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# Stone Cold Secrets

Victoria L. Mujahid  
*Kennesaw State University*

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Stone Cold Secrets

By

Victoria L. Mujahid

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the  
Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

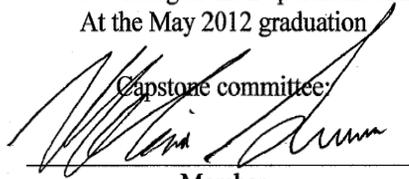
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2012

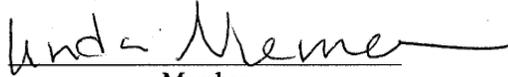
College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia  
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of  
Victoria L. Mujahid  
Has been approved by the committee  
For the capstone requirement for the Master of Arts in  
Professional Writing in the Department of English  
At the May 2012 graduation

Capstone committee:



Member



Member

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## **My Writing Journey: *Stone Cold Secrets***

**Victoria L. Mujahid**

In 2008, my friend and I were talking on the phone, and she hinted that I should do something more with my life; she offended me. After all, I had graduated from college a year ago, and I knew that I wanted more than just a new job. I had a need to be creative.

My career at Hewlett-Packard Company had hit a dead end, especially since I did not have a creative outlet. Determined to take my time on deciding my next career move, I waited for the moment when I would hear a whisper from deep within my soul. Unlike my friend, I did not think that time had escaped me. I remember being determined to follow my next path without second guessing my strategy. It did not matter how long it would take for my next goal and strategy to develop; I wanted to be happy, and I needed to express myself.

After hanging up from one of my many tedious conference calls one afternoon (this one made me physically sick), I felt that my days as a project manager and communication specialist at Hewlett-Packard would soon come to an end, regardless if I had a new job or not. While doing some research on a project, a jolt in my lower abdomen made me stop and look around. I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and listened. I said out loud, "I'm going back to school to be a writer." Just like that, I finally knew the next step toward my new career path, after two years of waiting.

I love to write in my journal, and writing at work was the only activity that would get me through the day. My corporate writing experience consisted of writing and editing newsletters, proposals, and technical documents. I worked for computer geeks

who thought of me as a miracle worker on their documents. This feeling gave me confidence to apply for the MAPW program under the Applied Writing track with a support in Creative Writing. After completing my first semester, I immediately changed my major from Applied Writing to Creative Writing.

I had always been a closet fiction writer; I had thought my writing needed to remain in the dark. After all, I thought of it as a hobby. The extent of my storytelling had been bits and pieces of story scattered in one document with different characters and themes, but without unity. Then, one day in an undergraduate, Careers in Writing, course taught by Dr. Margaret Walters, she asked the class to write a genre that we found appealing. I wrote fiction, which consisted of five pages about my mother's dysfunctional family, and I titled it, *Stone Cold Secrets (SCS)*. While writing the five pages, I felt lost in time and space. My storytelling experience seemed as if it were an unlimited source of creativity. I loved it! Dr. Walters said, "You know we have a MAPW program. Check it out." I did, and knew one day I would return to KSU to study in the MAPW program.

After I changed my major to Creative Writing, I knew I would write *Stone Cold Secrets* for my Capstone because I wanted to finish it; I wanted others to experience this world. More importantly, I chose *SCS* as my Capstone because I knew it would reveal the creative depth where this story laid dormant within me.

My development as a writer in the MAPW program depended on my need to write SCS, and every lesson I've learned, I applied to my novel. Although I'm still learning to write this particular novel, I have gained valuable insight from all the creative classes on how to present a story—this story.

I first introduced *SCS* in the Creative Writing class; it had been the only time I allowed a group of people to read it; a few of my family members had read different sections of *SCS*. Surprised and pleased with the number of people who thought the story was fascinating, I left class that night feeling satisfied. However, I realized that I had to do a lot of work on my craft. My feeling of satisfaction soon turned into a feeling of being overwhelmed. I then accepted the fact that I had come to the MAPW program to learn how to be a profound writer; so, I knew it was time to prove to myself that I could do it.

After listening to all of my classmates' and instructor's critiques about *SCS*'s first chapter, I knew I needed to focus on: point of view – first person – action. I had not considered any of these points during my writing process.

Janet Burroway, author of *Writing Fiction – A Guide to Narrative Craft*, said, point of view is: “Who Speaks? To Whom? In what form? At what distance from the action?” (296). I chose the main character, Olivia, in *SCS* because she was the oldest child who had a deep interest in her family. Since I wanted the main character to have the ability to see the entire story, deliver it as it happened, and have the ability to recall memories, I chose to write *SCS* from the first person – point of view. “From the reader’s perspective, third- and second-person stories are told by an author; first person stories, by the character acting as “I” (Burroway 297). I knew it would be a challenge to write in first person, but it felt right for me to allow my audience to experience, up close, how the protagonist relates to the action and events taking place in *SCS*.

Originally, in chapter one of *SCS*, I wrote a fascinating action scene with a dramatic climatic point, but it did not affect my protagonist. According to Burroway,

“The significant characters of a fiction must be both capable of causing an action and capable of being changed by it” (83). I realized that I needed action to impact the main character; a change that the audience would be able to identify. To this, I wrote chapter two of *SCS*, again, in first person, but I aimed to present a series of events where the audience could experience the impact caused by action and see how the characters were impacted by the change, including the protagonist. In the creative writing course, I’ve learned the importance of establishing the “point of view and action” before and while developing the story. My writing has vastly improved because of this knowledge.

While going through the MAPW program, I have also learned the importance of tightly constructed sentences. I never realized how wordy my sentences were prior to attending graduate school. For all of my work, I continue to edit each sentence so that it is concise and strong in its meaning, although it is a work in progress.

The playwriting and script writing courses were a significant factor in allowing me the space to practice creating sentences that present details and facts, build characterization, and use dialogue to move a story along quickly without excessive summary. I am now conscious in making sure that I create sentence structure with conciseness in *SCS*.

I’ve gained a lot of knowledge while attending the MAPW program: I’ve learned to critique a colleague’s work; I’ve been exposed to many terrific books that I can reference to improve my writing beyond graduation, and I’ve been exposed to the business aspect of becoming a writer, from finding an agent to submitting work for publishing. These lessons I have learned are from a variety of classes including Creative Non-Fiction, Feature Writing, and Organizational Publications.

I should also mention that it has been a challenge for me to write in the “active” voice while practicing to write my story without creating too many flashbacks. Something clicked within me, and I now understand that the active voice is powerful in pulling readers into a story, and the story written in the present is also just as powerful. I’ve recently learned this lesson in the Advance Creative Writing course.

I chose to write *SCS* for my capstone because I have been interviewing family members, taking mental and written notes, and researching my grandmother’s past for over fifteen years. It felt natural to share this amazing story, and I knew I would have the confidence to write it once I completed the MAPW program.

*Stone Cold Secrets* is a fictional story based on true events and characters. The story is about seven siblings; three children given away and four children sold when they were just babies by their biological mother, Valerie. The story takes place in Pittsburgh, PA. The siblings are: Cheryl – Olivia – Debbie – Justine – JuneBug – Diana – Pete. Over the years, each of the siblings find out about each other. In an attempt to establish a close relationship with and between her siblings, Olivia plans a family reunion in order to create a family tradition. Secrets are revealed before the actual reunion takes place, and the family has to forgive each other in order to move forward.

