, they shook their heads.

Rose smiled. “Whoever did... they chose beautiful flowers.”

As they turned to leave, Pansy noticed a man and woman watching from a distance.

“I wonder who they are,” she murmured.

“Probably visitors for the festival,” Rose replied.

Back at the house, the celebration was in full swing. Pansy re-

turned to the gazebo, where two paintings remained covered. Dee Dee couldn't contain her curiosity.

"Aunt Pansy, why are these hidden?"

"The first is my newest painting of the faceless lady," Pansy explained. "The second... is a surprise."

Just then, the man and woman from the cemetery approached. Pansy greeted them kindly.

"My name is Pansy," she said.

The man shook her hand. "I'm Leroy, and this is my sister, Beverly. We've been searching for our sister's grave for years." The man pulled a picture from a folder and showed it to Pansy.

Pansy's breath hitched. She felt a shiver of recognition.

"She is here," Pansy said quietly. "In the unmarked grave. Years ago, there was a car accident. They believed the woman who died was me... but my mother knew it wasn't. She insisted the headstone read 'Unknown.' She waited for someone to come."

Leroy nodded, eyes filling with emotion. "Our sister's name was Phyllis Townes."

That evening, the face returned. Pansy returned to her studio and uncovered her newest painting. She studied the blank space where the face belonged. Then she unfolded the photograph Leroy had given her.

Something clicked—a memory, a feeling, a long-forgotten truth. With careful strokes, Pansy painted Phyllis's face. A beautiful young woman slowly emerged, her features soft and kind.

At last, the faceless lady had a name. A life. A place. A face.

The next day, Cedar commissioned Pansy to paint the town—past and present—for the festival's grand presentation. As her brush swept across canvas after canvas, she felt whole for the first time in years. Phyllis had finally been found. And so, in many ways, Pansy had been found too.

Years had passed since that Autumn festival in Cedar. The town had grown even more, but its heart remained the same—the gentle rhythm of familiar streets, the laughter echoing across porches, and

the scent of apples and woodsmoke drifting through the air.

Pansy stood on the same gazebo where she had first painted the faceless lady. Her hands rested on the railing, and her eyes traced the branches of the old oak trees that had witnessed generations of her family. The town's festival was alive with music, the chatter of neighbors, and the vibrant colors of Autumn leaves swirling like confetti.

Phyllis Townes' painting is now hung in the Cedar Museum, a reminder not only of a lost sister found but of the importance of memory, love, and family ties that refuse to be severed. Visitors often asked about the story behind the painting, and Pansy told it with quiet pride, a gentle smile tugging at her lips.

Daisy and Dee Dee laughed on the porch below, recalling their childhood mischief, while Mattie and Petunia shared stories over steaming mugs of tea. Jarrod and his children wandered past, now older, their lives full of their own memories and milestones. The family had grown—not just in numbers, but in understanding, forgiveness, and connection.

And Pansy, she had found something she hadn't realized she was missing: peace. She had discovered that time could both take away and restore, that faces once lost could return through memory and love, and that roots—deep and steadfast—could give wings to generations yet to come.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden glow across the town, Pansy lifted her brush one last time. She began a new canvas—a portrait of Cedar, of her family, of life's quiet miracles. Each stroke was a celebration, a tribute, a promise that once lost, stories could always be found again.

In Cedar, the past and present existed side by side, each moment treasured, each memory honored. And as Pansy set down her brush and looked out over the town she loved, she whispered softly to herself: *We are all faceless at times, until love reminds us of who we are.*

NAP-PHOBIA

Rayna Sun

I stand with my back to her and look out of the wall-to-wall window in my high-rise office. I can see Stone Mountain from here. Below, miles of highway traffic snake their way through Georgia's capital city, eventually crisscrossing through the State like a python. The view is breath-taking and I'm appreciative that I get to experience it. I have been featured in numerous articles, many magazines, the focus of multiple podcasts, and have so many zeroes in my account that I don't know what to do with my money. My office walls are adorned with magazine covers, various awards, and pictures commemorating other achievements. But no one has ever asked me the question that she just did.

Something about this interview is different. It's personal. Not only is she asking about my empire, but she is asking about *me*. Typically, I never answer personal questions. It's in my NDA that the journalists cannot ask me personal questions about my relationships or family.

But for some reason, today I don't mind. Could it be because it is the anniversary of Aunt Norma Lee's passing? Am I feeling less guarded because I'm about to announce the newest goal I recently achieved?

I smooth my hands down the sides of my black Brunello Cucinelli suit and glance at my matching heels by the same designer. It is a special outfit that I chose especially for today, when I was having my

meeting and making my big announcement. It is a special day for me. I close my eyes and say a little prayer. I'm now ready to respond.

I inhale and turn back around to face her. I focus my gaze on the woman sitting at my desk, across from me.

"My mother?" I say, perplexed. "Nobody has ever asked me about her. Only about my products and my empire. I have to admit: I don't know much about her. One story my family told me is that she died in childbirth. There's another story saying she left shortly after I was born and never came back. Nobody has ever heard from her since. So, honestly, I couldn't tell you anything about the woman who brought me into this world."

"Oh..." The reporter is taken aback. She pushes her glasses up on her face and rifles through her notes. "Norma Lee's Pride? I just thought..." she stammered.

"It's actually *Aunt* Norma Lee's Pride." I correct her. Amateur! She was supposed to do her research before entering my office. But I forgive her because I like her. She reminds me of me at that age. She looked prepared with her recorder ready, laptop bent open, plus a pad and pencil for old school sake. She is working on an article about me entitled "When Life Gives You Lemons..."

She smiles. Her teeth are white and straight, and I can tell that she's had braces at one point in her life. She is hungry, young, and ambitious. Definitely like me at her age. I can tell by the eager look on her face and the glint in her eyes that she was still naïve... just like I was. She is a young journalist who features African-American women who have made a difference in the Black community. I am number 27 on the list of 40, and I am as proud as a peacock. I can just picture my Aunt smiling down on me, beaming with her big, infectious smile and hearty laugh. I look up towards the ceiling and return the smile.

I clear my throat and raise my eyebrows at her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry..." The reporter rummages through her bag. "I'm sorry..."

"You keep saying that." I glance at the acrylic on my nails and bat

my expensive camel-lashed eyes.

“It’s just that I’m so nervous. I admire you so much. I was thrilled to get assigned to you.” She drops her pen onto the floor and almost lands her laptop there too, but her quick reflexes save it from an expensive fate.

I appreciate the nostalgia; however, she could do without the pen and pad. It’s a moot point and frankly a waste of time and energy.

“Why don’t you breathe?” I say. “And we’ll start from the beginning.”

She exhales and smiles, seemingly less nervous. She nods her head affirmatively. She stops moving long enough to take in a breath and let it slowly escape her pursed lips. “Okay, that sounds wonderful. Let’s just start from the beginning.”

I sit down and nod. She presses play and poises her finger above her keyboard, and pushes her glasses snugly onto her nose.

I close my eyes, take in a deep breath, smile at the memories of my journey, and start my story.



My fondest memories are of when I lived with my Aunt Norma Lee in Alabama. We would smack on the sweetest, reddest watermelon meat grown right out of her garden. At night, we would catch fireflies in mason jars and then set them free later. She was the earliest memory of a mother that I had. It never occurred to me to wonder about my real birth mother because, for as long as I could remember, I had Aunt Norma Lee in my life. I was happy, and I knew that I made her happy, too.

Life in the country in the early '70s was simple. Church on Sundays, swimming in the summers kinda simple. We ate what we picked from her garden, didn't waste anything, and shared what we had with neighbors and friends. Our small town was a real community. Everyone shared in child-rearing, financial burdens, and looking out for each other. Life was good.

Our town was something out of an old black-and-white movie. Children ran in the streets and swung from old tires hanging from tree limbs. Front porches were full of chattering gaggles of women rocking, singing, and snapping peas. They were always boiling, steaming, or frying something in big silver tin pots or washtubs. They braided little girls' hair two or three at a time from the same spot, and then sent them off to fetch the next hair victim.

I was the definition of happy, wild, and free. Innocent and naïve. I never had to worry about anything because Aunt Norma Lee took care of me. She was my sun, my moon, and the reason I woke up in the morning; she was my everything.

Rumors had it around town that Aunt Norma Lee had a stillborn baby boy when she was younger. Her husband left soon after. She never married or conceived again. So when I came along, she called me her "blessing in a dress." It was just us two chickens in the farmhouse without a rooster, she would say with a smile. I never knew my uncle, but I didn't feel his absence.

My aunt and I didn't have much in the way of material possessions, but I understood the meaning of being financially poor and emotionally rich. Our way of living meant that sometimes we would go to other people's houses just so we could have something to eat. Other times, we needed to be able to take a hot bath when our heat and lights were temporarily turned off until payday. But when we had an abundance of anything, she opened her door wide and shared with anyone in the neighborhood. If you asked me, I didn't need for anything, because Aunt Norma Lee made sure that I knew that I was loved and wanted, in and outside of her home.

One night, Aunt Norma Lee sat down, but she couldn't get up. I ran all the way to the neighbor's house two miles away as fast as my 14-year-old legs could go. I let them know that Aunt Norma Lee was breathing hard and clutching her chest. By the time we made it back, Aunt Norma Lee was still, in a slumped over position in her favorite chair, her Pepsi bottle spilled over on the floor, with Lawrence Welk playing loudly on the television. Something inside of me died with

her that night. Although I was only 14 years old, I knew that my life was about to take a strange and scary turn.

I was shipped to Aunt Petal, who lived in the city. I'd only seen her twice in my life. She had no children, no husband, and no patience. She worked in a big, fancy office on a busy street. She wore suits with matching shoes and purses. Her life was the total opposite of Aunt Norma Lee's.

Aunt Petal took one look at me and frowned. Her scowl was so deep on her face that I thought it might crack into a million tiny pieces.

"What in God's name is wrong with your head?" Her words tumbled out of her mouth.

I reached up and touched my hair. What did she mean? This beautiful crown of tight curls that Aunt Norma Lee said was a gift from God? Aunt Petal called it a wild, tangled mess. Aunt Norma Lee and I loved how our hair boldly "shouted out loud" at the world, as she used to say.

"Your hair is letting the world know that you are here!" Aunt Norma Lee loved how my hair shot out of my scalp like unruly telephone cords. Aunt Petal was not impressed with my fluffy mass of coils dancing in every different direction.

Perplexed at her disdain, a few tears slid down my cheeks. All I wanted was to go back to the country with my friends. I wanted my Aunt Norma Lee back. I instantly missed the little community of friends we called family. Aunt Norma Lee would have never scowled as hard at my head as Aunt Petal was right now.

"And what has Norma Lee been feeding you out there in that country... your belly pokes out farther than your behind."

I looked down and rubbed my belly, confused about what was wrong with it.

"Smothered chicken, collard greens, mashed potatoes, sweet potato pie..."

"Stop." She said, holding her hand up. "I didn't mean for you to

literally answer...”

“But you asked!” I threw my arms up in frustration.

“Listen here, little girl...” She dropped her head and pinched the bridge of her nose like a migraine was forming. “This is San Francisco. The big city. And it’s 1988, not 1978! We don’t walk around with nappy Afros, looking like this here anymore. And stand up straight! Stop slouching! Slouching is for whores and streetwalkers.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Auntie Petal, what’s the difference?”

“What?”

“Between a whore and a streetwalker?”

She stared at me for a long time with a strange look on her face. She opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, but then didn’t. She took out her cell phone and walked away as she made a phone call to her stylist. Apparently, in the city, naps were a no-no. The next day, I was off to Aunt Petal’s favorite salon to get my large head of hair washed, greased, pressed, and curled.

“NOW!” She said, admiring the stylist’s work. “You are ready for your new school.” She said in a satisfactory tone as she stared at me with her hands on her hips. “After all, you don’t want the new kids at your new school to laugh at you, do you?”

I looked in the mirror. Although I liked the smooth flow of my new shoulder-length mane, I preferred my old crinkly hair. It expressed my free spirit. It reminded me of Alabama and Aunt Norma Lee. And frankly, it didn’t take half the day to do as this hairstyle did.

Hair is a big thing in the Black community. It’s NOT just hair. It’s different. It’s our culture. It sets us apart from every other single race. We literally are the only race that has this kind of hair, and my Auntie Norma Lee loved it. She used to talk about how versatile it is, how we are the only ones who could do so many things with our hair.

People think that Black hair is hard and strong, but it’s actually the opposite. It’s fragile. We have to nurture and care for our hair

with love, or it won't do right. It grows and flourishes when we love it, when we allow it to be free the way God intended it to be and the way that it is supposed to grow out of our scalp. So many days and nights I miss my Auntie Norma Lee. So many nights I cried myself to sleep.

I wasn't used to the more frenzied pace that city life moved at. The people were loud. The air was thick with particles that tasted like chemicals. The sun only poked its head out for a short amount of time each day and quickly retreated as if its life was in danger. I was so depressed during my first few months in San Francisco. I felt an overwhelming, suffocating feeling of grief that Aunt Petal didn't quite understand.

"You should be glad that you are among peers your own age instead of running around in the country rolling around in dirt like a little piglet with people five times your age. You'll survive," she quipped, as she peered at me over her glasses. "And stop slouching! You gonna bend your spine outta shape."

School started soon after I arrived. I managed to make two new best friends at school on my first day, Leondra and Serena. They circled around me, constantly asking questions and ogling at the way I dress and the way I talk. Serena said she never heard anyone talk so slowly and drag their words as I did. With my thick Alabama accent as my differentiator, they decided that they will induct me into their circle, making us a threesome.

Leondra, named after her father, wore her hair in thin, neat cornrows. She looked like a younger version of Queen Latifah. She was very pretty, and the boys always tried to talk to her. Serena had a long, slick mane. Her skin was the color of caramel candy that deepens in summer months to a nice toasty glow. Her hair was "relaxed" and hit the middle of her back. Apparently, her mother had been growing it out since she was a baby. It was all that she and everyone talked about, so she never had a problem getting positive attention from girls and boys.

Me? I was “thicker than a Snicker,” according to Serena. My thighs were round and ran all the way down to my calves, not bothering to be stopped by my ankles. When I walked, I stomped because I was so used to running through the hard dirt and fields in Alabama. I was so unaware of how hard I hit the slick San Francisco ground when I walked. I was so comfortable existing that sometimes I took up too much space. This sometimes annoyed my classmates, especially the boys.

I wondered why two semi-popular girls would want to be my friend. Looking back, I think I was more of a project for them. At the time, I honestly didn't care. Because other than them, no one else approached me or tried to befriend me. So Leondra and Serena were my world. I wanted to fit in with the rest of the popular girls in school. But between the two of them, I was damn-near invisible... except to Jordan. One time in Geometry class, he told me I have a pair of sexy bedroom eyes.

I quickly learned that my new hair had restrictions. I couldn't get it wet. Sweating wasn't allowed. Too much heat and too much grease were also no-no's. I looked in the mirror and fretted: what exactly could I do with this new hair? It barely lasted the first week of school. My huge mane sprouted out like a frizzy afro. Some of the boys started calling me Mufasa. That really hurt. They pointed, laughed, and made jokes about my hair. Many of them left me out of many of the activities, while Leondra and Serena were accepted. This never occurred in the country. These city folks were just rude and mean.

Aunt Petal was furious that my hair barely lasted five days.

“You're just too rough and wild! Norma Lee should have taught you a little couth and class. That flat-iron was expensive! It ain't like I get a lot of extra money for you. I wasn't prepared for an extra mouth, and I definitely wasn't prepared to take on another salon bill. If you gonna get your hair done, Grace, you HAVE to take care of it!”