Again, the story is in first person from Cheryl’s point of view. At first, I had planned to tell the story from Olivia’s point of view with the opening chapter focusing on the day of the meeting, which is at her home. After I began to write, I liked Cheryl’s voice better; so, I decided to begin the story introducing the audience to Cheryl first. The first three chapters are about Cheryl’s life, her relationships, and her interaction with Olivia’s family.

Cheryl is in her late fifties. She is a receptionist and dispatcher for the Pittsburgh Police Department. Unhappy with her job, she continues to ask the chief for a promotion and a raise; he denies her each time. She is a large woman who hides her pain by eating. She is married without any children; a son is all she has ever wanted for and with her husband. Cheryl and Olivia are extremely close in terms of their relationship. Cheryl has somewhat of a pessimistic attitude about Olivia's family and her desire to pull together her dysfunctional family for an annual reunion. She knows how sensitive the family is about their mother, Valerie, and the secrets that she kept. They find out that Valerie is not the only one keeping secrets.

Olivia is an optimist; she feels that it is never too late to forgive her mother for abandoning her children. She is the only one who is pushing to start a family reunion tradition. Her siblings are so dysfunctional that they are numb to the idea.

After meeting with her boss, Cheryl receives a call from her doctor that she is a diabetic, and she needs to start insulin injections right away. Cheryl ignores his plea. She then receives a phone call, while at work, from Olivia about her idea to have a family reunion. Cheryl has just eaten two Snickers candy bars, and she has anxiety. She tries to talk Olivia out of planning the family dinner; Olivia does not listen. Aware of all the issues Olivia's family deals with daily including the fact that she knows Olivia is a functioning alcoholic, she decides that she will confront Olivia about her drinking.

Cheryl and Olivia are married to brothers, John and Ben; they all practically grew up together. John and Ben were small time hustlers who loved their women. However, they've grown to be respectable individuals. Cheryl, who was extremely close to her grandmother, ignored her grandmother's wishes and married Ben. Since her

grandmother died, Olivia's family became Cheryl's family. Cheryl thinks a dysfunctional family is better than no family at all.

Chapters three, four and five are about the meeting to discuss the family reunion. Two secrets are revealed during these chapters: Olivia's sister, Debbie, has a daughter, Shelley, who hates her guts, but she is totally unaware of it until Shelley finds out that Debbie has been stealing money from her; Janice, also Debbie's daughter, is a hooker who had sex with her mother's younger brother, Pete. Janice is a heroin addict.

In Chapter six, Cheryl introduces us to Diana, Olivia's younger sister, who was sold to an Italian couple that owned the corner market on the same street where Olivia and Cheryl grew up. She tells the family that she is an art dealer, but Cheryl finds out otherwise. Diana follows Valerie's footsteps; she becomes a high-priced prostitute. Cheryl and Diana find out that Diana's number one customer is the same man Valerie used to have as a customer. They also find out that this man, Mr. Fletcher, may be her biological father. Cheryl keeps the secret to herself until Diana finds out the truth. Diana confronts her mother, Valerie, for the first time in twenty years. She finds out that Mr. Fletcher is not her father; Diana is sick about being in love with the same man that used to be Valerie's steady customer, although she is relieved that he is not her father.

Chapters seven, eight and nine are about the secret lives of Olivia, Valerie, and Cheryl's quest to raise Janice's baby as her own.

Olivia secretly searches for the child she gave away to a traveling pastor and his wife, but she never finds this child. She eventually has to share her secret with her husband, John, who never knew she had a child before they married. Olivia drinks to cover up the pain she feels from giving her child away. Her husband, John, becomes

aware of her drinking problem. John forgives Olivia for keeping the secret, and he helps her to forgive herself.

In the same chapters, it is revealed that Valerie, born to a White mother and a Black father, becomes a high-priced prostitute after her husband goes off to fight in WWII. She leaves her three young children, ages five, four and two, in the house alone and never returns. Their paternal grandmother rescues Olivia, Debbie and Justine, and she raises them. Valerie lived in New York City, but each time she gets pregnant, she returns home to sell four of her children to various people.

Valerie lived in New York City as a young white female, resenting the fact that she was bi-racial. She had high-profiled customers: lawyers – politicians – mafia – actors – athletes. The last time she returned to New York, one of her customers ordered her to stay out of the city after he accused her of stealing money from him.

In the meantime, Cheryl decides that she wants to raise Janice's baby as her own when Janice reveals that she does not want to be a mother. While looking for her own baby clothes that her grandmother saved, she noticed a birth certificate that read Baby Rouse. The birth certificate belongs to Cheryl; she recognizes her birthday on it. Since Cheryl has now established a line of communication with Valerie, she felt comfortable going to Valerie to ask her questions about the birth certificate, which had Valerie's maiden name on it. Valerie claims that she does not know what Valerie is talking about, keeping yet another secret.

Chapter ten is the finale. All the secrets are out. Valerie shows up to the family reunion. At first, there is resentment, anger and pain among Valerie's children after they see her. She begins to tell her story of how her mother encouraged her father to have a

sexual relationship with her in order to keep him at home; her mother did not want him prowling the streets for women. Valerie then receives compassion and understanding from her children. She explains that she does not have dignity, but she can give them the only thing that validated her existence – money. Valerie gives Olivia and Cheryl each a check for \$2.5 million dollars to split between all of the siblings, children and grandchildren. At this moment, Cheryl understands that she, too, is Valerie's first born who she gave away to an older man and his wife. At sixteen years old, Valerie had sex with this man for money; she became pregnant with Cheryl. Cheryl's grandfather is actually her biological father and Valerie's first customer.

Cheryl is in shock and does not respond to Valerie until the next day. She confronts Valerie about all the secrets; Valerie responds with rejection. Cheryl rips the \$2.5 million dollar check and leaves Valerie's home.

Cheryl and Ben finally adopts Janice's son, and begins to raise him as their own. They named their son, Ben, Jr. The story ends with Cheryl and Ben deciding to relocate to Atlanta to raise their son, near her grandmother's family.

The more I write this story, the more I am comfortable with Cheryl as the main character because her voice is powerful and funny; a great combination to tell such a dramatic story, and I enjoy writing the story from her point of view. Cheryl's character reminds me of my mother and three of her sisters combined.

There are approximately seventy-seven pages completed of *Stone Cold Secrets*, my capstone. During the MAPW program, I did not put much emphasis on editing and revising *SCS*. My goal was to start the process of getting the story down on paper. However, I have found that it is best to revise along the way because revising is such a

difficult task, although an extremely important one. Moving scenes and characters around to fit like a glove in my story is like completing a puzzle with a thousand pieces, without a photo to follow.

While revising and editing, I realized that the family reunion scene should happen further into the story because of the disconnection between Cheryl's point of view, the action, and the other character's conflicts. After choosing Cheryl as the narrator instead of Olivia, I had to provide the "what is at stake" reason for Cheryl, causing me to write the chapter about her life first. This revision process has been an enormous challenge for me and has taken me months to come to this conclusion.

As it stands, my capstone consists of Chapters one, two, three, four and five, and they are about the first meeting that takes place to discuss the family reunion, Janice's secret affair with her uncle Pete, and the sibling's reaction to facing abandonment by their mother, Valerie.

## **Conclusion**

*Stone Cold Secrets* is undoubtedly a work in progress. All of the classes, critiques, and guidance I have received have helped me to understand that creativity is excellent when producing story, but organizational structure, style and mechanics are just as vital!

The MAPW program is an excellent choice for writers who want to build confidence, find their strengths, and work on their weaknesses. I did find that my strength is writing dialogue in fiction and script writing. My weaknesses have been story structure and grammatical errors. Although I still struggle with identifying grammatical errors and sometimes structuring story and sentences, I have access to books that I've

used as support throughout my educational experience. These books are: *The Elements of Style*, *Writing Fiction*, *Style*, and *The Art of Fiction*.

I have read a quote several times, printed it, and placed it near my desk where I write, and it has helped me to stay true to myself. The quote is in *The Elements of Style*, and it reads, “Write in a way that comes easily and naturally to you, using words and phrases that come readily to hand. But do not assume that because you have acted naturally your product is without flaw” (Strunk, White 70). I am a creative writer; it has taken me a long time to know it, say it and feel it. I know that *Stone Cold Secrets* will be successful, but it will take me some time to produce a flawless piece of work. What’s exciting about it? Now, I am prepared for the challenge.

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Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction – A Guide to Narrative Craft*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007. Print.

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**VICTORIA L. MUJAHID**

72 Fairview Oak Place

Dallas, GA 30157

770-443-0496

[vickie.mujahid@gmail.com](mailto:vickie.mujahid@gmail.com)[www.victoriamujahid.weebly.com](http://www.victoriamujahid.weebly.com)**WRITING / EXECUTIVE PROFILE**

*Feature Writing / Creative Non-Fiction Writing / Creative Writing / Inspirational Writing /  
Ghostwriting / Copy Editing / Corporate Communications & Marketing*

Energetic, confident, positive, and highly motivated professional writer with a passion to create remarkable creative stories and professional copy that engage the souls of readers while raising consciousness. Detailed-oriented communication professional with a proven record in executing organizational and strategic resolutions that improve the productivity level of high-profiled executives. Areas of expertise include:

Blog and Website Communication  
Author / Editor  
Social Media

Corporate Writing & Editing Communication  
Public Speaking and Public Relations  
Document Design

- Professional writer for 13 years: editor for 5 years with a focus in business, inspirational, and fiction writing.
- Authored over 208 articles for a successful inspirational Blog titled *Operation You, Your Journey to Peace Holistically*
- Currently authoring first novel titled Stone Cold Secrets
- Redesigned book cover for classic literature – The Yellow Wallpaper
- Design and write corporate newsletters, brochures and flyers - Resume and cover letter expertise
- Selected to spearhead a stage production as part of Black History Month for a local high school, which included formulating and writing advertising communications and designing and producing educational communication documents.

**EDUCATION**

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA

**Master of Arts in Professional Writing**, GPA 3.7, May 2012

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA

**Bachelor of Science in Communications**, GPA 3.14, May 2007

Public Relations major – Professional Writing minor

**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE****Communication Specialist / Project Manager**

May 2006 – June 2010

HEWLETT-PACKARD, Alpharetta, GA

- Revamped the communications policy for an HP internal electronic delivery organization by partnering with the marketing communications team to brainstorm and develop new internal strategies to assist the department to communicate more effectively, as well as increase visibility of global programs.

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- Originated, executed, and managed corporate communication content for employee and customer supported websites, updating employees of on-going and ever-changing worldwide technical information.
- Encouraged and directed employee participation in order to deliver outstanding articles as editor of an internal quarterly, online departmental newsletter, and researched, drafted and wrote appropriate content to serve as an information resource.
- In response to feedback received from a survey completed by over 1,500 employees, created a monthly Global Newsletter which was distributed to 3,000 employees.

**Communication Manager / Office Manager** Jun 1996 – Jul 2006  
 ARM CONCRETE CONSTRUCTION COMPANY, Kennesaw, GA

- Successfully executed public relations campaign that included initiatives directed toward general contractors within the construction industry.
- Orchestrated, designed and produced corporate and advertising communication documents that established brand recognition and increased business within minority segments, such as women contractors.

**ADDITIONAL EMPLOYMENT**

**Executive Administrative Assistant** Apr 1999 – May 2006  
 HEWLETT-PACKARD, Alpharetta, GA

- Constructed processes and demonstrated thorough understanding of department functions and performed situation analysis in order to interpret policies and procedures empowering management to effectively concentrate on executive decisions without any interruption or interferences.
- Increased employee productivity and reduced administrative costs by 50% through effective execution and management of high-profiled presentations, training and reference manuals, newsletters and articles.

**Regional Administrator** Aug 1996 – Jun 1997  
 SCB COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY, Atlanta, GA

- Successfully launched new Southeast Regional office grand opening two weeks ahead of schedule.
- Implemented new office procedures and policies as dictated by corporate headquarters.

**Senior Administrative Specialist / Office Manager** May 1989 – Jun 1995  
 COCA-COLA FOUNTAIN AND COCA-COLA USA, Atlanta, GA

- Orchestrated office management, project management and administrative support techniques that provided a 50% increase in productivity for the National Marketing and Presentation Graphics departments.

## STONE COLD SECRETS

### PROLOGUE

The rain soaked my body, and I let it. My tears fell with the raindrops that pricked my face. I turned my face toward the rain, closed my eyes, and wanted it to rain harder.

The concrete steps made the back of my legs itch, and the water rolling between my thighs felt like urine. I wanted to be cleansed of knowing all of these damn secrets that clouded my mind during the last few weeks.

How I got to Valerie's house felt almost like a dream. I heard Valerie's voice, "Get the hell off of my property!"

I didn't say nothing.

"If you don't leave, I'm going to call the police."

I rocked back and forth until I stood. With the help of the rain, my dress hugged my large thighs, but I didn't care. I walked back toward Valerie's door and stood with my face close to her screen door. I swallowed and felt snot roll down the back of my throat, just as my heart fell to my knees. I finally spoke.

"You are such a mean, hateful bitch."

"I don't have to listen to this," Valerie said.

I snapped the screen door open, breaking the lock. I felt her warm breath on my chin. I wanted her to feel bad, but she didn't.

You have sex with my granddaddy, then, you sell me to my grandmamma for \$2,000. You carried me in your womb! What kind of heifer are you?"

“I gave you all the money. It’s all I got.”

I reached in my bra and pulled out the check for two million dollars; slowly, I ripped it to pieces. My pride combined with pain gave me courage to do it. I know I will regret it. But, today it seemed that I would have sold my soul—my life to the devil.

“All these years, you could have told me I had sisters and brothers, that you were my mama! You never cared for nothing but yourself. I hate you.”

The pieces of paper fell to her floor. I felt Ben’s hands on my shoulders from behind, guiding me to the car.

“Come on baby,” he said.

I couldn’t get in the car; I just couldn’t. Instead, I held onto Ben’s waist, crying like I was a child in the pouring down rain.

“It’s raining Cherylie, let’s go.”