With her sharp enunciation, clipped words, and how fast they

flowed off her tongue, she sounded much like the actresses on television. Sometimes, I didn't understand her words. They ran too fast together like a string of pearls. I would stand there and stare at her for a few moments, waiting for the words to formulate into a way that made sense to my country brain. Whenever I did that, Aunt Petal would get so frustrated with me; I could tell she wanted to scream or choke me. At first, it terrified me how she looked at me, but after a few weeks of it, it would make me sad. Later, I decided that her judgment angered me.

Eventually, it was downright comical to me, so I usually ignored her reaction. I would just bob my head up and down real fast, like I understood what she was saying, and go about doing whatever it was I was doing before she interrupted me.

Her ranting and the kids' reactions taught me a valuable lesson, though, about Black hair in The City. I learned quickly that to fit in, I must have the "straight" hair. Through the rest of high school, I did everything that I could to keep my hair straight so I could fit in with my peers, be invited to the parties, and be popular. After all, said my Aunt Petal, who would want to ask a nappy-headed girl out to the prom? Or who would want to hang around a nappy-headed girl?

At that point in my life, I agreed. I would do anything to be popular and to get Jordan to ask me to the prom. So, I got on that flat-iron hamster wheel with other Black girls. Every other week, I was in the shop getting my beautiful mane of coily curls attacked, rearranged, pulled, straightened, and mutilated. But I did what I thought I had to do to be accepted. It's not fun being ostracized and ridiculed. And it's downright lonely to be told that you shouldn't be who you are when who you are is, simply, who you are. But at 16 years old, being liked and accepted mattered more to me than being myself.

At least it paid off. When it was time for prom, Jordan actually asked me. Of course, I said YES! Next, I had to get all the prom necessities and come up with a hairstyle that would accommodate my "wild flailing that you call dancing," as everyone said to me. I opted

for a French bun in the back. I figured after getting it flat-ironed and rolled securely to the back of my head, I'd be safe from a hair-tastrophe.

Prom was great. The food was awesome, and I had the time of my life. As I was wildly dancing Jordan's pants off, my French bun came undone. Of course, I sweated out my hair. It revolted out into frizzy curls. Serena looked over and laughed. I spent the majority of my night trying to hand-press my hair back to straightness. I would dance to my favorite songs, but then excuse myself to the bathroom, followed by one of the two or both of my friends following as we tried to figure out how to slow the regression of my hair until the end of the night. The heat and humidity of all the sweaty bodies in the gym made my hair disobey my command. Finally, I gave up and decided that I was going to enjoy the rest of the night regardless of how wild my hair had become. So I kept patting it down on the dancefloor.

"Just get a relaxer already!" Serena yelled while bopping by to the beat of LL Cool J, her long straight mane swinging from side to side.

Aunt Petal just sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes when I walked in, and she saw my hair. And although I had a blast, she refused to pay for me to get my hair re-straightened.

"I'm tired of paying for your hair when you don't even try to take care of it! You don't cover it in the shower. You don't wrap it at night. You HAVE to take care of your hair, or it will curl up on you!"

Apparently, "curling up hair" was the hair that nobody wanted. On weekends, we would flip through *Word Up* and *Right On* magazines. I loved looking through the *Ebony* and *Essence* issues that Aunt Petal would get in the mail each month. The glossy pages were filled with beautiful Black women who donned the sleek look that Aunt Petal tried so hard to instill in me. The *Jet* Beauty of the Month's hair was always laid. All the boys at school loved the *Jet* Beauties. They hung them on their walls in their bedrooms. I wanted to be accepted, admired, and adored like that.

For the rest of my high school years, Aunt Petal and I lived in an

asymmetrical harmony. Our interactions were limited to necessary subjects only. I did my best to stay out of her way, do my chores, and do my homework. In return, she allowed me to hang out with my friends and paid for my flat-irons. The straight hair still didn't make me very popular because my accent was still a little thick for people to understand. But since Leondra and Serena were popular enough, I was popular by association.

I made it through high school and was accepted to matriculate in the fall of 1991 at Spelman College, a historically Black college in Atlanta, Georgia. Aunt Petal was proud that I was accepted into her alma mater. She hooked me up with the name of a salon there to make sure that I had no excuses. I was just glad to be out of her house, out of California, and into some dorms where I could be around boys unchaperoned by Aunt Petal.

While in college, I decided to celebrate my newfound freedom by letting the real me flow free. I discarded Aunt Petal's salon suggestion and went back to my natural hair. This didn't go over well with my Black peers. They joked about my hair. They wondered why I didn't get a relaxer. I was constantly asked what was wrong with my hair, and many of my friends offered to do my hair for me before they would be seen with me at the campus functions.

It was like prom all over again. At all of the fraternity parties, I would enter with a freshly flat-ironed head of smooth hair. But by the time left, my hair would be a full-blown puff of soft naps. The torturous ritual was the bane of my existence during Freshman, Sophomore, and Junior years of college because I partied a lot. It was the running joke of the small Black college community. Dorm mates took turns pulling, yanking, blow-drying, and pressing my hair.

I just didn't get the fuss. I was actually happy to be nappy. But I was like the last of the Mohicans. A dinosaur of hairstyles. The very last sistah in the world who didn't have a relaxer. In Alabama, my Aunt Norma Lee celebrated our heritage, our roots, our hair. I wondered why, at Spelman, of all places, there weren't more girls wear-

ing their hair like mine. But it was the early '90s; whether you were an “around the way girl,” aspired to corporate life, or were trying to get your “MRS” degree, straight hair was a required look, no matter what flavor of Black woman you happened to be.

I had a pack of relentless friends. So I finally caved to the peer pressure, and I got my first relaxer at the start of my junior year, when I was 20. As I moved into the world of working entry-level jobs and internships along with my studies, I lived as every other professional Black woman. Trips to the hair shop became a must; I relied on my touch-ups and would cut anyone who got in the way of one of my hair appointments.

But this hair didn't let me be free. It still had restrictions. As a child in the country, I swam during the summers. With my new hair lifestyle, my friends and I didn't dare get our hair wet. Of course, this cut down on the types of activities I participated in. I attended many pool parties, but no one ever got in the pool. I was beginning to feel trapped.

While everyone praised the virtues of relaxers, no one warned me about the damage. The harsh chemicals dried my pretty curls and shocked them into straightness. My hair started to wither, leaving broken and split ends on the covers of my pillows and poking out of my brushes.

One particular hairdresser decided that in order to get my hair “super straight,” we had to leave the relaxer in for a long time. Instead of rinsing it out as I asked her, she just kept spraying oil sheen on it, convincing me that this is how I would get that Halle Berry look. I ended up with burns on my scalp that took forever to heal. Those burns were painful.

This torture went on into my Senior year. I constantly damaged my hair, trying to keep up with the Joneses. Then I'd enter a re-growth cycle by protecting my hair with braids. After a few months, I'd re-shock my hair with the chemicals again. It was maddening. Not only was my hair in shock and stressed, but my mind was fried. Half my time outside of work and classes was spent juggling hair ap-

pointments. I felt like I was always sitting in a shop somewhere with a book on my lap, waiting to be next.

One day, I sat in my hairdresser's shop from morning until practically midnight as she had over-booked. It was something she did on a regular basis. Not only did I miss the event that I was supposed to go to that night, but I was so tired that I didn't get to study properly for my test, and I bombed it.

I was tired of spending the insurmountable time in shops. And the money was mounting up; I barely had money left to go to the parties I was trying to look cute for! I saw how much these hairdressers paid to buy a one tub of no-lye relaxer. But then they charged each of us a minimum of \$50 just to spread a little of it on my new growth? I was getting frustrated with this system. Those were hours in my life that I would never get back. And why? Because I wanted to be accepted? By whom? Society? My peers? The Black community?

Before Christmas vacation, I cut my hair. I cut all of the relaxer away and left myself with a short afro, much to my friend's dismay. You should have seen the eye rolling, the teeth sucking, and the comments from the older southern women who just couldn't understand why "this child would do that to her hair". But I didn't care. I was tired of going through hoops for other people's acceptance. I was on a journey to learn to live in my own skin. I was learning to love myself and appreciate who I was as a person and a woman. And what it meant to me to love what God gave me. I'm not saying that straight hair is wrong, I'm just saying it wasn't for me. It's not what God gave me. With my damaged hair cut off, a new soft crown of curls grew in.

I experimented with different "natural" styles and rotated them until I found one that suited me best: twists. They were becoming popular. One day, a random woman on the street told me she loved my beautiful, natural hair. I smiled and thanked her. I wondered why so many people seemed to be afflicted with nap-phobia.

I had to seek out hair care products specifically for natural hair. I began mixing different hair brands, trying to find the right com-

ination for my hair type. I began massaging my curls each night. I concocted my own hair cream that really made my hair “pop.” I received so many compliments. And I started to feel like myself again... like I did when I was back in Alabama with my Aunt Norma Lee.

I had more free time on my hands. Instead of wasting time in hair salons, I took walks. I started eating better. I drank more water and less alcohol. I spent more time with my friends, studied more, and improved my grades. I even started spending more time calling and talking with Aunt Petal.

But more importantly, I was happy with the health of my hair. This is the hair that God created to grow out of my scalp, and I embraced it. I appreciated it, nurtured it, and breathed life back into it. I didn't care what anyone thought; I embraced my own natural hair in all its glory, beauty, and kinkiness. It helped me accept myself, like when I was younger, before the world forced its views and pressure on me. I stopped worrying about everyone else's approval and was satisfied with my own. By the time spring came around, I felt reborn.

One night, months away from graduation, I had a dream about Aunt Norma Lee. In this dream, she cradled me, kissed me on the crown of my head, then she washed, conditioned, and massaged her magic oil into my hair. I awoke the next morning with tears in my eyes. The dream seemed so real. In the dream, she whispered the ingredients in my ear. I immediately went to the kitchen and pulled out rosemary oil, Jamaican black castor oil, and black seed oil. These were the ingredients that Aunt Norma Lee used to put in my hair as a small child in Alabama.

She gave me the recipe! I mixed it all into a cream and added a splash of hibiscus and gardenia for scent. It was the perfect combination of what I'd been looking for, for healthy, natural hair. It made a huge difference in my hair.

My stuff worked so well that I started using it on my friends. It worked well on their relaxed hair as the new growth came in. I

wound up convincing more and more of my friends to go natural. To my surprise, I had started a little natural hair revolution on my campus!

Because my product was becoming popular, I figured out how to make bigger batches and bottle it. My besties from high school came to Spelman with me, and they helped. Leonora helped me design a label for my bottle. Naming the product was easy; I called it Aunt Norma Lee's Pride. Serena's mom, who used my product, bought a few bottles for her sorority sisters.

The stuff was like crack for Black women's hair. Word spread fast. A local Atlanta newspaper did an article on me, the Spelman senior that was a young Madam CJ Walker, pioneering natural hair care. That's when real orders started coming in. I had so many clients that I rented a booth and the spare back room at a local hair salon owner I was friendly with, just to have the space to mix, bottle, and store my creation. I needed to move operations out of my dorm room because graduation was looming.

As word of mouth grew, I had to hire people to help me. I had a business on my hands before I even graduated from college in May of 1991! Things kept growing from there. My product got into the hands of some celebrity hairstylists. Then, unsolicited, some of them mentioned that they used my product in their interviews in important style magazines and on their personal blogs. The rest is history! Or, as I like to say, "hair-story."

The company has come a long way in the last 34 years. I've had slow steady growth from the beginning but we saw massive success when natural hair began to have a resurgence in the 2010s. Since then, we've seen exponential growth year over year. I even made enough money that I bought Aunt Petal one of those expensive-ass houses in California! Yes, the naps that Aunt Petal despised so much bought her a house!



I finally stopped talking. The reporter peers over her glasses, then pushes them up on her nose. I exhale, and she clicks the tape recorder off. I smile because I feel really accomplished.

“Beautiful!” she says, beaming. “I think we got it!”

I nod. “Well, if that’s all, I thank you for coming. Please excuse me, I have a meeting with my staff.”

I stand. Once she has gathered her things, we walk to the elevators where we shake hands, and I see her off. I’m intrigued about how the article will turn out. I quickly pushed it out of my mind because seeing the final results was weeks away.

I make my way to the conference room where the employees are assembled. There is a buzz of chattering as I enter the door and then a hush as people notice that I’ve arrived.

“Good morning, everyone.” I stand at the very front of the room. “As you all know, the word ‘nappy’ has had such a negative connotation for Black people. It is the mission of Aunt Norma Lee’s Pride to change that narrative.

“Curly, coily, kinky, wavy, springy, and, yes, nappy, are all words to describe our texture of hair. I never did understand nap-phobia. Our hair is perfect. It’s versatile. It’s God-given, and as my Aunt Norma Lee would say, God don’t make no mistakes.” There is a rouse of giggles and laughter from the crowd members as some of them look around and nod in agreement.

I lace my fingers together. I am nervous but excited. “When I started this company from my dorm room back in 1991, I could never have envisioned where it would go. Today, we’re weeks away from entering our 34th year! Just a few minutes ago, I was interviewed for my innovative natural hair care. It was not an easy task to get this company to where it is today. It was really hard work. It was worth it. And I couldn’t have done it without all of you.

“And now, we stand up there with the ranks of some of the great pioneering companies in natural hair care and Black pride, such as Camille Rose, Mielle, and Carol’s Daughter. Aunt Norma Lee’s Pride has made it possible to not only pay homage to a legacy but

also to pay it forward by educating and celebrating.

“So I’m proud to announce that today, March 1st, 2025, we are adding another \$2 million dollars to our scholarship fund!” A stir begins as members look around and smile, gasp, and start clapping.

“Next month, a team and I will be traveling to Ghana to build the first Aunt Norma Lee Pride’s school for girls, educating young girls who may not have had access before.” The clapping gains momentum.

“Ladies and gentlemen, together, we are making a difference! We are changing lives and affecting futures! Aunt Norma Lee’s Pride has finally reached the \$50 million dollar mark in sales for our company!” I throw my hands up into the air. “Today is a good day. Today is a proud day!”

A round of applause goes out, and everyone is on their feet, applauding.

DANCE WITH A DOLPHIN

Henrietta Anderson

*I*t was cold, and rain tapped a soft, rhythmic song on the tin roof as I swung back and forth on the porch. My red coat clung snugly to me, the hood pulled tight, shielding my face from the drizzle. The wet earth smelled of moss and clay, and the chill nipped at my fingers, but I barely noticed. I was waiting. Watching. Listening.

Then I saw it: a dusty old sedan sliding up the muddy driveway, the headlights cutting through the gray like lanterns in fog.

I ran to meet it, boots squelching, and Grandma Annabelle stepped out. She wrapped me in her arms. Her perfume—cinnamon, sugar, something earthy and indefinable—swirled around me, like the breath of some old, familiar magic. I felt it, the pull of generations in her embrace, the weight of her years, the love that spanned time.

Her hand reached into her coat pocket, and I knew without asking that a piece of coconut candy would emerge. My eyes lit up. It was always there. Always for me. It was more than candy; it was a ritual, a connection, a talisman of her protection.

Grandma Annabelle moved in when I was five. She called herself a survivor of five husbands. Daddy didn't want her to be alone, and Mama was about to have another baby. I didn't care whether it was a boy or a girl—I just wanted a sibling, someone to share secrets with, someone to play with.

A couple of weeks after Grandma Annabelle came to live with us,

Mama got sick one night. Grandma Annabelle helped Mama deliver the baby. It was a boy, but he was dead when he was born.

Mama was extremely sick afterward. Daddy and Grandma Annabelle took care of her, but Mama cried all the time. Grandma Annabelle made her special tea to help her sleep. I would cry too, standing in the doorway, not knowing what else to do.