“Did you hear, Ben? Did you hear?”

“I know.”

“I miss my grandmamma.”

## Chapter 1

### *Cheryl*

Six weeks before my life changed, it seemed that nothing would have ever changed in my life: my dead-end job, me and Ben's life without a son, and my body growing larger every day made me eat more until the fullness in my belly would temporarily replace the pain in my heart.

Me and my boss sat in his office talking. Bottom line, I wanted a promotion and a raise, and he didn't want me to have neither. I took my time to say what I had to say, just like my Ben told me. He said, "Cherylie, don't go up in that place demanding nothing. You make sure you have all your facts in hand why you should get a raise and even a job promotion."

The sun highlighted the dust all over the Captain's office. I moved my face to look around the rays of the sun, and said, "Captain, I've been here for twenty-five years, and I know I have done a good job."

He said, "Ms. Yarborough, you have done a fine job. The fellows can trust you will have all of their police reports submitted and filed correctly. You handle those phones better than any of those new phone computers.

"Thank you, Sir. I appreciate that. So, um, I am hoping to get a raise this year. It's-it's been about three years since my last one, and I am hoping that we could talk about moving me off the phones."

"And where are you interested in moving to?"

"Well, I am really interested in the investigative side of things. I think, well, I know I would do well in Joann Mancini's old job."

The captain's stare penetrated me before he answered. With my sweaty palms and the line of sweat rolling down my back, I tried to move in that damn metal chair, but my thighs remained pressed against the side railings.

He cleared his throat, "Ms. Yarborough, I'm sure you think you can do that job, but it requires a substantial amount of knowledge, skills, and education to do it, and—

"Captain, I'm skilled, and I have knowledge. Who was the one that put the new computer system in place to handle all of the police reports electronically? Me. Who was the one that pointed out that the department wasn't following all of the government rules on inspecting and shipping all that sensitive packaging? I did. As a matter of fact, I trained those kids on the right way to do it. Captain, I can do that investigative assistant job. How do you think I found out that the packaging wasn't done correctly? I investigated it."

"Ms. Yarborough, that position has been filled already."

"And the raise?"

"The budget has been cut this year, and it's been cut every year for the last five years. So—

"So, no raise either."

*Ain't this some shit? Every time I ask for a raise, I got to hear some bullshit as to why I ain't eligible to get more money. If I quit, then what will his ass say? What am I suppose to do? At my age, who's going to hire me? Damn him.*

"Ms. Yarborough?"

"So, who did you hire?" I asked.

The captain said, "I can't give out that information at this time."

*I bet you can't with your lying ass.*

“Why a secret?”

“It’s not a secret, Ms. Yarborough. I’m just not ready to disclose that information.”

His cold green eyes sparkled in the sun like the stones my grandmamma made me promise to keep forever.

I stood as fast as I could, accidentally lifting the metal chair off the floor with my thighs. Pushing the chair away from my thighs with both hands, I slammed the chair on the tile floor, making a loud sound.

“Excuse me. Thank you for your time.”

“Thank you, Ms. Yarborough, for all your hard work. The entire department appreciates your dedication to doing a marvelous job.”

*Kiss my fat ass, bastard!*

The phone rang, and I didn’t bother to answer it; it was time for a Snickers bar. The gray metal desk became my prison, just like the bars that kept the criminals off the street. I had no freedom in this place. I used both hands to yank open the top drawer; I didn’t care about the noise it made this time.

After eating my second Snickers bar, I answered the phone.

“Pittsburgh Police Department, how can I direct your call?”

“Cheryl, it’s me, Olivia.”

“Hello.”

“How are you? Can you talk right now?”

“Not really, but go ahead, anyway.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Olivia said.

“It’s hard to talk about it right now. I’ll tell you later.”

Olivia said, “Well, I’m finally doing it. I’m going to plan a family reunion.”

“Really?” I said.

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What do you want me to say?”

She said, “I want you to be happy and say that you will do whatever it takes to help me pull this thing off.”

“Olivia—

“Cheryl, before you begin telling me about how it’s a waste of my time. I want to let you know something.”

“What.”

“I know you think that I am naïve, and maybe so. But, I feel that if I don’t try to do something, I will go to my grave wishing that I had. I knew my sister, Debbie, growing up, but I didn’t know my other sisters and brothers. And yes, that bothers me.”

I don’t have any brothers and sisters. I listened to Olivia’s plea for me to accept her decision and thought about how I would want to know my siblings, if I had any. Knowing them and getting close to them are two different things, especially if they are crazy as hell, like Olivia’s family.

“Olivia, you go and do what you need to do. All I can say is that I hope you don’t get hurt. You go digging, as you always do, and then when you get hurt, I’ve got to hear about it over and over again.”

She said, “All you need to do is come to the meeting I’m planning in two weeks, that’s it.”

“OK.”

“Thank you Cherylie.”

“Don’t go getting all mushy on me. I have to go.”

“I will call you later,” Olivia said.

I heard a click, and I sat thinking how I wish I had passion about something other than this damn job, wishing for a son, and spending nights in front of the television eating peanut butter cookies.

The clock read 4:00 pm, quitting time. Opening my desk drawer again, I grabbed my third candy bar to eat on the way home.

The bus stop is crowded as usual. Pittsburgh residents don’t drive to work when Pat Transit ran buses every hour on the hour because it is understood that cars are for enjoyment purposes on the weekends. Plus, taking the bus became my daily attempt to get exercise. I only wish it had worked. Nothing I did seemed to help me to lose the weight I had packed on for years.

The Pittsburgh Police Department was surrounded by buildings with old, light-colored bricks, which had faded because of the historic floods that swept through downtown Pittsburgh during the 1970’s. I can still see the flood line on a few of the old buildings, marking its territory. I can’t believe the government officials decided to leave the markings of the flood. It’s a stupid way to be reminded of how many people lost everything they had worked for all their lives. *People are so damn stupid.*

“Hi Cheryl, how are you doing today?”

I looked over my shoulder and saw Carol Jefferson standing near me with several bags in each of her hands.

“Hi Carol, I’m fine.”

“Just leaving work?”

“Yes, Carol. Every day you ask me the same thing.”

“How’s Ben?”

“He’s doing the same as he was yesterday, good.”

Carol came closer to me, and I wished she would just shut up, and leave me be. She don’t have no damn job; she shops during working hours every day, and I am beginning to think she does just to irritate the shit out of me.

“Macy’s had yet another sale. I got three pair of pants for my son, and two dresses for both of my girls.”

“Really.”

“Oh yes, you should go by there. I’m sure you can find something in your size. I didn’t look in the plus-size department. You know, I only wear a size ten, but I saw plenty of women your size with clothing in their hands.”

“I’m sure you did, just so you can tell me all about it,” I said.

“Joe loves for his children to look good all the time. He grew up without anything, so he can’t stand his children to look poor.”

“Who, Black, didn’t grow up poor?”

“Well, you know what I mean, Cheryl.”

I met Carol Jefferson right here at this damn bus stop. I don’t know why I don’t cuss her ass out, but if she keeps talking today, I will.

“Joe’s work calls for us to go to dinner parties with him. So, we must look our best at all times. You know, Cheryl, we must show “those” people that we have class too.”

“What does your husband do again?”

Carol stomped her foot, and said, “Cheryl, I’ve told you this a thousand times.”

“Tell me again.”

“Joe is a judge, right over there in the county clerk building.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember.”

I can never forget that her husband is a judge. It was the only thing that kept me from cussing her ass out a long time ago. With Olivia’s crazy ass family, I never know when I will need to call on him for a favor. Carol loved to announce it, and I liked acting like I don’t know.

Carol said, “I think I’m going to start driving my car down here. I use to think it was easier to just hop on the bus, but not so. Old habits are just hard to break. Isn’t it, Cheryl?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I’m just saying how difficult it is to stop doing things,” Carol explained.

“Are you talking about my weight?”

“Oh, no. Of course not, Cheryl.”

Carol bit her bottom lip and got red lipstick on her white teeth. I looked at her hair perfectly curled, and wanted to yank one of those curls out of her head.

“Well, here comes the bus,” she said.

I didn't say nothing. I wanted to get as far away from her as possible. When I stepped on the bus, I searched for a seat next to someone who would not say one damn word to me. I chose a man whose head hung low. Good, he's sleeping.

As my left cheek and thigh hung over the seat, my eyes were drawn to the black smoke that came out of the multiple pipes of one of oldest steel mills left in Pittsburgh. The black smoke make the Allegheny River look black, too. My Ben has been working there for over twenty years. I wonder if he will bring home news of another layoff. It wouldn't be the first time; the news came so often, sometimes Ben wouldn't even tell me. Three months was the longest time that Ben had been laid off. Then, the union would start getting their signs together to march in from of the Governor's office, and just like that, Ben went back to work.

I removed the candy bar from my bag and began to eat it. I looked up and saw Carol Jefferson looking at me over her shoulder. I made sure I took a big, juicy bite of my candy bar, hoping that maybe her ass will turn back around in disgust.

If it wasn't for my Ben, I would be one lonely woman. I love Olivia, and I really think of her as a sister, but ain't nothing like having your own family and your own kids to love. Grandmamma was all I had, and now, she's gone. If I had a cousin, an auntie, or even a distant relative I could call my own, we could do so many things together, like spend the Thanksgiving holiday together. Instead, I spend all of my time with Olivia's family. Since Ben and John are brothers, I am technically a part of her family. I guess supporting Olivia while she plans for a family reunion will bring some form of excitement into my life; I just wish her family wasn't so damn dysfunctional.

The bus driver said, "Northside!"

I walked sideways in the aisle, careful not to bump anyone with my hips. As the bus stopped, I shifted forward, holding on tightly so I wouldn't fall to my knees as I once did before. The three metal steps were steep. I took my time walking off that bus, and then, I heard Carol's voice, "Have a good weekend!"

I acted like I didn't hear her.

## Chapter 2

### *The Meeting*

Olivia buzzed around in the kitchen, making sure that she topped off the food buffet she carefully prepared with rolls and a warm upside-down-pineapple cake. Olivia's husband, John, had begun to complete his to-do list that Olivia so often made for him, during the times when he would rather go to the old garage out back, listen to blues music, and drink a little liquor. I sat my fat ass down and waited for this meeting to happen. Olivia always says, "Your negative." I'm not negative. I just speak the truth. That family of hers ain't interested in no damn family reunion.

Olivia is always trying to be the perfect mom, perfect wife, perfect sister, and the perfect friend; it ain't that much perfection in the world. The Lord knows we ain't perfect, but, she keeps on trying. I love my sister-in-law. She keeps a clear head on her shoulders. I just think growing up without her mama, who was mean as hell, done something to her. I don't believe I've ever heard Olivia yell or raise her voice for nothing. Even when her children fought, she only waited until they were quiet enough to talk to them. That woman sure got some patience, more than me. But, I know the truth, she ain't fooling me. Once, I saw all the empty liquor bottles when I walked to the back door; she couldn't hear me knocking on the front door. She said she was gathering them to recycle for money. Yeah right. She tells everybody she don't drink; I know better. I know her well.

Me and Olivia grew up together. I will never forget how she and John came to my rescue. Faustine Jones was the meanest, ugliest girl you ever want to lay eyes on.

She was unusually tall to be sixteen years old, and I had enough ass whippins from her to last me a life time. She beat me so badly one year that my grandmamma had to pray that I would wake up.

One summer afternoon when I was, oh, about sixteen, John and Olivia saw Faustine Jones holding my head and dragging me around the alley as I was a wet rag. I couldn't breathe, and my own blood began to choke me worse than Faustine. Just when I thought my life was over for real, I fell to my knees grateful that I could breathe again. Olivia had pulled Faustine Jones off me, and I could see Olivia whaling on her through my tears, as John watched for on lookers. I never saw Faustine Jones after that, and me and Olivia became friends. Grandmamma said we were sisters in another life, and I believed her. I believed everything she said, even if I didn't admit it to her.

My mama died after birthing me. My grandmamma took care of me, and I loved her as if she birthed me. Grandmamma was a fine woman. She didn't take well to Ben at first. She didn't like gamblers; she said, "They will gamble everything away and leave nothing for people who love them." Ben and John were hustlers, and they knew how to make a dollar. Oh yeah, those brothers had a terrible reputation, but when it came to their family, they treated us like gold. Ben ain't as good looking as John, but he's all mine, and I knew I loved him the minute I saw him throw those dice down on Hill Street. Olivia had known she loved John before she understood love.

I had always admired John's and Olivia's love for one another. He knew how to make her feel safe, and she trusted him; he was about the only one she ever trusted until I came along. John was well respected on the streets, and his life of petty crimes created a nice little nest egg for them. When Tevin and Lena were born, John promised Olivia that

he would die providing a good, clean, and honest life for her and his children, a promise he kept. After their second blessing popped into this world, they moved into a three-story home that had ceilings as high as some of the office buildings I had been in. They got married in that house, the same house I'm sitting in thirty-five years later.

John and his first born, Tevin, were both 6' 2" tall with dark-brown skin that appeared as velvet under the moon. If it wasn't for John's age, Tevin and John could easily be identical twins. They both wore mustaches with side burns. John's dark-brown eyes were full of conversation, which made it easy for people to know his thoughts. Tevin's soft-brown eyes, resembling Olivia's, were full of excitement. Tevin inherited his dad's charm and his mama's sensitivity; it is no wonder women swarmed around him like bees, even when he was a baby. Yeah, those were the days. Those children are all grown up now.

The aroma from the food made the hairs in my nostrils flare. So, I sat waiting for the festivities to begin as I watched the cars slowly drive over the red-brick street. I watched John's and Olivia's second child, Lena, walk up the five concrete steps and into the front door. With her cell phone glued to her ear, I couldn't say hello to the child. I liked the days when you could actually get someone's attention by simply saying hello, without those damn phones plastered to an ear. Cell phones just made people so damn rude; they don't be talking about nothing that can't wait until they get home.

John walked in the family room stumbling with some household tools in his hands. He was surprised to see his daughter.

"Hey there Le-Le. What's shakin'?"

Lena smiled, hung up her cell phone, and gave her Dad a warm, "Hi Dad."

He smiled back, “When did you sneak in here?”