“Grandma Annabelle,” I would beg, “Help my mommy. Don’t let her die like my brother did.”

She would pull me close and say softly, “Your brother is with Jesus.”

Then I would cry harder and say, “Don’t let my mommy go to Jesus.”

Sometimes, I went into Mama’s room and just sat beside her, holding her hand. When she cried, I cried too. She cried for months. Then, little by little, she got better. She went back to work. She and Daddy started going to parties again and to the movies. I was so happy when laughter came back into the house.

Grandma Annabelle’s room was connected to mine by a small, hidden door. It became my secret universe. Jars of trinkets lined the shelves—faded letters, tiny keepsakes, relics from her travels. Sometimes I touch them, curious. Other times, I swore I could hear something inside them—a faint hum, a whisper, a vibration—as if each object carried a memory still alive, reaching across time and waiting to be remembered.

At night, our rituals became sacred. Wine for her, milk and cookies for me. Her hands braided my long strawberry-red hair, the strands shining like spun sunlight. “You are my reflection, LaBelle,” she whispered, tracing the small mole on my face. “The world will see you, but not the way you see it.”

I didn’t understand then, but I believed her.

Nile, my best friend, came every morning, and we walked to school together. Grandma Annabelle would always smile at us and hand us a pack of cookies to take along. When Nile walked me back home, Grandma Annabelle would laugh and ask, “Where’s that little husband of yours?”

I would shake my head and say, “Grandma, he’s my best friend. Little girls can’t have husbands.”

She would just smile and say, “You’ll see.”

One night, my stomach started hurting badly. I went into Grandma Annabelle’s room so she could give me some medicine. She was asleep, but I couldn’t wake her up no matter how hard I tried. I got scared and finally went back to bed.

The next morning, she came into my room and asked, “What did you want last night?”

I told her my stomach was hurting.

She said, really calm, that she and her twin sister, Maybelline, had been in New York at a party—and that she had seen her second husband there.

Grandma Annabelle and Maybelline used to have a little juke joint down in New Orleans. Maybelline would sing, and Grandma Annabelle would dance. Grandma told me her third husband, Fred, was the best-looking one she ever had. He didn’t like going to the club with her and Maybelline because Maybelline always got into fights with other women.

Grandma said Maybelline had a bad temper and would fight anybody—man or woman.

She told me she loved her first husband the best. He worked on the railroad and bought her pretty clothes all the time. She loved cooking for him.

Sometimes, I get scared because Grandma Annabelle would sleep for a long, long time. She told me that if she ever slept like that, I was not trying to wake her up.

At night, she would tell me so many stories—some of them scared me, and some of them made me laugh. Before I went to sleep, she always said the same thing: “Always remember what I tell you. Wherever you go, there will always be someone there to guide you back. And you must let them guide you.”

I did not know what she meant then. But now I remember every word.

Grandma Annabelle's room was more than just a room. The small door connecting our rooms was a threshold, a veil. Each night, I slipped through and stepped into another world stitched with magic into the seams of ordinary life.

The room smelled of herbs, old books, earth, and something metallic, like the pulse of hidden veins beneath the ground. I would reach for jars of dried flowers or carved figurines, and sometimes I thought I heard them hum, as if alive.

"Curiosity is good, Strawberry," Grandma would say, "But some things are meant to be discovered in their own time."

She told me I had a veil, that I was born to see things others could not. Sometimes the veil whispered, sometimes it hummed, sometimes it lifted in moments of clarity. I felt it even in the ordinary: a breeze that seemed to carry a voice, a pattern in the clouds that mirrored my dreams, or the way the dolphins laughed at the edge of the sea and other animals like bears, dogs, cats, even birds as they flew past me.

Summers spent in Florida, visiting my mother's mother—Grandma Louise—only strengthened what I already felt inside me. The goats, the cows, the hogs, the squirrels, the rivers and waterfalls—they all felt aware of me, and I of them. It wasn't imagination. It was a different layer of seeing, one that made the ordinary sacred.

Through it all, I learned to listen—to the wind, to the animals, to the quiet murmur of the ancestors. Courage, kindness, and curiosity were more than virtues. They were tools, ways to move through both worlds without getting lost.

Grandma Louise and Grandpa owned a grocery store. They sold vegetables from the garden and meat from the hogs and cows they butchered themselves, even chickens. They also sold clothes and little miscellaneous items—pocketbooks, comic books, watches, things folks needed or simply wanted.

While I was in Florida, I helped Grandma Louise in the store, and she paid me for my work. With my money, I bought comic books for my best friend, Nile. He loved comic books. He also loved

dolphins, and Grandma Louise had a whole family of them near the water. The man-dolphin had a big white spot on his chest, and I never forgot him.

I loved visiting Florida during the Summer, but even then, I couldn't wait to get back home to see Grandma Annabelle. I knew she would have all kinds of juicy information to tell me—where she had been and who she had seen.

The Sunday before my parents came to take me home was homecoming at church. On Saturday, my girl cousins and I helped the ladies bake cakes. Early Sunday morning, my boy cousins made homemade ice cream in the old ice cream machines. My uncles and grandpa had barbecued four hogs the night before.

At church, there was food everywhere. Before service let out, my girl cousins and I helped the ladies fix plates. Afterward, we carried food to sick folks who could not come to church. That part made me feel grown, like I was doing something that mattered.

When it was time to leave, Mama and Daddy packed the car full of things Grandma Louise had given us. I kept the comic books and the dolphin gifts for Nile with me—I didn't put them in the trunk.

By the time we got home, it was extremely late. Daddy told me to go straight to bed and not wake my grandmother. I put on my nightgown, and just as I was settling in, Grandma Annabelle peeked into my room and blew me a kiss.

I woke up early the next morning. I already knew—Grandma Annabelle was going to tell me some amazing stories.

The next day, I gave Nile the comic books and the dolphin family gifts. Nile kissed me on the jaw and said, "Thank you, LaBelle."

Grandma Annabelle watched us and smiled. "That's your husband, child," she said.

I just looked at her and smiled back. I had told her before—little girls don't have husbands. She only smiled and said, "You will see."

I was getting ready to start fifth grade when school began. Daddy told Mama I could wear my hair curly, and I was so happy. Grandma Annabelle washed my hair with her special shampoo and condi-

tioner. She straightened it, then curled it, and when she finished, my hair hung halfway down my back.

“Strawberry,” she said, “Your hair is just as pretty as mine.” She kissed my forehead.

When Nile came to walk me to school, he said, “LaBelle, you look grown up now.”

I was filling out—I had breasts like my mommy—and everything felt like it was changing all at once.

One night, I dreamed I was in a forest. A mother bear—big and beautiful, her fur a deep red—was eating berries while her two cubs played and wrestled nearby. Suddenly, the mother bear started running toward me. I felt a hand touch me, and I was back in my bed.

I told Grandma Annabelle about the dream—about the bear, and the hand, and how I woke up suddenly.

She listened carefully. Then she said, “Always pay attention. Some places you will go again, and some places you will never go again.”

That whole week, I had dreams like that. One night, I woke up in a field during slavery times. I heard a child crying, saying, “Don’t hurt my daddy.” White men had him on a horse, tying a rope around his neck. When I woke up, I cried too. Sometimes, I was scared.

When I went off to college, I was excited. I had always wanted to be a nurse, just like my mother. Nile left to study dolphins—he had been accepted into school to become a marine biologist. His bedroom was filled with books about whales, dolphins, and all the great sea animals. Every time he called me, he had new, exciting stories to tell—especially about dolphins.

The Summer after college, Grandma Annabelle passed away. But her presence remained, like sunlight caught in a jar.

Nile and I eventually got married, and sometimes I could still feel her kiss lingering on my jaw—a gentle push, a reminder that the unseen was never far.

One night by the ocean, I woke beneath the moon. The waves shimmered, and the air smelled of salt and possibility. I felt a warmth—familiar, like a hand brushing mine. Then I saw them:

dolphins, leaping and twirling, their clicks echoing like laughter from another world.

One dolphin, marked by a black spot on its chest, swam toward me. Its eyes held a knowing beyond words. Without fear, I stepped into the water, and we danced.

So many nights, I danced with the dolphins.

Time unraveled—the moon, the sand, the world itself dissolved. All that remained was motion, rhythm, and a connection so deep it made my soul ache.

When I woke up, the dolphin was gone. But in my hand lay a small, shimmering scale. It pulsed with life.

I knew then the veil was not a mystery. It was a bridge. A map. A calling.

The dreams that followed confirmed it—avalanches, forests, bears and cubs, whispers of ancestors. They became signs. I remembered Paris, wandering through a perfume warehouse with Grandma Annabelle, the scent of gardenias drifting like a spell. I understood then that the spiritual and physical had always been intertwined.

Even years later, even at work, I could feel it. A patient would remind me of someone I had met long ago. She would speak of encounters I barely remembered, and I realized that time is not linear. It folds, overlaps, and echoes.

I had met the woman once—a long-haired figure with white hair falling to her feet. Grandma Annabelle had known her. She guided me then, as she always had. And now I understand. The unseen is always present, waiting for recognition.

Some doors never close. They wait for us to learn, to grow, and to see. They wait for us to step through—fully awake, with love and courage—into worlds that have always existed just beyond the veil.

Years later, I stood on that same porch where it all began—the rain pattering on the tin roof, the scent of wet earth and wildflowers mingling with something older, deeper. My hair is streaked with silver now, but the red still shines faintly in the sunlight, a reminder

of who I was and who I became.

I watch my children play in the yard, their laughter rippling like sunlight across the grass. And sometimes, in the corner of my eye, I see her, Grandma Annabelle, watching, smiling, her presence almost tangible in the gentle sway of the wind. The veil she spoke of. It has never lifted. Not entirely. And I do not want it to.

It still guides me. In dreams, in moments of quiet reflection, in the subtle signs that pepper my days: a flicker of light on the water, the click of a dolphin's song in the distance, the echo of her laughter in my mind. Sometimes I feel the pulse of my ancestors, the old ones who whisper through leaves, the currents, the cracks in the earth. I listen. I follow. I trust.

Grandma Annabelle once told me, "The veil is a bridge, LaBelle. It does not hide the world—it reveals it, in ways most people will never see." And she was right. I have learned to walk on both sides of that bridge: the ordinary world, with its routine and chaos, and the hidden world, full of magic, memory, and meaning.

And sometimes, when the sun dips low over the horizon, I walk down to the water. I wait. I breathe. And if I am still enough, I can hear it: the faint, joyous laughter of dolphins, dancing in the moonlight, calling me to remember that life is never just what we see.

I close my eyes, and I step forward. And the veil shimmers.

REVENGE OF THE WHITE PEONIES

Rayna Sun

“Is it possible to love more than one person?” I ask scrolling on my tablet.

He is watching the 49ers play, and I know that he is half listening. Especially when his team is winning. The television is so incredibly loud that I barely heard myself ask this latest question.

“Hon?” I say again, louder this time. I make sure to drip my words in sweet tones, so I don’t raise his suspicion.

He darts a quick look at me over his shoulders from the couch but then puts them right back on the television as his team the 49ers score a touchdown.

“Whoooo!” He yells and jumps up with a grin, pumping his fist in the air. “Did you see that? McCaffrey is on fiya tonight!”

“Damian, did you hear what I asked?” I press calmly.

“Huh?” His grin still plastered on his face, confusion dots his eyes. Clearly, he hasn’t been listening to my barrage of subtle questioning that I’ve been firing from the dining room table.

“In your opinion... do you think that you can love more than one person? At a time?” I ask again, pressing play on the video that I’ve watched over a hundred times by now.

“I dunno.” He says shrugging his shoulders and plopping back onto the couch. “I guess... I’ve loved different women at different times. But that was before I met you.” He says with a smirk and a wink. To which I smile demurely and blow him a kiss.

“What about sex?” I ask.

“What about sex?” His face is puzzled but now the Wingstop commercial is off and the game is back on and I’ve lost his attention again.

“Hon?” I say again, sweetly. “What about sex? Do you think it’s okay to have sex with more than one person at a time?”

“Nah.” He said. “Unless you’re single or dating. To which we are not... so no.” Back to the game. His attention is now on the kicker who has disappointed him on many occasions.

I scrunch my lips to one side of my face at the back of his head, as I press play again on the video sent to me anonymously. It is of my husband, yes the one sitting in front of me, with another woman having sex. The very sex that he says is prohibited because we are “married.”



My husband of twenty-one years is fucking his young new assistant. I know it sounds cliché, but it’s true. The video is proof I didn’t need. I already know he’s been cheating on me.

How do I know this, you ask? It’s simple. Lately he has been staying out later, claiming to be working late in his office. There have been a few times that I’ve driven by his office on said nights, and his ass is not there. Also, his business credit cards have charges for lingerie, jewelry, and expensive gifts that I never received. Plus, there are expenses on “business” trips that I knew nothing about. Like I said, cliché. I have yet to see what this heffa looks like; she has only worked for my husband a short while.

When I put my mind to it, I can be anything. So tonight, a few days after the game, I have decided to be a blonde with large square shades, a pixie cut and a hat to hide from my husband and his mistress.

I watch them from the back of the restaurant where he is feeding her dessert with a spoon while she is giggling with this ridicu-

lously irritating laugh. After I can take no more of this obviously disrespectful display of PDA between this grown-ass married man and this damn-near child, I leave. I'm heartbroken but relieved. My suspicions are confirmed.

When he gets home two hours after I do, I smile up at him with a warm hug. I can smell her cheap perfume, one he probably bought her. Or should I say "we" bought her? I don't know what to do, but after he showers, we make love. For the first time in our 21-year marriage, I am repulsed. When we are done I roll over. He sleeps so good, like a baby. He might as well have his damn thumb in his mouth. I lay there staring into the darkness, listening to his snoring with regret. Emotions sweep through me like a tsunami. Disdain. Embarrassment. Anger. Resentment. Rage. Just to name a few.

I gave this man 21 years of my life! We raised 3 spoiled rotten brats into somewhat decent members of society. Two dogs, a hamster, numerous goldfish and a fucking guinea pig that I never wanted!

I am livid! How dare he? I've been working my fingers to the bone to make sure that we have a secure life and a more secure retirement and he's out there living it up like Hugh Hefner, spending MY money on this trap! I am so hot that my nostrils are flaring and you can fry an egg on my head. But as my father used to say, when they go low... damn it! We go lower! I refuse to be a victim, not at the ripe old age of 48. Nope, Satan! Not now, not never! I roll over fuming and silently cry myself to sleep.

I am a strong Black woman! Not because I want to be. But because I HAVE to be. I do not have a choice. Life must go on. For me at least. So, the next day, I smile and make breakfast like I always do. While I'm flipping his favorite omelet over, an epiphany hits me, and I smile. A project. A project will solve my problem. I scoop the soft egg-pie onto his plate along with the morning steak that he likes for breakfast.

"I love you honey." I say.

"I love you also." he says with a handsome smile. My husband is so handsome. I have made him breakfast and dinner for many

years to show my appreciation. I shower him with smiles and compliments and make sure to let him know how much I love, admire, and appreciate him. He is none-the-wiser.

“What’s been up with all of the attention?” he asks, cutting into his steak.

“I just love you, and I appreciate how much you do for our family.” I bend to kiss him on his forehead as he chews. “I wanted to plant some trees in the back, spruce it up a little. Maybe a few peonies. Do you think you can get Tanner to come over and help us next weekend while he’s home for the summer?”

“Ahhh, yes, I like peonies. Sure. I’ll ask Helen.” Helen is Tanner’s mother. Damian went to high school with her.

“Thanks babe. I appreciate it. And can you ask Helen what’s Tanner’s favorite meal? I want to cook him something as an appreciation.”