“I just got here.”

“Do your old man get a hug? I haven’t seen you in a month.”

“Dad, that’s not true, and you know it.” Lena smiled and gave her dad a loving hug and a kiss. I know she had to be choking. John’s strong scents of Old Spice filled my throat and made me choke, especially when I stood just ten feet away from him. He always put too much cologne on when he planned to go out for the evening or had visitors at the house.

Lena hated for her daddy to call her Le-Le; she knew not to make mention of it or she would get a lecture on why he named her Lena. “Honey, I named you Lena after the beautiful and lovely, Lena Horne, and I knew I was going to call you Le-Le before you popped into this world.” It was something that Lena heard all of her life, and she accepted her Daddy because like so many others, she respected him.

I interrupted them, “Hi sweetheart. I was trying to wait until you got off that phone. Give me hug.”

“Aunt Cheryl, I’m sorry. It was an important phone call.”

I didn’t bother to get my fat ass off the sofa. Hell, she younger than me.

“How you been?” I asked with my voice sounding muffled from her hug.

“Ok...*sigh*. Just busy at work. Where’s Uncle Ben?” Lena asked.

“Oh, he’s around here somewhere.”

John said, “Ben is out back in the garage helping me do a few things.”

“Now, John, don’t be starting with all that lying. You know damn well Ben ain’t helping you do no work. He’s helping you alright; drinking up all that liquor,” I said.

He said, “Girl, you know you crazy.”

“I’m going to say hi to Mom,” Lena said, as she fanned us off. Lena always thought she was better than us. I don’t care how long you went to school; if you don’t know how to love your family for real, all that schooling don’t mean a damn thing.

John retreated to his duties. I sat rubbing the numbness out of my leg.

A successful cab driver most of his adult life, John didn’t make a big deal about education. To him, good ole fashion hard work and sacrifice would be enough to receive a stamp of approval on the test of life. John’s world consisted of business ventures where a handshake sealed the deal it was the same thing as signing on the dotted line, as beads of sweat rolled down a nervous back. In John’s case, penalties for late payments or default loans equaled no life.

Olivia and John owned eleven rental houses in Pittsburgh from the North Side by Allegheny Mall to East Liberty. He purchased all of them with cash he borrowed from loan sharks including the house he and Olivia raised their children in. Many of John’s old friends and professional underground loan sharks were dead or out of the business now. Things have changed a lot since those days.

One day, John asked Ben where he could borrow money to fix up a few of his rental properties, and Ben drove John downtown to the fancy bank with the large blue windows. Me and Ben sat in Pittsburgh National Bank in a couple of those black leather chairs, listening to the music that makes me snore in public like I don’t have any sense. John walked to the closest desk in front of us and spoke to a young man with a dark suit on, one of many dark blue suits that blended with the high-back chairs.

The young man asked, “Mr. Yarborough, do you have any credit?”

“Credit?”

“Yes, credit” the man said with confidence.

“What in the hell is credit?” John’s voice rumbled.

“It is a list of companies that you have obtained items or money from in advance with a promise to pay back in a specific timeframe,” the man said impatiently.

“I’ve been borrowing and paying back money for over 20 years.”

“I will need the business’ names, addresses and phone numbers.”

“I can’t give you that information,” John snapped.

“Why?”

“Because the “Globe Trotter” and “Hank the Tank” are dead, and “Lover boy” got out of the business five years ago,” John said.

The young man looked uncomfortable in his wide-back chair, and he looked around with confusion on his face; his eyes had focused on the security guard for a few minutes before he cleared his throat.

“Mr. Yarborough, I’m not sure I understand.”

“Look, are you going to let me borrow any money here or not?” John snapped.

“We have procedures, Mr. Yarborough. We can’t just give you cash without verifying that you have decent credit,” the man said with less confidence.

John leaned into the man’s face over the wide desk and said, “I’ve been around for sixty-five years, and I know that you are a loan shark under the disguise of these damn rules and regulations. I own eleven houses and got them without this “credit” business. What happened to handshakes and integrity, huh? How many houses do you own?”

“None,” the man said softly.

“I thought so.”

John walked out of Pittsburgh National Bank, and he hasn't been back since.

Determined, he will find another way.

Lena and John walked back into the room where I sat.

*Here I am waiting for this no-good family to show up. I suppose I could get my ass up again to see if Olivia needs any help. Lena is beautiful. I remember I use to have a waist like that. Shit, my ass was fat and my waist was tiny; men use to stop shooting dice to look at me. I was never as uppity as Lena. She's beautiful and educated, but the child don't have a man. And if you ain't got no man, you are just a lonely woman.*

“Daddy, why is Mom having such a big dinner to discuss a family reunion?”

“Le-Le, you know your mother. Everything must be a large party. John kissed his daughter on her forehead and called for his son.

“Hey Tevin, come in here and help your old man change the light bulb in this here dining room,” John yelled. Tevin sprinted in the dining room.

“Aunt Cheryl, what are you doing in here? I'm not used to your quietness. Are you OK?”

“Yeah child, my leg is bothering me. Come sit with me a while.”

Lena sat. “Mom doesn't need any more help.”

“I'm sure she don't. She is such a control freak. It gets on my damn nerves.”

“Everything gets on your nerves, Aunt Cheryl.”

“Who are you allowing to shake your tree these days?”

“Aunt Cheryl,” Lena sang.

“What?”

“Why don’t you just ask who I’m dating?”

“Cause you young folks don’t know nothing about dating. Ya’ll think dating means having sex, and then you never even get to know someone.”

Lena smiled, “I guess you and Uncle Ben know about dating.”

“Hell Yeah,” I yelled, “Your mamma and daddy know about it, too. Your Uncle Ben used to sing to me, and he used to buy me flowers. When he won a bet or made a few dollars on the numbers, he always brought a dress over to my house before we married; and when we married, he used to take me for long walks in the park.”

“Is that your definition of dating?” Lena giggled.

“Yes! You don’t know what I’m talking about; water floating between my toes, the sun reflecting off of my back, and the touch of your Uncle Ben’s hand between my thighs still makes me shiver.”

“Aunt Cheryl, That’s way too much information!”

I scorned. “Lena, you are grown. You know what I’m talking about.”

“Well, I’m dating a guy named Mark, and I like him a lot.”

“Um...Hm, go on,” I pried.

“That’s it.”

I whispered, “He make you shiver?”

Lena snapped, “Ok. That’s enough of this talk.”

She stood, and said, “Come on. Let’s go in the kitchen with mom. She’s been in there way too long.”

Lena took both of my hands and lifted me off of that large sofa. On our way to the kitchen, we heard Tevin's voice.

"Hey Sis, what's up?"

"I'm here."

"I didn't see you come in the door."

"I didn't see you either."

Tevin walked over to us while holding a light bulb. "Hey, guess who I spent the night with," he said with eagerness in his eyes.

I looked at him shocked that he started a conversation like that. Continuing my walk through the kitchen door, I cleared my throat, and Tevin winked at Lena.

He mouthed the words, "I'll tell you later."