“I’ll just pay him, Ayeisha. No need to feed him also. Kid’s home from college. I’m sure he could use the money.”

“Well honey, I don’t mind doing both. Working in the garden brings me joy. It’s so peaceful and beautiful out there. I’ll even whip up a gallon of my famous lemonade that you like so much.” I wrap my arms around his shoulders.

“Money is enough. Teenaged boys are like cats. You feed them once and you’ll never be able to get rid of them.”

I nod in understanding. I will do as my husband says.

A week flies by as I gather all of my necessities for my peony planting project that I have planned.

Tanner shows up early on Saturday, and we are all working in the yard. Damian and I go to Home Depot while Tanner gets started digging a deep ditch for me. Inside the store, we are walking, shopping, and smiling at each other, hand in hand. I giggle like a teenager in love. He is preoccupied with his phone a few times, but that’s okay. We pick out an avocado tree and a blood orange tree... and peonies. Lots and lots of peonies... I’m excited. I love yard work.

Damian and I used to do a lot of it before he started running

around on me. Maybe this was a sign of the changing times for our marriage that I missed? Who knows.

We are all out digging and working in the yard, listening to music, dancing, singing and enjoying the sunshine. I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand and look up into the sky. Arizona heat can be brutal this time of year.

“Great job!” I say looking at the large ditch that Tanner has mustered. “Thanks boys.” I go in and get them lemonade with frosted glasses that sweat down the sides and ice cubes that clink and float as I walk and look so refreshing that I would be tempted to drink some myself.

They are grateful and wipe the sweat from their foreheads with the backs of their hands. Tanner takes a few sips but then gets back to work digging since he is trying to finish out the day to go to some party. Damian takes the glass and holds it up against his forehead and rolls it back and forth, his face a semblance of relief. Then he gulps the lemonade in four long loud disgusting gulps. He drains the lemonade then looks over at me with a smile and raises his empty glass to me in an appreciative salute. I smile back appreciative that his thirst has been quenched. He is satisfied. So am I.

We continue our work until Tanner’s eyes flutter and he sits on the edge of the pool and slumps against my mosaic side table. Damian glances in Tanner’s direction, frowns and coughs. His eyes slide to half-slits and he stumbles to his knees close by the ground opening.

“Water?” He asks, his voice hoarse, his arm reaching out to me.

I walk over, look down at him groveling on the pavement and smile. “Why don’t you ask that bitch you’re fucking to get you some water. ‘Cause I’m fresh out!” I cross my arms over my chest. “But I can get you some more lemonade.”

His face changes. At first, confusion flashed across his eyes. Then realization. Then anger. He lunges at me but I step back and he stumbles onto all fours. His breath is ragged. Panic sets in as he sends another glance at Tanner whose straight blonde hair has

flopped over, completely covering his pale face. He is completely blacked out, flat on his back.

“I make the best lemonade. You’ve always known that.” I smirk and wait. Any moment now, the Xylazine should take him out. First, he will start sweating, then his breathing will become shallow, and then finally his heart will stop and put him out of his misery. Courtesy of the veterinarian of a friend who owns a ranch and owes me a favor, the little pills were easy to crush into a powder and stir into their lemonade. Damian is gripping the side of one of our chairs, panicked. I walk up to him and stand, looming over him. He looks up at me.

“What did you do to me? Why?” That made me lose my composure.

“FUCK YOU!” I screech. I pace back and forth a few feet, hyperventilating.

I pick up the shovel that Tanner was using, and I swing and hit him over the head. He grunts in a mixture of pain and anger. He holds his head, looking dazed and confused. I stare, frozen in shock that I just did that to him.

I did it! I *just* hit my husband in the head with a shovel.

My eyes are wide in horror. I can’t believe it. I hit DAMIAN in the head with a shovel!

I take a deep breath in, straighten my back. I just hit that motherfucka in the HEAD with a SHOVEL!

I’m so shocked at myself that I stand there and stare at Damian, clutching for anything he can, while holding his head. My breathing is intensifying as I stand there watching him grovel on the ground. I can’t believe what I just did. A fleeting moment of regret creeps through me, and I think about our kids, our home, our life together. But it is fleeting, because then I think of all the emotional abuse, the womanizing, the multiple affairs throughout our marriage, and the lies. This latest tramp was definitely my breaking point.

So...

I hit him again. This time, harder!

With all the energy, anger, and hatred I can muster, I bring the heavy shovel up as high as I can over my head. It flows through the air with a whistle that impresses me and lands hard against Damian's head. Blood syringes from the magnificent, newly made gash that I've opened in his head.

I won't lie; it felt so good! Thrilling, even. I smile. This shovel is heavier than I thought, I think to myself as I heave it up over my head again, ready for another blow. I don't want to wait for the horse tranquilizers to kick in. I want this done, and I want it done now.

I'm not stupid. Under normal circumstances, Damian would be able to overpower me... he's so big and strong, which is why I fell in love with him in the first place. I always felt protected around him and safe. But in this situation, that bronze would be to my detriment, so I had to be smart.

A few Xylazine pills crushed into a fine powder, stirred around in his lemonade, would sedate him enough for me to have the upper hand. Poor Tanner got just a few sprinkles in his glass to sedate him temporarily. But Damian, oh no, I wanted him DONE! I was just impatient now.

He groaned and gathered enough strength to stand, stumble, and lunge at me. When he did, I swung the shovel again. Hard. The blow snapped his head backward. His body flew a few feet away. He hit the ground so hard that even I flinched.

I thought for sure he was dead now. But there was a twitch in his fingers... kinda like you see in the movies. It was eerie. So I walked to stand over him. I kicked him in his side.

"That's for lying to me! You cheating bastard!" I kicked again. "And that's for making me look like a fool!" I can see the confusion on his face. He's such an idiot. I expected him to feign confusion, and I expected that my next blow would kill him. What I didn't expect was for him to reach out and grab my ankle.

He snatched me to the ground. I scrambled, fear pumping in my heart, making my heartbeat faster until I thought it was gonna pound out of my chest. It was gonna be him or me. And as I said

earlier, I'm a strong Black woman. Don't wanna be, but gotta be.

With a few twists and turns, I was able to kick out of his grip. The Xylazine was on my side. That plus the whacks on his head I already landed. I was able to overpower him, and scramble upright. I swung the shovel a few more times, smashing his head against the pavement until he stopped moving. Then, it looked like he stopped breathing. I leaned down over him and grabbed him by the collar of his T-shirt.

"Why Damian? Why did you do it?" I yell at him, shaking him as hard as I could. I am hysterical now, tears are flowing down my face. "I gave you my life!" But I don't think he heard me 'cause quite frankly, I think he was dead. I checked his pulse. It is very faint. He didn't have long. I wiped my tears and smiled over his body.

"Motherfucker! I told you not to mess with me."

His eyes are half slits. His breathing is shallow infrequent sips, like he is holding on to life by a string. Should I call 911? Nah. It's too late anyway. He's not gonna make it. So, I do what any good, faithful wife does when she's tired of her husband cheating.

I roll his ass right into the ditch!

His body topples halfway in, and I have to position the sole of my foot on his backside to nudge him all the way in. I wished Tanner had dug a little deeper ditch. Ironically, he is wedged between the large root ball of the avocado tree and his head cocked awkwardly against the blood orange tree. I watch the blood ooze from his head and saturate the soil under his body like a dark oil stain. I stand there for a few moments, transfixed on the view for a few moments. My mind is numb, and strangely I feel... what's the word? Relieved.

I glance over at Tanner, and I drag him onto my lounge chair by the pool. This was all planned. I've picked Tanner for a reason. He is small in stature, so I can handle moving him if necessary. I try to make him look as natural as possible on the lounge. But even with Tanner being a small guy, he is still dead weight and heavy as hell.

I roll up my sleeves. I work overtime to fill the ditch and pat and stomp the dirt with my work boots. It took me all night to fill the

ditch with dirt and to make sure that none of Damian's limbs were sticking out of the soil. I also had to remove the visible evidence of blood on the ground, furniture, and other plants. I'm exhausted. I have planted peonies all around the base of the trees, and the rest of them I have planted along the fence.

They turn out beautiful, and I am truly satisfied.



It's a few hours later. I am sitting across from Tanner in the other lounge chair. After I finished working on the garden, I showered and ate leftover steak, and poured myself a glass of wine. I came out to enjoy it in the garden as I admire my handy work. Damian and I bought it for a special occasion. Well, I'd say this evening deems celebratory. So I imaginary toast in the air to Damian. Right now, Damian is as snug as a bug. Or as the younger kids say... "pushing up daisies"... or in his case... "pushing up peonies." Just where his sorry cheating ass belongs.

I've been sitting here watching over Tanner as I thought of my next move. I could leave. But then I would look suspicious, and the police would come after me. Or I could make it look like Damian decided to leave his life behind due to the insurmountable amount of stress he was under. So many thoughts float in and out of me. I flick a little soil residue from under my pinkie fingernail and bring the glass to my lips again. I'm confident it will all work out. But first, I gotta get this boy out of my house.

I get up and douse a large cold glass of iced water on Tanner. He stirs slightly but is groggy, so I slap him hard across his face. Twice! He awakes with a jolt wide eyed looking around in bewilderment. Instantly, his pale cheek flushes red. Tanner is as confused as Damian was. I told Tanner that he must have been tired, that he worked hard, and that WE appreciated all the help. He looks confused.

"Where's Mr. B?" Tanner asks, blinking slowly. Dead, I say to

myself.

“Sleeping,” I say outloud. “Shhhh.” I hold my finger up to my pursed lips and glance up at my bedroom window. The lights are off, but you can see the reflection of the television lights bounce off the walls. “He had to turn in early; he has a business trip tomorrow. But he says for me to pay you and to thank you for your work. Good luck when you return to college. And we’ll see you next summer.”

“Ummm, okay, sure.” He scratches his head and takes the folded bills from my hand. “I’m so sorry. I HAVE been up late a lot. Staying up all night. I don’t know how I fell asleep. I must have been really tired. I don’t quite remember but... but...” Tanner still looks over at me, helpless and confused, waiting for me to rescue him with his memory.

“Oh, you did such a great job!” I say with my hand giving light pressure on his back as I walk him to the side yard gate. “Tell your mother ‘hi.’ Have a good night!”



Days, weeks, even months, pass, and my peonies are flourishing and blooming beautifully. Since planting them, I have added a motif, an archway, and a backdrop near the fence. I must admit it really does spruce up the yard. And I spend most of my evenings working back here. I even sometimes talk to Damian and thank him for making my peonies flourish so vibrantly.

One evening after work, I am in the backyard, thanking Damian and clipping weeds, when my doorbell rings. I don’t like to be disturbed when I’m working with my flowers, so instantly my forehead is crinkled into a frown. Who the hell could this be?

It’s been months since Damian “disappeared,” and people have stopped coming by with casseroles, so I’m confused when I hear the doorbell. I’m not expecting anyone. The detectives have long since ruled this a voluntary situation where a man decided that he didn’t want to be a husband or father anymore, so he left on his own voli-

tion. Case closed. He left willingly is the word on the streets. And I help to keep that rumor alive.

Yes, my children are distraught by the thought of their dear father leaving, but they'll be alright. I explained to them that their dad wanted and needed some space and that he said he would come back once he'd had said space. They have their own families now to keep them preoccupied.

I walk to the door and look at the monitor. *She* is standing on my doorstep! I freeze when I see her. Then I get curious. So I open the door.

"Hello. I'm not sure if you remember me, but I'm Damian's assistant, Chloe."

This Bitch! She has a lot of nerve! I size her up. She is pretty. Petite. Perfect. I can see why Damian wanted to fuck her. Then, a thought flashed in my head. There is a spot by the fence in the yard, on the left side. Yellow peonies would look good over there.

I nod slowly. "Tea?" I say.

She looks confused.

"Won't you come in?" I say a complete thought. "I was just about to make some tea or lemonade. Would you like to come in? Chloe, you said?" She hesitates. I must convince her.

"Please," I say demurely, lightly fluttering my eyelids.

"I probably shouldn't." She says, glancing over my shoulder into my foyer. "I was just stopping by to see if you've heard anything from Damian. Any updates? So strange of him to just disappear like that. Did you file a missing person's report?" As she asks this last question, I can see tears pooling in her eyes. The poor fool. She loved him.

I must act as she does. "I did." I lie. "I just don't understand it either, Chloe. Please. Come in." I say again, this time with my bottom lip slightly sticking out. She wipes her nose, looks around, and then glances again behind me into my house.

She pauses, inhales deeply, and says, "Okay. But just for a little while." Instantly, I pull some lemonade from the kitchen and herd

her out onto the patio by the pool.

“Here,” I say, pulling out a chair next to the patio table. I smack the cushions with my fist a few times until puffs of dust float in the air. “Sorry. Damian and I don’t sit out here much. I’ll be right back with your lemonade.” I say, trotting back into the house like a prized Clydesdale. I have to stir her drink quickly.

“Chloe, you said?” I breeze through the screen door and plop into my patio lounge chair. “How is it that I can help you today?” She perches on the end of the chair, her purse clutched on her lap, staring at the glass of lemonade that I had set next to her.

“The last time I saw Damian, we were going over research papers late at night in the office. He said that he had to get home to you, and that was it. I did not see him again after that night. And then he didn’t show up on Monday for work. Did he come home that night?” She puts the glass to her lips but doesn’t drink. I watch carefully. Her lemonade has something special in it. Let’s just call it a gift... from me.

“He did not,” I state. “I went to bed early. I have papers to grade, so I usually knock out kinda early before Damian gets home. When I awoke, he hadn’t been home. I called the police and filed a report. I find it strange that he hasn’t contacted me... or you.” I say, looking at her.

She clears her throat. “I don’t understand why the police aren’t doing more to help find him.”

“Because he is a grown man, they don’t put in as much effort, I guess.” I actually couldn’t care less.

“But he’s missing...” she yelps. I hand her a tissue, and she profusely apologizes for her outburst. “He could need help or be in danger...”

“Chloe,” I lean in to whisper as if there was someone else there other than us two. “Can I tell you a little secret? Damian didn’t disappear. He’s not hurt or in need of any help.” I wait for her to respond, and like a fucking puppet she plays right into the emotion that I want her to.

“He left.” I lie again. I was getting good at it. “He decided that he didn’t want this life anymore. Yep, just took off.” I leaned back into my chair. “He got tired of being a husband, so poof! Just like that!” I threw my hands up in surrender.

“That bastard.” She whispers. Her pretty little face crumbled in disbelief. “What... well, how could he?”

I have to keep my lies straight. I told the police that Damian left on his own. I told his job that I had no idea where he was, and this dumb little girl believes that he is missing and that I would actually take the time to waltz my ass down to the police station to fill out a missing persons report. I KNOW exactly where Damian’s double-crossing, two-timing, loose dick, cheating ass is! I giggle to myself, and she shoots me a strange look.

“Why would he just take off without saying goodbye? And how can you laugh at that?” She asks, clearly distraught.

“Damian is selfish.” I sip from my lemonade, hoping she will hurry up and drink hers.

“But...” She sighs. I can tell she is at a loss for words. This was not what she thought would happen when she decided to pop up on my porch.

“Some men are just like that,” I finish. “You’re young. You’ll find out eventually. Sometimes they think of only themselves. That’s when you got to remind them who they are messing with.” I glared over at the peonies.

I loved Damian. When we first met and got married, I was head over heels for him. He was so tall and handsome and smart. I thought he would love me forever. I sigh. I do wish things had turned out differently for us. I keep glancing over at the mound of dirt that Damian is lying under with the peonies springing on top of him.

Chloe catches me looking in that direction. “Your peonies are beautiful. It’s so many of them. My mother’s peonies dry out and wither away quickly.” She blinks slowly for a while. “What type of fertilizer do you use?”

I bring the glass to my lips and smile. “Organic,” I say. “A special blend.”

“They’re beautiful.”

I glance over at her. “Fun fact about peonies, Chloe, is that they can actually outlive people. There is a story about a 1,000-year-old peony tree in China. That has been observed by many generations of whom have not outlived the tree.” I smile. “Their petals are so delicate and pretty, but poisonous to dogs. And did you know that the different-colored peonies have different meanings? White means purity and new beginnings. Red means passion and love, and yellow means joy and happiness.”

She glances again over at the peonies. “Yours are all white.”

I sip, “Why yes. I guess they are. To new beginnings!” I say, raising my glass into the air. I hold my lemonade there waiting for her to toast me. She hesitates, then returns the toast. We clink our glasses together, and I drink, while watching her. She brings the glass to her mouth, then sets it back down without a simple sip. Damn it! I am livid. Why is she here? She has to know that I know something about her and my husband. I quickly lose my patience.

“I know you’ve been fucking my husband, Chloe.”

Her eyes widen like saucers, and her mouth opens like she wants to say something, but she doesn’t.

“Listen...”

“I’m so sorry!” She blurts out and wipes her tears with the tissue. Sorry for getting caught with your pants down with my husband? Or sorry that you actually did it? There is a difference. I’m not sure which one she is sorry for, but at this point, it doesn’t even matter anymore. Damian has already paid the price. And so will she. I just gotta get her to drink without making it weird, I think to myself.

“Oh, don’t worry about that anymore.” I dismissively flick my wrist. “My marriage was over. I’m not even mad.” I lie. “Our marriage was already on the rocks. Hell, you actually probably helped in that department, if anything.”

A small, unsettling silence swells between us.

“Why do you think Damian would leave like that, though?” she says absentmindedly.

I hunch my shoulders.

“Maybe he was unhappy. Or dissatisfied. He informed me before he left that he didn’t want to be found. He was moving on from both of us. From the rat race, as he put it, and living off the grid.” She looked at me.

“His words, not mine,” I say, nonchalantly.

“From both of us? But I thought...” she said. “...he’d never...” her voice trailed off. She glances at me, her eyes pooling.

“Oh shit!” I put my fist in front of my mouth. “You thought you were special?” I laugh, letting an amused smile linger on my lips. And when I see that I’ve hurt her feelings, I give it another long, loud, hearty laugh. You would have thought Kevin Hart was performing in my backyard! “Baby Doll, you are as special as the rest of them!”

“The rest of them?” she squawks.

“You don’t know Damian like I do. He likes nice, new, shiny toys. But then gets bored easily.” I say, remembering the first time he cheated on me 3 years into our marriage, when I was pregnant with our second child. “You didn’t know because you’d only been fucking him for a short time.”

She bristles a little, but I saw it.

“If you were married to Damian as long as I had been, you would know that he was a bastard.”

“You said *had*.” She stares at me. “And *was*.”

“Did I?” I ask, taking another sip of my lemonade, “Well, I guess I did. Silly me. My mistake. I guess we are technically still married. I stand corrected. *Have*.” I point to her with my glass. “And I guess he is STILL a bastard.” But not anymore, I thought to myself!

“If you were married to Damian as long as I *have* been, then you would know that he *is* still a bastard. Better?” I raise my eyebrows at her for approval and continue. “You would know that was his nature. That man was greedy. *IS*...” I say correcting my mistake.

“I really am sorry.” She says. And I believe her. She starts to cry, hard.

I take a long drink that drains my glass. I wish she’d hurry and drink hers. The more I watched her, the harder she cried until I just couldn’t stand it any longer. She was making my beautiful backyard seem like a gloomy cemetery. She had to go.

“All that crying must have your throat dry.” I say.

She sniffles a few times and looks confused.

“It’s just, it’s just...” she hiccups as a few sobs escape her mouth. “I’d never expect him to...” her crying is relentless and I’m getting annoyed.

She’s sucking in so much air with each sob.

She drags the back of her hand across her pretty lips, smearing her pinkish lipgloss and then glances over at the glass of lemonade. She grabs it for the umpteenth time and finally takes a large gulp.

Yes! I throw my arms straight up in the air like victory, a huge smile on my face.

She frowns and turns to look at me again after taking another large swallow.

I slowly lean my head to the right, pressing my nose snugly into my armpit and sniff. “Been working in the yard. Phew! I’m sweaty.” I say trying to play it off.

I am impressed with my performance and give myself an imaginary pat on the back. I should get an Oscar for my acting skills. I bring my arms down and look at the time on my cellphone to see just when the Xylazine will be kicking in.

“Say, you ever do any gardening, Chloe? Nothing soothes the soul better than gardening. Believe me, the best way to get over Damian is to give back to the earth. Before you came, I was just about to plant some more flowers. Why don’t you help me?”

“Oh no.” She says. “I really must be going.” She stands, and so do I. “Thank you for the lemonade.”

I glance at her glass. It is empty.

“Yard work really is calming. Listen, you’re here now. After mak-

ing the trip all the way to our house, you might as well help me plant some flowers. It's cathartic."

She hesitates.

"Chloe, as I said. Our marriage has been over since the kids left the house. We are practically roommates at this point." I plaster such a fake grin on my face that I feel my teeth are going to pop out of my mouth like chattering dentures. "No hard feelings at all. So, won't you please help me? Just a few? I promise, it'll make ya feel better."

She seems to buy my story. "Well, just a few, I guess, won't hurt."

"Oh great!" I say, clapping my hands together in delight. I retrieve her purse from her hand and drape the strap across the lounge chair. "There are a few peony flowers around the side of the house, yellow ones. If you don't mind getting them. It won't take long at all for us to dig a hole and get them in the ground."

"Yellow for joy and happiness?" She asks, turning in that direction.

For me. "Yes. Joy and happiness."

"And then what?" She asks.

"And then we can dig a great big hole together," I say to her with a reassuring grin. "I'll get the shovel."

GOOD HUSBAND

Henrietta Anderson

Annie Ruth was of medium height, with long, naturally beautiful hair that she always kept perfectly shaped. Jesse towered beside her—over six feet five, dark-skinned, with natural curls and a handsome face that turned heads wherever he went. Together, they made a striking couple.

Annie Ruth's best friend, Joann, had been inseparable from her for years, as though they were connected at the hip. Wherever Annie Ruth and Jesse went, Joann usually followed. Sometimes, Jesse and Annie Ruth would sneak away just to have a little private time without Joann hovering nearby.

Joann had always been flirtatious. When Annie Ruth was not in sight, Joann's attention toward Jesse crossed lines—lingering smiles, unnecessary touches, and playful comments that made him uncomfortable. All the women wanted Jesse, but he was interested only in Annie Ruth. He made that clear repeatedly. Whenever Annie Ruth was present, Joann toned it down, pretending nothing improper had ever occurred. It did once, and they both promised that it would not happen again.

Back in school, Annie Ruth and Jesse were popular among their peers. Jesse excelled at every sport, and Annie Ruth was a cheerleader and class president. Both graduated from Harper High School, brimming with ambition.

Annie Ruth was overjoyed when she was accepted to Spelman

College, following in her older sister's footsteps. She graduated and became a teacher, a career she cherished deeply. Jesse graduated from Morehouse College and then joined the Marines, serving four years. When his tour of duty ended, they married and began building a life together.

Their life was full and fulfilling. Annie Ruth led the children's choir at church, and Jesse served as a young deacon. Their wedding had been warm and joyous, surrounded by family and friends.

For years, they tried to conceive. When Annie Ruth was 35, and Jesse was 38, they finally received the long-awaited news: she was pregnant. Their joy filled the house like sunlight, brightening every conversation, plan, and quiet moment.

But complications arose. Annie Ruth was placed on strict bed rest. Jesse immediately took over everything: cooking, cleaning, errands. He never complained; caring for her made him feel as if he were already practicing being a father.

Annie Ruth appreciated his devotion, though sometimes his constant hovering tested her patience. And Joann was always around. Jesse felt uneasy whenever she visited, her touch brushing past him unnecessarily, her eyes lingering. He reminded her firmly that he loved his wife and that he was a good husband. When Annie Ruth was present, Joann behaved herself. One early morning, Joann was at Annie Ruth's house, sitting, drinking a cup of coffee with her.

Annie Ruth's mother gently warned her, "No woman should be in your house early in the morning like that." Joann was there every day.

The doctor advised Annie Ruth that she might not be able to return to work immediately after giving birth. That was fine with her, as her baby's safety was paramount. Each test and check-up left her more grateful for the support surrounding her.

Annie Ruth had accumulated enough sick leave for her extended absence. She and Jesse had agreed she might stay home indefinitely. Jesse, now principal of Harper High School, could check in on her during lunch breaks because the school was just around the corner

from their house. The presence of her mother and Joann brought her comfort, knowing she would not be alone.

Jesse even stopped attending his Friday night card games—something he once looked forward to weekly. Annie Ruth loved him for it, though secretly, she longed for quiet evenings alone with an enjoyable book, free from constant questions about pillows, snacks, or blankets. She often smiled quietly, watching him move around the house, trying so hard to care for her. He meant more than well, and she loved him for it. Yet she knew that these peaceful moments would soon vanish with the arrival of their child.

Joann received a promotion to assistant principal and transferred to Harper High School. On her first day, several male teachers lingered in the hallway as she asked for help carrying boxes from her car. The way she linked her arm with theirs, the flirtatious glances, the sway of her hips—all drew attention. Jesse was not aware of her arrival and felt disappointment over her at the sight of her confident demeanor. Trouble, he sensed immediately.

The male teachers whispered and watched, eager for opportunities. Stories about Joann's previous schools had already preceded her.

Months passed. Jesse remained what everyone called the “good husband.” Occasionally, Annie Ruth encouraged him to attend his Friday night card games, relishing the rare quiet moments to read uninterrupted. He rarely stayed out long, and when he returned, she welcomed the undivided attention he lavished on her.

One Saturday, Joann came to visit Annie Ruth. Her first question was about Jesse. Annie Ruth's mother, Hazel, remarked, “I thought you came to see Annie Ruth, not Jesse.” Joann smiled and dismissed it lightly.

Jesse often took days off work to accompany Annie Ruth to numerous doctor appointments. After particularly painful visits, Hazel would stay for days, understanding how much the baby meant to both parents. She often said, “You have a good husband.”

Annie Ruth always replied, “I know, Mommy.”

At work, women flirted openly with Jesse, and meetings filled his days. Annie Ruth tried not to dwell on it.

When Annie Ruth's health improved slightly, Hazel arranged a baby shower. Initially hesitant, Annie Ruth eventually relaxed and enjoyed herself. Teachers from Harper High School attended, some familiar faces, some new. Joann appeared sweet and kind but took every opportunity to brush against Jesse. Other women followed suit, each with their own motives. Annie Ruth received so many gifts that she would not need to buy baby items for months—a year.

During the shower, Jesse stepped outside briefly. Later, he was seen shutting the door of the gym teacher's Range Rover and slipping away. Annie Ruth did not notice at the time, but unease had already begun to build quietly in her mind, a whisper of things to come.

Soon after, Annie Ruth and the baby were declared out of danger. She was released from bed rest. She and her mother went shopping, even though she didn't need baby clothes—she simply wanted to enjoy the moment.

Jesse resumed his Friday night card games.

On his first night back going Annie Ruth asked where they were meeting. He said the location changed weekly and reminded her to call if she needed him. He did not return home until two in the morning. Annie Ruth was still awake, reading *Affairs to Remember* by Rayna Sun.

She asked him to come to bed. He said he was exhausted. After showering, he fell asleep on the couch.

The next morning, Jesse prepared breakfast—fresh orange juice, French toast, boiled two eggs, coffee, and dozens of yellow roses. He read a book to her while she ate.

After breakfast, he suggested a short trip. He drove to Savannah, staying overnight at a Riverfront hotel. He told her how beautiful she was and how much he loved her.

The following week, Jesse waited on Annie Ruth hand and foot again. She loved the attention, believing once more that she truly

had a good husband.

At work, Joann was attracting attention from nearly every male faculty member. The women were upset and began avoiding her, frustrated by her confidence and the way she carried herself. As assistant principal, she was in charge whenever Jesse was away, a position that gave her authority—and the chance to delight in the attention she received. Even teenage boys noticed her presence, and she thrived on it, enjoying the power she seemed to wield effortlessly. Every head turned when she walked through the hallways.

Jesse, meanwhile, grew increasingly restless at home. Annie Ruth, noticing his agitation, told him not to worry about her and to go to his Friday night card game. Although he appeared reluctant at first, once he stepped outside, his demeanor brightened noticeably. Annie Ruth simply smiled, silently glad he seemed lighter.

But when he arrived at the address given for the card game, the building looked abandoned. Windows were dark, but the parking lot was full, and weeds grew along the entrance. As he walked closer, the door creaked open, and he hesitated. Something about the evening had already seemed off, though he brushed it aside and went inside and shut the door.

A week later, Spring Break began. That night, Annie Ruth started having labor pains. Jesse immediately called her doctor, and within an hour, they were on their way to the hospital. After several hours of labor, Annie Ruth delivered a baby girl via C-section. She weighed five pounds, with a delicate flush of red hair. When Jesse first saw Jonai, tears streamed down his face. The baby's arrival brought intense relief and uncontainable joy.

The next morning, a nurse brought Jonai to Annie Ruth for nursing. Annie Ruth's heart ached as she saw the tiny, beautiful baby girl. She cried uncontrollably, whispering promises into Jonai's ear. "It's going to be okay," she told her, over and over again. Despite the tears, she felt a deep, unwavering love.

The following day, the doctor explained that Jonai would require eye surgery in the coming months. Annie Ruth nodded, anxious

but determined. She stayed at the hospital for a week with Jonai and Joann, Jesse, and Hazel supported her.

Jesse drove Annie Ruth and Jonai home today. Annie Ruth thought she noticed a strange tension in Jesse. On Friday night, while talking on the phone, his expression seemed unusually strained. Annie Ruth asked if all was well. He insisted it was, he was good, yet he soon became restless, making a drink, attempting to watch basketball, then stepping outside repeatedly, unable to stay still. She noticed his growing nervousness. After he saw Annie Ruth was asleep, he left the house.

When Jesse returned home from work, he showered and insisted Annie Ruth rest while he cared for Jonai. After several hours, he suggested Annie Ruth go shopping, and on her way home, pick dinner up, though Annie Ruth sensed he was hiding something.

At the mall, Annie Ruth ran into Joann. They greeted each other with a long hug and a kiss. Annie Ruth asked why she had not visited recently. Joann hesitated, visibly nervous. After some conversation, Joann revealed, casually, that she was Jesse's assistant principal.

Annie Ruth froze. "What? I had no idea! He never mentioned it to me."

Joann looked apologetic. "I don't mean to upset you. Yes, I've been there for six months."

"I knew he needed an assistant."

"I had no idea that he had not told you, but I don't mean to upset you."

"Congratulations on your promotions."

"Thank you."

Annie Ruth felt a mix of shock and betrayal. "I am happy for you," she said carefully, masking her rising unease. "But... he should have told me. Congratulations, I know you have been wanting a position like that for a long time." They parted with a kiss on the cheek. When Annie Ruth returned home, her heart was heavy.

That evening, she placed the groceries on the table. When Jesse walked into the dining room, she asked directly, "I didn't know

Joann was your assistant. Why didn't you tell me?"

Jesse's face tightened with stress. "I've been so busy... I forgot."

"For six months?" She asked quietly.