I loved to show off Tevin and his good looks to all of the "sisters" at my church. He always reminded me of Billie Dee Williams. I love me some Billie Dee Williams. Anyway, Tevin hated when I showed him off. Those old hags and their daughters and nieces stared at him, like a bolt of lightning striking their eyes. Tevin, a young boy, then, complained to Olivia about getting his face buried in the women's large breasts, especially when they hugged him tightly. The women ignored Lena most of the time; she would sneak to the corner store immediately after church to buy bubble gum with the money meant for church offering. I am so glad that God automatically forgives children for their sins.

In the kitchen, with her head resting in the palm of her hands and her body sitting sideways in the kitchen chair, Olivia spoke without looking at me or Lena.

“I don’t need any help in here. I’m just thinking about how happy I am. After many years, we can finally come together and plan our family reunion.”

*Silence.*

Lena spoke first, “Mom, I don’t want you to get your hopes high. Let’s just wait and see who all shows up.”

I said, “Olivia, I know you are not expecting Valerie to show up; are you?”

“I’m optimistic.”

“Opp-ta-what?”

Lena explained, “She is not going to rule out the idea that Valerie may come.”

“Hmm. Don’t hold your breath.”

“Cheryl, please don’t start this. I’ve planned this—“

“Aunt Cheryl, why don’t you have a seat in one of the dining room chairs? They are more comfortable than the sofa because they sit up higher. Dad and Tevin will keep you company. I will go and get Uncle Ben in a few minutes,” Lena said as she guided me out of the kitchen.

*Well, I call like I see it.*

I stood for a few minutes and watched Tevin and John work together. Ben is drinking more these days, and I know why: it probably hurts him to see his brother John with his son. For years, I tried to give Ben a son. The Lord punished me for something, and I spent my entire life wondering what I did.

Tevin climbed to the fourth step of the ladder to change the light bulb in the low-hanging, Victorian-styled chandelier. It had many dangling crystal-like substances. Only then, I realized how the high ceiling complimented the chandelier. John and Olivia lived

in a hundred and fifty-year-old house, and each room had an oversized fireplace that at one time was the only form of heat in those days. Two children could fit in one fireplace at a time, but they only used the fireplaces in three rooms: the living room, parlor, and John's and Olivia's bedroom. The furnace heated the rest of the house. The windows in the house were as tall as the old church down on the corner of Linden and Hammond Streets. Olivia had every window decorated in the finest blue and white drapes. Every room was coordinated and decorated to suit her expensive taste. A cloth with earth tone colors of blue, green, and tan covered the traditional oak dining room table, and a floral blue cloth, with a silky shine, covered each chair. The china cabinet held Olivia's hand-made china, and she dared anyone to get close to it. I ain't never been so uptight about how my house looked. I mean, what's the use. As long as it's clean, smell good, and it's mine, I'm happy.

I sat my ass down in one of those shiny-material chairs while John and Tevin chatted.

"Tevin, go get me another light bulb from the basement. Never mind. It's better if I go because I know exactly where it is," John said.

He left.

"I sure would like this meeting to get started, so it can end."

"Why are you saying that?" Tevin asked.

"Cause I don't want to see your mama hurt."

"She will be fine, Aunt Cheryl."

"So, who are you dating now? I heard you mention it to Lena. You young folks can't get nothing by me."

“No one’s trying to get anything pass you, Aunt Cheryl.”

“Well?”

“Well?” Tevin smirked.

“Don’t play with me, boy!” I snapped.

“When it’s time to share, I will. You will be the first to know,” Tevin leaned toward me and kissed me on my forehead.” He is so much like his damn daddy.

*Um...hmm, he ain’t fooling me. He like em light.*

John walked in the dining room holding several light bulbs whistling the song “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay.” That broke up our conversation. They began talking like I wasn’t in the room. I hated being ignored.

I cleared my voice and said, “John, do you know if Valerie even knows about this dinner?”

John responded without looking at me. “I think so, but I’m not sure.”

*You ain’t never sure about anything.*

“Is Ben still out back? I’m sure he’s good and drunk right about now.”

John said, “Cheryl, why don’t you go out there and check on Ben.”

“The hell if I will. My legs are bothering me too badly. But, I will go back into the kitchen.

John and Tevin said, “That’s a good idea.”

*No, they didn’t!*

I decided that I would be more appreciated if I sat in the kitchen with Olivia and Lena.

“Hey ladies, do you need any help? You are stuck with me now.”

“Please, get the rolls out of the oven and place them on the cooling rack,” Olivia quickly replied. Her 5’4” round body could hardly keep up with how fast she was moving. When Olivia is on a mission, she focuses like an acrobatic performer walking on a tightrope. On this day, I didn’t expect a whole lot of conversation from Olivia. She must feel like a volcano is about to erupt in her stomach; she always did when it came to her screwed up family. I washed and dried my hands before opening the oven door because Olivia didn’t like anyone going into her kitchen without washing their hands. Eventually, everyone got that message; Tevin got it first.

I remember Tevin learning this lesson at thirteen. He put his hands in his mama’s pot without washing them. After school; in search of a snack before dinner, Tevin removed the cover from one of his mama’s pots; that was a no, no! He could not resist sticking his hand into the pot of collard greens. As he closed his eyes to savor the taste, he opened his eyes to Olivia’s dishtowel swiping him in the face.

“What did you do that for?” Tevin said.

“You do not come in to my kitchen without washing your hands,” she scolded him.

He pleaded, “I just had a taste.” His mama hit him again with the dishtowel until Tevin got the hint. I laughed my ass off.

I grabbed a towel from the gray, granite counter top to open the metal oven door. Absorbed in the warm and toasty aroma of the rolls, I wondered if I could resist the temptation. I pulled the pan of rolls out from the oven when a loud scream shuttered my ears, “Help!”

I dropped the rolls all over the floor; ran behind Olivia and Lena through the kitchen door to see who had screamed. Janice, my niece, stood in the glass doorway with the blood all over her face. The older home had two door entries as most older homes had in Pittsburgh. Olivia called it the foyer.

“Oh Lordy, call the police, call the ambulance, get my keys!” Olivia said. Olivia gave everyone nicknames including God. While everyone rushed to Janice’s rescue, Lena rushed to grab a green dishtowel. She busted through the swinging kitchen door and ran to her cousin’s aid with the towel dangling from her hand. She handed it to Tevin over his shoulder; he snatched it from Lena without looking back. Tevin and John kneeled over Janice’s weak body. With all the ruckus, I didn’t see Ben come into the chaos. Ben stood behind John, wiping his face with the handkerchief passed down to him from their father, Moses.

Olivia screamed, “What on earth happened to you, Janice?”

Janice was conscious, but out of it a bit. She had found her way back to the only stability she had ever experienced.

John and Olivia never turned Janice away, and she could always get warm clothes, a hot meal, and even money, but she could never sleep at their house. The last incident of mistrust happened when Janice was sixteen; Tevin and Lena were eighteen and sixteen. Janice allowed the local pond shop to hold onto Olivia’s wedding band for a hundred bucks. The owner, Mr. Thornton, called John because he owed him a favor. It had been nine years since Janice slept at 1016 Jones Avenue, Olivia’s and John’s home.

“Olivia, please stop screaming and call the ambulance,” John said sternly.