They ate in tense silence. When Jonai started crying, Jesse rushed to her side, feeding and burping her before laying her gently back in her crib. He retreated downstairs to the recliner, a beer in hand, looking uneasy and distracted.

Later that night, Jesse came to bed, rubbing Annie Ruth's back with lotion. At first, their intimacy was gentle, loving, tender, and good, as it always had been. But then something shifted—his touch grew rough, unrecognizable. Annie Ruth, startled, asked him to stop. He froze, confusion written across his face, as though he did not know who he was with. They fell asleep afterward, her mind heavy with unanswered questions.

The following morning, Jesse prepared Jonai's usual formula promptly. Annie Ruth asked him about the previous night, but he responded with blank confusion. She decided not to press further, unsure of how to confront the situation.

That evening, Hazel came to keep Jonai while Annie Ruth went to a doctor's appointment. She finally told her mother about Joann being Jesse's assistant principal—a fact he had never mentioned. Hazel, always practical, said calmly, "Joann is flirtatious, yes. But you have a good husband, and he is a good man, and he loves you and his child. Remember that."

Still, the events of the night haunted Annie Ruth. How could she explain to her mother what had happened with Jesse's odd behavior in bed? How could she even confront the reality of it herself?

Friday night arrived. Jesse returned home bearing red roses. Annie Ruth prepared an exceptional dinner—grilled lamb chops, Spanish rice, garden-grown okra and green beans, and fresh blackberry cobbler. He seemed distracted, nervous, as if something lay heavily on his mind.

Annie Ruth asked, gently, "Jesse... what's going on?"

"Everything's fine," he replied too quickly. "Just a lot happening

at work.”

She nodded silently. “If you want to talk, I’m here.”

He excused himself for a shower and said he would go to the card game afterward.

The next day, the family attended church. Annie Ruth was struck by the warmth of the congregation as they congratulated her on the baby and praised Jesse as a devoted husband. After the service, she looked around for him. When she finally spotted Jesse, he was stepping out of the deacon’s office and closing the door quickly. Someone else exited moments later, but by the time Annie Ruth looked again, the person was gone. On the drive home, Jesse’s tension was unmistakable.

That Friday night at the hotel, Joann waited downstairs in the lobby. She saw Jesse walking closely with Natasha, a teacher from Harper High. They didn’t notice her at first—but Jesse did. Joann approached his sleek black Mercedes, the personalized license plate reading “GOOD HUSBAND.” She leaned in and spoke quietly, her words sharp and deliberate, making it clear she knew more than she should. Then she walked away, her confidence unmistakable.

Jesse sat in the car, resting his head against the steering wheel, his expression twisted with disgust and dread. He pulled out his phone and made a call. No answer. It went straight to voicemail. He left a brief message. “I need to talk to you.”

The following week, the weather turned bitterly cold. By mid-morning, snow was falling heavily, and students were dismissed early. Faculty members remained behind to complete their monthly reports. As Jesse was leaving his office, Joann stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

“Hello boss man, I see everything you are doing. I saw the gym teacher come out of this office looking happy, the music teacher, the nurse, even Linda, even the overweight dietitian come out looking relieved. So, when I leave here I am going to be happy and relieved too.” She took her panties off and put them to his nose, and told him to smell them, “I know you like the smell.” He laid her on his sofa.

Afterward she put her panties in her briefcase and left the office.

Jesse's inner voice told him that he was out of control.

Jesse locked the door, sat down, and took a shot of his favorite bourbon. It stung as it went down and he put his head in his hands. He had to get a hold of things and quick. He looked at the photo sitting on his desk of Annie Ruth and Jonai and tears ran down his face.

Later, on his drive home, Jesse made another call. A man answered on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Jamie," Jesse said quietly. "I need to talk to you."

"What about Saturday evening? We will be at the same place."

"Thank you."

Annie Ruth's unease grew. She couldn't shake the feeling that the carefully constructed life she had known was beginning to crack.

At Harper High School, Joann commanded attention from every male faculty member. The female teachers were frustrated and increasingly distant, wary of Joann's flirtatious demeanor and the power she wielded as assistant principal. When Jesse was away, Joann was in charge, and she relished the authority. Every glance, whispered compliment, and admiring smile fueled her confidence. Even the students noticed, and Joann thrived on the attention, feeling unstoppable as she walked through the hallways.

Meanwhile, Jesse grew increasingly restless at home. Annie Ruth noticed his agitation and gently told him not to worry about her—he could go to his Friday night card game. At first, he seemed reluctant, but the moment he stepped outside, his posture straightened, and his mood lightened. Annie Ruth smiled quietly, happy to see him unwind, yet a faint unease lingered in her chest.

When Jesse came home, Annie Ruth was still awake. She asked him several questions, but he brushed them off, insisting that everything was fine. Later, he said he was going to take a shower, then slipped into his downstairs office and turned on his computer.

Annie Ruth's heart sank. Something hidden was beginning to

unravel, and she could feel it deep in her spirit. The perfect life she believed she had was starting to crack, though she still didn't know the full truth.

On Saturday evening, Jesse kissed her gently. "I'll be back around 11 o'clock," he said.

Annie Ruth watched his car until it disappeared from sight. Jesse drove to Piedmont Avenue and entered the building, where the room was already full. He recognized a few familiar faces—two men from his church. They sat together, drinking coffee and talking quietly. Jesse leaned toward one of them.

"Jamie, I need a private session," he said.

"We'll talk after the meeting," Jamie replied.

Back at home, Annie Ruth focused on Jonai, her tiny red-haired daughter, and the steady rhythm of daily life. Jesse continued to help around the house—feeding the baby, changing diapers, preparing meals. His devotion appeared unwavering, yet Annie Ruth occasionally noticed his restlessness. His phone buzzed more often, and sometimes he stepped outside, offering vague excuses about work or errands.

One afternoon, Annie Ruth had a quiet moment alone while Jonai napped. She noticed Jesse's phone was left unlocked on the kitchen counter. Curiosity tugged at her. She hesitated—she knew she shouldn't—but her intuition, an uneasy stirring, pushed her hand toward the screen. A string of messages appeared, and the color drained from her face as she read them. Flirtatious texts from women, some meeting details, some blatant innuendo. The shock struck her like lightning. Jesse, her devoted husband, her "good husband," was hiding a life she never imagined.

For hours, Annie Ruth sat silently, her heart pounding. The home that had once felt safe now seemed foreign. She replayed every incident in her mind—Joann's visits, Jesse's sudden restlessness, the mysterious outings. Her stomach churned with betrayal, disbelief, and sorrow. How could the man who held her hand, kissed her forehead, and cherished her daughter harbor such secrets?

That evening, Jesse returned home with the usual warmth, unaware of what Annie Ruth had discovered. She watched him carry Jonai to her crib, her mind a whirlwind of emotions. When he came to her, holding a bouquet of roses, she forced a polite smile, masking the storm within.

“Annie Ruth,” he said, voice soft, “How was your day?”

She swallowed hard. “Fine,” she said, barely above a whisper. Her mind screamed questions, accusations, and heartbreak.

Dinner passed in a tense silence. Annie Ruth excused herself early, claiming fatigue. She went to the nursery, watching her daughter sleep, the tiny chest rising and falling in innocence. She felt a surge of protection. Jonai deserved a safe, honest home—a father she could trust without doubt.

In the following days there was a battle within her. She observed Jesse more closely, noting patterns, behaviors, and small inconsistencies. Every unexplained call, every sudden outing, now bore weight. The love she felt for him collided with the raw sting of betrayal.

Finally, one quiet evening, Annie Ruth confronted him. She had rehearsed the words a thousand times in her head, but they felt small compared to the enormity of the truth she had uncovered.

“Jesse,” she began, her voice trembling yet firm, “I know about the women... the messages, the meetings. I know everything.”

Jesse froze. The casual ease that had characterized him at home vanished, replaced by a flicker of panic. His eyes searched hers, searching for mercy, understanding, or perhaps a way to explain what could not be excused.

“I... I can explain,” he stammered. “It’s not what you think. I—”

Annie Ruth held up a hand, tears brimming. “Don’t. I trusted you. I believed in you. I thought... I thought we were building a life together. Jonai deserves honesty, Jesse. I deserve honesty. I don’t know if I can ever trust you again.”

Jesse sank into the chair, silent, guilt etched across his face. He looked at his daughter’s crib, then at Annie Ruth, the reality of his

actions crashing down. The man who had once been the perfect husband now faced the irrevocable fracture he had created in their family.

For Annie Ruth, the house felt colder that night. Jonai slept peacefully, unaware of the storm brewing above her crib. Annie Ruth's world had shifted; the light of trust dimmed by betrayal. She loved Jesse—she always had—but now, love was complicated by the ache of heartbreak and the fear of what the future might hold.

The next morning, Annie Ruth awoke with a tight knot in her chest. She watched Jonai sleeping peacefully in her crib, her tiny hands curled in gentle fists. The innocence of her daughter reminded Annie Ruth why she had to act with clarity and resolve. She could not allow this betrayal to fester in silence. Jonai deserved a home built on honesty.

Annie Ruth took a deep breath and decided that before confronting Jesse further, she needed to understand Joann's role. If anyone had encouraged or enabled Jesse's behavior, it was Joann. She had always been flirty, always lingering, and now she held a position of authority in Jesse's workplace. The thought made Annie Ruth's stomach twist with anger and disappointment.

That afternoon, she called Joann to meet at a quiet café. When Joann arrived, she was her usual confident, bright self, but Annie Ruth noticed the slight tension in her posture. The playfulness Annie Ruth had once found endearing now felt like a threat.

"Joann," Annie Ruth began, her voice steady but laced with anger, "I need to know the truth. How much did you know about Jesse... about what he's been doing?"

Joann blinked, a flicker of surprise crossing her face. She laughed nervously. "Annie Ruth, what are you talking about?"

"Don't play with me," Annie Ruth said, her hands gripping her cup tightly. "I've seen the messages. I know about the women, the meetings... everything. I trusted you as my friend. Did you encourage this? Were you part of it?"

Joann's expression hardened, the flippancy replaced by some-

thing calculating. “Annie Ruth, I... I didn’t force him. I didn’t make him do anything. Jesse made his own choices.”

“You stood there, flirting with him, rubbing up against him,” Annie Ruth said, her voice breaking with frustration. “Did you not see how uncomfortable he was? Or did you not care?”

Joann shrugged, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “I liked the attention. That’s all. He’s a grown man. He’s responsible for himself. Don’t blame me for what he does.”

Annie Ruth felt a cold fury rise inside her. This was no longer about hurt feelings—it was about protecting herself and her daughter. She stood abruptly, chair scraping against the floor. “I trusted you. I thought you were my friend. I was wrong. Stay away from my family.”

Joann’s eyes narrowed, but she did not respond. Annie Ruth turned and left the café, each step fueled by a mix of anger, sorrow, and determination. She knew she had to confront Jesse fully, not just about what he had done, but about what this meant for their future.

That evening, Jesse returned home, expecting the usual calm. Instead, Annie Ruth met him at the door, her face pale but resolute.

“We need to talk,” she said simply. “No excuses this time. I want to know the truth, every detail. And I need to know if you can ever be the good husband and father like you promised to be.”

Jesse’s confident demeanor faltered. The weight of guilt and fear settled heavily on his shoulders. He knew this was the moment of reckoning, the day his choices had finally caught up with him.

Annie Ruth led him to the living room, Jonai safely in her crib. “Look at her,” she said, gesturing toward the baby. “She’s innocent. She doesn’t deserve to grow up in a home where lies are allowed to fester. I’ve already spoken to Joann. I know her role. Now it’s your turn. Tell me the truth. All of it.”

Jesse sank into the sofa, silent, his head in his hands. The mask of “The Good Husband” had fallen away. Now, faced with the truth, he could only confront the damage he had done and wonder if there

was any path back to trust.

Annie Ruth, meanwhile, felt a strange clarity. The betrayal cut deep, but the pain also ignited determination. She would protect Jonai, and she would make the choices necessary for herself—even if that meant facing a future without the man she had once loved so deeply.

Jesse remained on the sofa, shoulders slumped, unable to meet Annie Ruth's gaze. The weight of her words pressed down on him. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and strained.

"Annie Ruth... I have made mistakes—terrible mistakes," he began. "I... I can't even explain why I did some of the things I did. I was weak. I was... selfish. Joann—she tempted me, yes, but I was the one who chose her, the other women... I didn't stop. I betrayed you, and I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Annie Ruth's hands trembled slightly, but her voice remained calm and steady. "Sorry isn't enough, Jesse. Not after all of this. You weren't just unfaithful—you broke the foundation of trust that held us together. You put yourself before your family, before Jonai, before me."

"I know," Jesse said, his eyes brimming with tears. "I never wanted to hurt you or Jonai. I love you both. I do. I just... I have this problem. I... I didn't know how to stop it."

Annie Ruth felt a pang of sorrow. Part of her wanted to forgive him, to cling to the man she had loved for so long. But another part—the stronger part—refused to let him off so easily. "Love isn't enough, Jesse," she said softly. "You must prove that you can be trusted. Actions, not words. And right now... I don't know if I can ever trust you again."

Jesse's head fell into his hands, his body shaking. "I'll do anything, Annie Ruth. Therapy, counseling, anything. I'll stop seeing them. I'll stop everything. Just... give me a chance to make it right."

Annie Ruth stood, walking toward the nursery where Jonai slept. She watched her daughter's peaceful face, and a wave of resolve swept over her. "I love you," she said quietly, turning back to

Jesse. “But love alone cannot protect Jonai. You’ve put me in a position where I have to protect her—and myself. For now, that means space, boundaries, and therapy for you. I can’t let this continue in our home.”

Jesse looked up, eyes pleading. “So... what are you saying?”

“I’m saying,” Annie Ruth replied, voice firm, “That you need help. I will stay here, raising our daughter, until I see that you are serious. You’re going to therapy, and you’re going to cut all ties with anyone who tempts you. If you can do that, maybe... maybe we can rebuild. But trust has to be earned again.”

Jesse nodded slowly, swallowing hard. “Anything, Annie Ruth. I will do anything. I promise.”

Annie Ruth turned to Jonai, brushing a gentle hand across her baby’s hair. The tiny warmth of her daughter reminded her of why she had to be strong. She would protect Jonai at all costs. She loved Jesse—but love alone could no longer blind her to the truth.

Over the next few weeks, Jesse began therapy. He confessed everything to a professional, facing the root of his compulsions and his past. He told the therapist it started when he was sixteen. He would go over to his uncle’s house to clean the yard. His uncle’s wife was very young. When he finished she paid him. She would have no underwear on, and she rubbed his penis and put his hand under her dress, and every week this would happen. And he liked it. He has been doing this since high school, college, and even in the Marines. “I thought I had it under control.” He spoke.

Annie Ruth kept her distance, maintaining boundaries in their home while ensuring Jonai’s life remained stable and filled with love. Through it all, Annie Ruth discovered a deeper strength within herself—a combination of love, sorrow, and resolve. She knew that the road ahead would be difficult, but for Jonai’s sake, she would walk it firmly, without compromise. Trust, she realized, could be rebuilt—but only with honesty, effort, and unwavering commitment.

And for the first time in months, as she watched Jonai reach for a toy and giggle, Annie Ruth felt a small spark of hope. She would

protect her daughter, she would protect herself, and she would navigate whatever future awaited them—with clarity, courage, and love, tempered by hard-earned wisdom.

The weeks following Annie Ruth's confrontation were tense, but steady. Jesse attended therapy faithfully, confronting the roots of his compulsions and his history of poor choices. Each session left him exhausted, sometimes emotional, but slowly he began to understand the patterns that had led him astray. Annie Ruth watched from a distance, her emotions a complicated mix of anger, fear, and cautious hope.

At home, she took command of their household. She structured Jonai's schedule, ensuring the baby's needs came first, and began rebuilding the stability that had been disrupted. Jesse helped when asked, but Annie Ruth made it clear that he had to earn trust through actions, not words.

Joann was no longer welcome in their home. Annie Ruth informed the school administration of inappropriate behavior she had witnessed, and Joann was transferred to another school. It was a small victory, but it reinforced Annie Ruth's determination to protect her family.

Despite the tension, moments of normalcy began to appear. Jesse made breakfast for Jonai, changed diapers, and read stories to her without seeking Annie Ruth's praise. Annie Ruth allowed herself to notice these changes, though she remained guarded.

One Saturday morning, Jesse came to Annie Ruth with a notebook in hand. "I've been keeping track of my therapy progress," he said quietly. "I want you to see that I'm serious about changing—for you, for Jonai, for us."

Annie Ruth took the notebook and flipped through it. Pages filled with reflections, exercises from therapy, and notes on triggers. She felt a flicker of something she hadn't felt in weeks: cautious hope. "I can see that you're trying," she said. "But it's going to take time. You need to prove it every day."

"I will," Jesse said, his voice firm. "I won't fail you again."

Over the months, the home became calmer. Jesse continued therapy, attended support groups, and focused on being a present father and husband. Annie Ruth remained vigilant but began to allow herself small moments of relief. She spent time with Jonai, took walks with friends, and returned to teaching part-time. The balance wasn't perfect, but it was real.

One evening, Annie Ruth sat on the porch, Jonai asleep in her arms. Jesse approached quietly, sitting beside her. He reached out, taking her hand. "I know I don't deserve it yet," he said, "But I hope someday we can be the family we both dreamed of. I will keep trying. Every day." Jesse added, "I am going to a meeting today. I will be back home around five."

"Okay, sweetie." Annie Ruth replied.

Hazel came over to the house to check on her daughter and granddaughter. After a while, she stood up, picked up the baby, and said, "Let me take this baby outside with me and sit in the gazebo. Honey, you look like you're handling things the best you can."

Annie Ruth sighed. "Mother, it's hard—but we're working it out."

Hazel nodded. "Annie Ruth, you are not the first woman whose husband cheated on her. Your daddy was one of the worst men when it came to running around."

Annie Ruth looked at her in disbelief. "Mama, you and Daddy always seemed like the perfect couple. Daddy sang in the choir, and you were a nurse, working with the children in the nursery at church. I had no idea Daddy was doing all that."

Hazel let out a short laugh. "Honey, women used to call him when he was at home, and two of them even came by in person. I made it clear I wasn't about to raise six children by myself.

"The last woman who came asking about your daddy—I had her meet me at an empty building. Your Aunt Helen helped me. We whipped her with switches we tied together."

"Mama! Did Daddy ever find out?" Annie Ruth asked as her eyes widened.

Hazel smiled slowly. "Oh, yes. When he came home, I told him

exactly what happened. He acted like he didn't know a thing—but you better believe she told him. After that incident, there were no more visits and no more phone calls.”

The two women laughed and talked for a long while, the weight of the past easing between them.

Finally, Hazel stood up. “Honey, I’m going to meet Helen over at Captain D’s.”

Annie Ruth shook her head, smiling. “Mama, please don’t you and Aunt Helen go whipping anybody today.”

Hazel laughed. “We’ll see.”

They both laughed together, the sound warm, knowing, and filled with the kind of love only women who have survived together can understand.

Jesse returned home with a dozen red roses, Annie Ruth looked into his eyes, seeing both the man she had loved and the man she had demanded accountability from. “I want to believe that, Jesse,” she said softly. “But it’s not about what you say—it’s about what you do. Every choice, every action.”

He nodded, understanding the gravity of her words. They sat in silence for a while, the night quiet around them, both reflecting on the past and cautiously envisioning the future.

Life slowly resumed its rhythm. Annie Ruth’s strength, honed by betrayal and challenge, became the anchor for their family. Jonai thrived in the safe, loving environment her mother had created. Jesse’s progress in therapy and commitment to change were gradual but noticeable.

Though scars remained, and trust had to be earned anew, the family discovered a renewed sense of hope. Annie Ruth realized that love alone could not sustain a marriage—it required honesty, effort, and boundaries. And as she watched Jonai’s small hands reach for hers, she knew that protecting her daughter—and herself—was worth every challenge, heartbreak, and decision to demand accountability.

The journey ahead was still long, but Annie Ruth understood

something vital: she was no longer simply a wife—she was a mother, a protector, and a woman who would not allow betrayal to define her family's future. And for Jonai, that meant everything.

Two years had passed since the storm that had shaken Annie Ruth and Jesse's marriage to its core. In that time, the family had undergone a quiet, steady transformation. The house was filled with laughter once again; the small crises of daily life were managed with teamwork and care. Annie Ruth's vigilance and strength had reshaped their home, setting clear boundaries and expectations that Jesse had learned to respect.

Jesse had remained consistent in therapy, confronting his past and acknowledging his compulsions. He had learned to communicate honestly, without fear, and to act with integrity. Slowly, he rebuilt trust, showing through small daily actions that he was committed to the family he had nearly lost. Annie Ruth, though never naïve, allowed herself to notice the changes, acknowledging the hard work and sincerity she now saw.

Jonai, now a lively and curious toddler, thrived in the love and stability her mother provided. She often ran through the garden, laughing with Jesse or holding Annie Ruth's hand as they walked to church. The little red-haired girl had a bright spirit that mended old wounds simply by being herself. Annie Ruth would watch her, feeling both pride and relief, knowing she had protected her child and created a home where Jonai could flourish.

On Sunday mornings, the family attended church together. Jesse, a devoted deacon, walked proudly beside Annie Ruth, holding Jonai's hand. Friends and fellow church members noted the change in him, the dedication, the accountability, and the genuine love he displayed. Annie Ruth, for her part, was recognized for her courage—not just as a mother and wife, but as a woman who demanded honesty and action in the face of betrayal.

One quiet evening, Annie Ruth and Jesse sat together on the porch, Jonai asleep inside. Jesse reached for her hand, holding it gently. "I know I don't deserve all of this," he said softly, "But I am so

grateful for you, for us... for Jonai. I promise to keep being the man you and she deserve.”

Annie Ruth smiled, her heart full but tempered with wisdom. “Yes, you’ve done the work, Jesse. I see it every day. And I believe in the man you are becoming. We are not perfect, but we are a family—and that is what matters.”

They sat in silence, watching the sunset, feeling the quiet triumph of survival, redemption, and growth. The past, with all its mistakes and heartbreaks, was not forgotten—but it no longer held power over them. Love, tempered by boundaries and accountability, had rebuilt what crumbled.

Jonai stirred and clapped her tiny hands, a happy, unknown reminder of why perseverance mattered. Annie Ruth lifted her daughter into her arms, smiling at Jesse. “We did it,” she whispered. “We made it through. Together.”

And in that moment, the family—scarred but stronger—felt whole again, ready to face the future with honesty, love, and unwavering devotion. Jesse looked into Annie Ruth’s eyes, kissed her, and spoke “I AM A GOOD HUSBAND!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

NOT A BROTHEL

Rayna Sun

“We’ve been waiting.” Her voice purred through the darkness and ended in a soft, stretched-out moan. He recognized its raspy nature. It was a thick, deep, sexy, hoarse tone. It was Gia. The one with the brown locs, cocoa skin, and large breasts. An image of her pouty mouth entered his mind, and the memory of her moist pussy flooded his brain. He inhaled the tangy smell of sex and Pierre de La Blue Parfume. Another long sniff for his memory. He heard the soft lapping of a tongue on flesh and heard the soft moans of pleasure in reply from his right.

His eyes began adjusting to the dim room. The light from the few strategically placed candles was enough for him to make out the oversized, heart-shaped bed and the silhouettes of two women pleasuring each other on top of it.

Anticipation thumped in his chest. His blood ran warmer. He fit his tall, muscular frame into the narrow, low-profile wing-back chair that was to the right of the door he entered. It was just across from the bed. Two man-sized strides and he could have reached out and touched either one of them. From the only window, moonlight sliced through the blinds, making crisscross lines on their naked bodies.

He was there for the show.

Night vision kicked in. Now, he could clearly make out Ming, the other girl. Petite in comparison to Gia’s curvier figure, Ming lay on

her back. Gia floated over her, sucking on her left nipple. Ming looked at him over Gia's shoulder. Her half-Black, half-Japanese eyes were seductive slits, fluttering with pleasure.

Gia put Ming's whole honey-colored left breast in her mouth, then playfully released it. Her tongue gave a long lick as it slid along Ming's under-boob. Gia let the nipple slip from her mouth, after gently trapping it with her teeth. Silver strings of saliva coated the brown areola. Both girls looked in his direction.

He was living every man's fantasy. The two beautiful women had his full attention. Guttural giggles escaped their throats, confident of his approval.

Ming stretched her left hand toward him and seductively beckoned with one finger.

"Join us," Ming's voice was as sensual as a siren. Instinctively, his dick responded, straining against his pants, as if begging to be let out to play.

"Nah, I'll watch," he said. He was just there for the show.

At least that's what he always told himself. The lie felt comforting. Because as tantalizing as the girls were, he was hoping for something more. They all knew why he was really there.

He adjusted the crotch of his pants while quickly glancing around the room. It was unnecessary because it was the same room. The girls rotated, but it was always the same room. The decor gave off sexy vibes. The walls were a black lace motif, accented by a deep mauve. Rich, dark colors were *her* favorite. Knowing that little fact about her made him smile.

Chains hung from the left wall, opposite the bed. Handcuffs, phallic toys, floggers, collars, and more were mounted for the playing pleasure of those who indulged. It was her little hint, just for him. At least that's what his cocky Gemini mind led him to believe. After all, "This is a luxurious, erotic experience," she'd told him on his first visit. "Not a brothel."

He turned his head to look over his right shoulder, staring squarely at the camera in the corner angled down on him. He knew

she was watching. He glared at the lens. He curled his lips into a deliciously sexy smile while licking them slowly.

Yeah... Let her watch that!! he brazenly thought as he turned his attention back to the bed.

Gia, still hovering over Ming, was situated between her legs. She had travelled a little further down Ming's body. He adjusted himself in the little chair, sitting back with a lean, widening his legs. The angle allowed him to see some of what Gia was aiming for. Ming's right leg was bent, foot planted on the bed. Her left leg draped over Gia's right shoulder. She had a knack for pleasing Ming with her touches.

He rubbed himself slowly as he watched Gia's magical fingers tease Ming's stomach. Then she slid her fingers down and slipped two into Ming's warm pussy.

He sucked in a little bit of air.

Ming's eyes fluttered closed as a sinful smile spread across her lips. Chin up, she sank her head back into the pillow beneath her as Gia sensually circled her clit with a thumb while her index and middle fingers continued pulsing in and out. Ming arched her back.

Pleased with herself, Gia kept going. She stared intently at Ming, reading her body like a text message with emojis. She increased her tempo to intensify Ming's pleasure, pushing deeper. Gia sucked on her own bottom lip as she inserted her remaining two fingers. First, it was gentle. But the more Ming moaned, Gia dialed up her pumps with a twist of her wrist.

Ming groaned louder.

Gia's wrist worked faster.

Ming's back arched higher.

He shifted in his seat, leaning into the curled arm. He could see silky moisture glistening on Gia's fingers as they now pumped and twisted furiously. Ming's mouth hung open, and her back was so arched, she seemed ready to levitate.

Gia gazed at him devilishly over her right shoulder as she kept pumping. He licked his lips. Gia's eyes gleamed with delight. In re-

sponse, she pinched Ming's nipple with her free hand while locking eyes with him. Ming went over the edge into a writhing frenzy. Gia kept working Ming with both hands as she worked him with her eyes.

He couldn't help but smirk back. His pants tightened as his bulge continued to grow. That damn Gia! She knew how fucking sexy she was. But he kept his cool. Still open-legged, he shifted his large frame slightly in the little chair to try to relieve some of the pressure building in his groin. Gia held his gaze as Ming lost control. Gia's hand glistened even more in the dim lighting as Ming surrendered to the waves of pleasure. She writhed, trembled, arched, and let out a primal grunt he could almost feel vibrate in his chest.

Gia gave him a daring stare. He glared back. Neither one broke eye contact. He licked his lips again and let out a low, knowing grunt. He was well aware that Gia had been trying to get him to herself for as long as he'd been coming. But they both knew she needed permission. With her mission accomplished, Gia eased her pleasure party on Ming.

"I wanna taste that dick," Gia said boldly, still holding his gaze as she worked her way up Ming's body. Gia let her nipples graze over Ming's, whose back had relaxed. Ming's face was a flushed brown with red undertones in her cheeks. Gia broke her gaze, fully turning toward Ming. She leaned forward and tilted her head to trap Ming's right earlobe between her teeth, then licked it.

"Ming?" Gia whispered coarsely, but loud enough for him to hear. "You want some of that dick too?"

"Mmmmmmm! You know I do!" Still high from cumming, Ming purred out her response as she looked over at him through hooded eyes. She let her left hand slide down her breast, through the sweat and oil to her belly and on her way to play with her clit.

"He's always so tasty when we get that treat!" Ming's eyes glazed over his muscular frame.

"But you know he's off limits until we have orders," she finished with a slight hint of disappointment in her voice.

To distract herself, Ming turned her attention to Gia, still hovering above her. Ming slid a hand up Gia's belly, then back down. Ming placed both hands on Gia's hips.

"Roll over," she commanded. Gia raised an eyebrow. Intrigued by Ming's spunk, she complied. Moving onto a semi-seated position, she situated herself against the backboard. Her lips curled in anticipation.

In a graceful move, Ming rolled over from her back into a cat-like pose. She slunk her way towards Gia. Ming raised up on her knees, facing Gia. She reached out for Gia's hips, pulling her a little closer. She placed her delicate hands on Gia's knees and slowly spread them wide.

He shifted in his seat to get a better view. He knew what was about to happen next. Ming ran her hands along the insides of Gia's thighs, admiring the plump lips between them like they were a Sugar Kiss melon.

He wanted to be in Ming's position. He knew the delightful dish she was about to enjoy. But to him, it was just the side. He was holding out for the main course.

Almost reading his thoughts, Ming looked over her shoulder at him, as her hands still held Gia's legs far apart. She shifted so he could get a good look. She displayed Gia's goodies like it was an offering being presented. Ming lowered her small eyes mischievously at him then buried her face between Gia's thighs. She playfully pulled at one juicy lip, then the other, before sticking her tongue out and circling it around.

Gia instantly shivered. She was usually the aggressor, but tonight, Ming was clearly in a frisky mood. The thought alone made her thick nipples stand at attention and her lush pussy lips pulsate.

That was Ming's signal. Keeping her hand on Gia's left thigh, Ming moved her right hand to slide a finger into Gia's vagina while gently sucking on her clit. Gia let out a soft whimper, her bravado starting to slip.

His pulse raced faster. His bulge grew tighter. Was Gia going to

break? He really wanted to be in Ming's position, but he couldn't let the vixens distract him. He straightened up, closed his eyes, and leaned his head against the wall since the back of the chair stopped just below his shoulders. Waiting for her to come was starting to be unbearable.

As if on cue, the door opened. He didn't need to open his eyes. He felt *her* presence. But he had been longing for her, so he wouldn't be denied now.

He opened his eyes and looked to his left as the door closed on a stream of light from the hallway. The tall, slender woman stood poised by the door as she shut it. Her authority filled the whole room as the scattered candlelight surrounded her in a soft halo.

For a moment, she was the only one in the room for him. He didn't even hear Gia let out a squeal or Ming's giggle in response. Even though they'd lost their audience of one, the girls didn't dare stop performing.

Composed, the statuesque figure by the door held a Coco de Ruel leather flogger in her right hand. Without a word, she slowly sauntered towards him, as if gliding to a sultry beat only she could hear. With each deliberate step, she gently slapped the whip into her left palm.

In just a few steps across the short distance, her hips played a full symphony. Her gait was like the fluttering melody of Floetry's "Say Yes." She was as smooth as Hennessy being poured slowly: sensually slipping down the slopes of ice in a glass, pooling at the bottom, then rising like mercury in a thermometer. Her scent preceded her. It was the top note that made the funk of sex recede as he let his nostrils get their fill of *her*. His erection couldn't be contained; he had to open his fly.

She stood in front of him, seductively glancing down at the effect of her presence on him. She blocked the view of the bed. But it didn't matter: he was here for *her* show.

She put her hands on his knees, deliberately pushing them apart as she positioned herself in between his legs. The flogger handle, still

in her right hand, pressed into his muscular left thigh as she bent down and pressed her weight onto him. He didn't care.

She leaned her body into his until they were only a nose-length apart. Her round breast caressed his chest. He could feel her hard nipples press through her lingerie against his pecs. He sucked in the air that escaped her parted lips. Her breath smelled sweet and mixed with the intoxicating floral scent wafting from her cleavage.

She moved her head as though she were about to kiss him. Then she leaned to her right, bringing her mouth close to his left ear. She let her bottom lip lightly graze the ridge of his lobe. He could tell that she had a slight smile on her sexy lips. It was the amused grin of a self-assured woman. Of all the women he'd ever been with, none had the power over him as she did. Her presence drove him wild. Her refusal to let him have her sent him into a tizzy, like a dog chasing its tail.

"Back for more?"

Her wispy breath gave him goosebumps. The little hairs on his arm immediately stood at attention. A shiver flushed up his spine.

"You just can't stay away." She purred in a husky, accented voice. It was more of a declaration than a question because she didn't need his answer. Her closeness made his heart hitch and his body tremble.

All he wanted to do was scoop her into his arms and guide her hips on top of his erection. Instead, he fought to keep his hands at his sides. He knew the rules: he couldn't touch her unless instructed. She was in full control.

The small chair wasn't designed for straddling. So she balanced on her left leg and planted her right knee into his beefy leg. She reached her left hand around to the back of his neck. He tilted his head backward, allowing the weight of his head to rest in her grip.

Her right hand slithered up his chest. Then, just her index finger continued traveling upward. She slid a gold cat-claw stiletto fingernail tip slowly and deliberately up the front of his neck over his Adam's apple, across his cheek, and down the front of his bottom lip.

She dragged the tip down to his chin and lingered. Then she cir-

ched it back up. The higher she went, the deeper she embedded her nail into his handsome face. Excited vibrations shot up his right leg. He bounced it in anticipation. She was the main event he'd come to experience.

She took that same finger and slipped it into her mouth. She slowly dragged it out. He followed the few drips of moisture that came out with it as she trailed the finger down her neck. He opened his mouth and slipped his lower lip between his teeth. She kept dragging that finger down to her left nipple, peeking through her lacey bra. Her eyes lowered but stayed fixed on him. Her smoldering stare bore into him as she let the finger trail seductively down to her waist.

Her intense stare made his bulge poke through his boxers. She looked down. She pulled back enough material to set it free; it pointed to the ceiling. He was exposed to her. She let the tip of her nail graze the shaft of his penis. He let out a big puff of air from his mouth with a groan.

"I see my girls did not disappoint?" It wasn't really a question.

"Naw. That's all you. You know what I really want." His voice dipped to a growl, a sexy rumble from his throat. His breathing increased to rapid, shallow breaths.

"Hmph..." she scoffed, watching him closely. Maintaining her gaze, she gracefully eased away from him, lifting the flogger from where her knee had imprinted it into his pants. She glided to the bed.

She turned her attention to the two women on the bed. He had almost forgotten they were there. Ming was sitting facing him. Her legs were bent over the side of the bed, spread-eagled. She was leaning back on her elbow, nipples pointing toward the ceiling. Gia was on her knees, nibbling on Ming's moist pussy. He had a nice view of Gia's full ass.

Gia's gorgeous brown locks stretched to the middle of her cocoa-colored back. She noticed his gaze and was determined to remind him where his attention belonged. She twirled a few fingers into

Gia's locs with her left hand and gave a strong tug.

Gia's neck snapped backward, her mouth gaped open with a mix of pain and pleasure. His dick jerked. Even Ming was turned on because she started fingering one of her breasts as she stared at Gia.

He watched *her* run a fingernail up Gia's exposed neck, stopping at Gia's slightly parted lips. The same nail she'd used on him. She pushed the golden-tipped finger through Gia's lips. Gia turned away from Ming towards *her*. Gia looked up at her and began sucking *her* finger. He saw the profile, and he couldn't help but begin to slowly stroke himself.

She watched him play with his tip as she slid her finger in and out of Gia's mouth. Gia sucked and lapped on it like it was the tip of a penis. Ming started slipping two fingers inside herself slowly. Whenever she pulled them out, he could see moisture glistening in the soft candlelight.

This Boss Lady commanded everyone in the room with barely any words spoken. As beautiful and fun as the two girls were, they paled in comparison to her. Boss Lady's presence was simultaneously dominant and sensual. And even though he could easily reach out and touch her, the aloof air around her kept him at bay. Boss Lady was always off limits. Which made him long for her like he never longed for another woman in his entire life.

As a red-blooded, deep-chocolate Black man with a chiseled face and body, there were always a dozen or so women he was constantly rotating through. But none ever stoked a desire in him like *her*.

He kept coming back to play her game because he just knew one day she would break. She couldn't resist him for long, he told himself. Ever since meeting her, no other woman compared. No matter what other pussy he entered, he couldn't stop imagining being inside of *her*, stroking *her* walls until she finally gave herself to him, letting go of that snobbish air that buzzed around her.

Boss Lady retracted her finger from Gia's mouth. She motioned for Ming to come down to the floor next to Gia. She looked at Gia and tilted her chin in Ming's direction. Gia turned her body 180

degrees to face Ming. Slowly, she guided the back of Gia's head toward Ming's face with her left hand. The girls followed her silent order. They began a slow, sensual tongue kiss. Since they were right in front of his chair, he could clearly see Ming's tongue seductively slip in and out of Gia's mouth.

CRACK!

Boss Lady brought the Coco de Mar flogger down hard across Gia's butt. The falls made a crisp crackle in the air when they touched her skin. Gia arched her back and let out an erotic hiss.

Boss Lady rolled the whip, snaked it across Gia's bare buttocks, then raised her arm high. She brought it down with another quick whip. Gia popped up on her knees in response. Her large nipples sprang in his direction. He couldn't wait to get his own licks in on her deep chocolate areolas. But he knew even he needed permission for that.

Sometimes, Boss Lady allowed them to go deep in their play. But other times, he sensed a little envy. That's when she'd only allowed superficial touching. He never knew what mood she would be in and what she'd allow. All three looked in her direction with eager faces. Boss Lady gave a slight nod in his direction.

"Ohh, yay! We get a treat tonight." Ming said, clapping a few times like a child. Gia quickly slinked over to him and stood up. She grabbed his hands, pulling him up, freeing him from the small chair. She walked him the few steps to the bed, next to where Ming was. Still on her knees, Ming made use of her position.

Smiling like a kid in a candy shop, she slipped her fingers into the band of his boxers. In one motion, she slipped the boxers and his pants down to his knees, careful of his erect penis that was sticking out of the front flap near her lips. When his waist was free, Gia guided him to sit on the edge of the bed. Ming made quick work of his shoes and pulled the pants and boxers totally off. Gia raised his arms and swiftly pulled his shirt over his head. The girls had him naked in seconds.

Ming crawled in between his legs, bringing her face to his groin.

“Hello, my friend!” She smiled, speaking excitedly to his dick. “It’s been a while. I’ve missed you sooooo much!” she purred. She stuck her tongue out and gave it a long, wet lick up from the base.

“Yes.” Gia agreed. “Looks like Christmas came early this year.” She couldn’t hide her pleasure. Of all their guests, Gia always hoped he would be a frequent patron. Gia dreamt about this man so much that she lost count. She wished that he would come there for her. Gia knew he liked her, but he never looked at her the way he did Boss Lady. He got lost in the Boss Lady’s eyes. All the guests did. Men are attracted to power they think they can conquer. And Gia was attracted to his confidence that he would be the one to break Boss Lady.

“Kiss me.” Gia’s voice huskily asked, lost in her own fantasy. She didn’t mean for the thought to escape her lips, but it did.

CRACK!

The swift, sharp swat across her back, almost as soon as the words tumbled out, was punishment. But it was quickly followed by a gentle caress. It was Boss Lady’s way of silently communicating, *I’m sorry. But you know the rules.*

No kissing. Not with any guest because it was too intimate and personal. But especially not him. All the girls saw the special interest the Boss Lady took in him. Gia knew her only access to him was what Boss Lady allowed.

Gia pushed her personal thoughts out of her mind and got back to playing her role. She slinked down to join Ming at his waist. She cupped her hands under his balls, gently squeezing them, applying pressure. Ming wrapped both her hands around the shaft of his penis.

Ming slipped him into her mouth and started bobbing her head up and down. She twisted her tiny hands in opposite directions as she sucked. Gia kept playing with his balls and started licking the inside of his thigh. His legs started trembling.

Ming’s tongue slid up and down his shaft. She placed just the tip of the penis in her mouth, then wiggled and circled her tongue

around the rim, flicking the tip of her tongue in and out of the slit at the top. She ran a thumb softly over the rounded tip.

Boss Lady gazed down at the trio. She walked slowly around Gia to stand behind Ming, steadily slapping the flogger lightly against her palm. She watched intently as her girls worked over the most interesting man she'd ever come across. A little perturbed that he had invaded her thoughts ever since meeting him, she swiftly brought the flogger down hard on Ming's tiny buttocks to forget. Ming gasped and started sucking harder. She felt him get rock hard in her mouth.

Ming increased pressure up the middle vein, massaging little circles with the pad of her thumb. She followed behind it with her tongue. Gia kept up her pressure on his balls. Ming saw clear liquid slip from the top. Immediately, she covered as much of his penis as she could fit into her mouth and bobbed her head up and down. She increased the pressure of her sucking. She sped up her bobbing until she felt his dick start to throb in her mouth, and his body started to convulse. He let out a low growl.

CRACK!

Ming's back arched against the whip. She paused, stopping him from cumming fully. He panted. Slowly, she started bringing him back to the brink. Gia kept caressing his inner thigh as she started to kiss his stomach. The girls enjoyed teasing and bringing him to the edge again.

The thin falls struck across both women's backs one at a time. They knew to stop, hold, and make him want more. Flogger in hand, Boss Lady waltzed from side to side behind both girls. Finally, she stood stationary in between his legs, towering over the trio. The girls looked up at her. She finally gave her nod of approval.

Boss Lady's eyes glazed a trail of heat up and down the work of art that was his body. He stared back at her with equal intensity, even as he was close to losing it. She inhaled and narrowed her eyes. Her stoic face didn't hold a hint of a smile. But amusement sparkled in her eyes. He recognized the sliver of wanting the look held.

“Finish.” Boss Lady commanded. The two women unleashed all their tricks on him at once. His body convulsed at the sensitivity of his penis. When his eyelids scrunched together, and his mouth made an “O” shape, Boss Lady drank it in with a steady, unwavering gaze. She did not blink or move. The golden tip of that favorite finger of hers rested just inside the bottom of her lower lip, and she ran her tongue across it a few times.

He kept his composure as long as he could to match hers. He concentrated on meeting her stoic nature. His breathing increased as Ming worked her magic with her tongue. Gia’s playing with his balls sped up his defeat. A thousand intense sensations prickled throughout his entire body all at once.

He grabbed a handful of Ming’s hair and helped her bob her head. He started to counter thrust with his hips. His movements got faster, more aggressive. Ming deep-throated his big, thick dick like a pro. His eyes betrayed him by almost fully closing, but he never broke his gaze on *her*.

Boss Lady was so close. Either one of them could have touched the other at any moment. He could see tiny perspiration beads forming on her décolletage, neck, and upper lip. A lonely bead of sweat rolled down into her cleavage.

He watched as her breathing matched his rapid breaths.

Short. Rhythmic. Panting.

They were in sync.

It was intense. The object of his greatest desire is so close and yet so far. He wanted to chase that bead of sweat that escaped her neck with his tongue. He wanted nothing more than to free her moist breasts from her lacy bra. He wanted to caress the sweat away. Then he would place them in his mouth and suck until her nipples ripened.

His dick stiffened and pulsed at the thought alone. Ming and Gia were hard at work, but he was about to cum because of *her*. He didn’t dare look away. He wanted her to see him surrender to her.

And then he let go. The rush convulsed his whole body. He al-

lowed his head to tilt back and his eyes flutter as he trickled, then spurted, erupting in Ming's mouth and on her face. Ming squeezed and sucked until her mouth overflowed with his delicious cum. She swallowed some and allowed the rest to spill out of the sides of her lips with a wicked smile. Some of it slipped down Gia's hand, which was still cupping his balls.

CRACK!

Boss Lady brought the flogger down on Ming's back. Ming stiffened. No gentle touch followed. Gia stifled her giggle; Ming should have known better than to enjoy herself too much with him in *her* presence. Ming wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and stood up with an attitude.

As his breath started slowing down, he opened his eyes to look at *her*. He was surprised to see a sexy smirk teetering on her lips. But she quickly erased it and resumed her usual stoic look. Boss Lady inhaled, straightened her back, and cleared her throat.

She won. Again. She never touched him... even though she desperately wanted to. Boss Lady let her stare linger a moment longer.

This man. Maybe one day, she thought to herself, maybe. She took one last glance at his now flaccid dick. Even in that state, it was still impressive and beautiful. A cocky smirk curled his lips upward at both corners. It was like he knew what she was thinking.

She abruptly turned away.

"Clean him up." She commanded, moving toward the door without looking back. As she turned the knob, his voice filled the now still room. She paused.

"Still can't... bring... yourself... to give in... huh?"

Even his struggling to regain his breathing was sexy. She was tempted to turn around. But she knew better than to break character. Her position meant that she could not partake in anything or anyone. It would be bad for business. But there was something about this one.

Her silence was profoundly loud to everyone in the room.

She turned her head slightly so that he saw her left profile.

“You know the rules, Brother. I am simply NOT on the menu.”

“Madam Aberdeen,” he seductively chided. “You say that every time.”

And yet, you always come back, she thought, as she turned the knob, exited, and closed the door behind her.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henrietta Anderson

Born in Greenwood, South Carolina, the second child of five siblings, Henrietta is an avid reader who enjoys travel, meeting people, and loves writing fiction.

She currently lives in East Point, Georgia. *A South-West Connection* is her first anthology; however, she has penned a number of novels that have sprung from her vivid imagination.

She is currently working on her next project.

ALSO by Henrietta Anderson:

Scent of the Gardenia

Kinfolks

Women of WestEnd Shelter

Caldonia the Little Yellow Fox [children's book]

Caldonia the Little Yellow Fox Meets Saffire [children's book]

Caldonia and her Forest Friends [children's book]



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rayna Sun

Born and raised in California, Rayna Sun pours her colorful imagination into her stories to the delight of her readers.

When she is not reading, this free spirit can be found skipping across the globe, trying to discover as many places and people as her passport will allow. She loves vacations with beaches, water, and sun. But most of all she loves being a mother to her comical teenager.

She is currently working on her next project.

ALSO by Rayna Sun:

Affairs to Remember