Olivia looked at John then looked back to Janice without moving. I managed to move my legs to run to the phone and realized that I had actually walked instead. I picked up the phone with my right hand, shaking. Somehow, I managed to dial 911; I knew I only had one chance to get the number right. Remain calm, I told myself. “Yes uh, operator, I have an emergency.”

The operator said calmly, “What is your emergency?”

“My niece has blood running down the side of her face, and she is mumbling something,” I blurted out.

“Is she conscious?”

“Yes, I believe she is.”

“May we speak to her?”

“What, speak to her? Didn’t I say she has blood all over her face?”

“Cheryl, how soon will they be here?” John yelled out.

“I’m not sure, John,” I said.

“John, she needs stitches. She has a hole in her head”.

“Olivia, will you please stop, and give me your keys to the car. I’m taking Janice to the hospital myself.”

“Ben, grab her,” John ordered.

Ben leaned his broad shoulders over Janice’s limp body; picked her up off the weather-worn and slightly stained carpet to carry her to the back seat of Olivia’s car. He then jumped in the front seat passenger’s side. I had pulled the phone cord as far as it would go. I couldn’t look and talk at the same time.

“Hello? Hello?” The operator said.

I told the operator, "Never mind, we're going to take her." I slammed the receiver down without saying goodbye.

Olivia and Tevin stood at the door entrance.

"Tevin, look after everything here. I will call you as soon as we know something," John said as he walked quickly down the concrete steps.

John drove off in his wife's green Buick La Sabre; she often wished it were a Cadillac. Me, Tevin, Lena, and Olivia stood on the wide porch without saying anything for a few minutes.

"What just happened?" Tevin said.

"The hell if I know," I said.

Tevin left us on the wide porch and went into the house without saying anything else. He slowly walked up the stairs to the second level. One hand dragging on the solid-red oak banister, he disappeared into higher ground. I knew Janice's situation had raised Tevin's stress level a tad bit. I can tell by his silence: it revealed his need to sit in quietness until he accepted the confusion.

Me, Lena and Olivia looked at each other awkwardly as we stood on the porch, ignoring the early spring chill that smacked our faces, making our eyes water.

"Janice is always in some kind of trouble," I said.

Just last month, she claimed another woman's man; this woman wasn't about to let her man slip through her fingers. Ya'll know what I'm talking about. Janice, too, thought she had been successful at claiming that man, so she thought. The woman showed up on the steps of the man's tiny duplex holding a wide knife. Janice tried to stand boldly, but that woman wasn't playing around with Janice. She chased Janice's

naked body out of her man's house. Mr. Edison, a police officer, saw her and quickly followed her in his car. Thank the good Lord he is a dear friend of our family. He made Janice get into his squad car, and then gave her his police jacket and a utility blanket to cover her before taking her home. Janice's mother, Debbie, opened the door; she wasn't even surprised that Janice stood in her doorway naked.

Olivia said, "We have got to get Janice some help. She can't go any longer like this. She will kill herself."

"Well, I don't want anything to do with her," I said with my eyes closed to avoid eye contact with Olivia.

"Cheryl, let's not begin jumping to conclusions. We'd better go back in the house and try to focus on wrapping up a few things before the meeting starts. People will begin coming in fifteen or twenty minutes."

*I knew it was wishful thinking. This damn family is always late, and Olivia know it will be another two hours before she admits that her damn, wanna-be mother, Valerie ain't stepping a foot into this house, especially to talk about pulling all of her kids together, the same kids she abandoned.*

"Mom, you mean we are moving ahead with the meeting?" Lena asked, knowing the answer to her question. Janice always had drama, and we became desensitized to it.

"Of course, sweetie. The show must go on. This step is extremely important toward getting our family to be closer and appreciative of one another."

"What about Janice?" Lena asked.

"That girl is fine. All she needs is a mean ass kickin," I protested.

"I think she has already gotten one for the day, Cheryl," Olivia said.

Me, Lena, and Olivia began to walk slowly in the house after standing on Olivia's porch longer than I wanted to. Lena led the march and we followed.

"I'm going to call Debbie and tell her what happened," Olivia said.

"What for?"

Olivia knew that my hands on my double-wide waist meant that we were going to discuss in detail. "Olivia, you are always trying to do the right thing. Debbie doesn't care what happens to that girl. She hasn't since she was a baby. What makes you think she's gonna care now?"

"Cheryl, please don't start that foolishness," Olivia snapped.

"I'm not starting anything," I said as I slammed the door behind me, "It's just a waste of time, and you know it."

Olivia ignored my voice. She picked up the phone and punched the buttons with force.

*Ring...Ring.*

"Hello, Debbie. This is Olivia. Janice had an accident. I'm not sure what happened, but she will be OK, I expect. I'm waiting to hear from John now."

Olivia looked at me with her hands on her wide hips and rolled her eyes around her eye sockets. I knew her sister, Debbie, felt sorry for herself, as she always does without a caring thought for Janice. The victim role suited Debbie the most.

"Yes Debbie, we will be here waiting for you," Olivia said. "Bye."

I stomped my right foot, which shook the first floor of Olivia's house. "See, I told you, she ain't worth the phone call."

"What did she say?" Lena said anxiously.

“Nothing,” Olivia said.

“Olivia, what did Debbie say?” I repeated.

“She said, “she doesn’t know what *she* had done to her child, and she needs a drink before her nerves get worse.”

“Really? Lena said.

“Are you surprised, Lena?”

“No, Aunt Cheryl. I’m just confused.”

“Well, I still have a lot of work to do,” Olivia said as she went into the kitchen.

Me and Lena stood looking at each other in a trance until the phone rang. Olivia hurried into the living room and stood just outside the kitchen doorway. My heart began to patter as my eyes followed Lena to the phone. She answered the phone on the third ring. I took two steps toward the brown wooden table with the hand-crocheted cover made by Valerie, Olivia’s mother. I couldn’t resist taking the phone out of Lena’s hand; I needed to handle this mess.

“Cheryl, that wasn’t necessary!” Olivia snapped.

“Hello.”

“Is this Cheryl?” John asked.

“It is.”

“Oh, ah, Janice is fine. I mean she will be fine. She has a slight concussion, and the doctor is sewing her up now.”

“Is she conscious?”

“Yes, she is.”

“Did she say what happened to her?”

“Yes, I will go into detail once I get back home.”

“John, can you let us know something? Can we press charges?”

“No, Cheryl. Janice has some problems that I think we, as a family, need to discuss. We need to figure out if we can help her.”

“What problems, John?”

“Let’s just say that she is co-dependent, and she played around with the wrong person.”

“Like who?”

“Cheryl, the whole thing is involving drugs and right now I’m too exhausted to talk about it over the phone. The doctor said he would like to keep her in the hospital overnight to monitor her head injury.”

Olivia now stood near me. “Give me the phone, Cheryl.”

I turned my shoulder to her. “John, Olivia wants to speak to you.”

She snatched the phone out of my hand.

“John, will you be home soon?” Olivia asked. “Ok.”

She looked at me and Lena intensely. “John told me to hold on. Cheryl, you should have let me speak to John first, and I—

Olivia’s voice shook, “Well, we know she has problems.”

“Mom, calm down,” Lena said as she walked toward her mama and placed her arm around her full shoulders.

“Oh my God! OK...O...OK. Call me back as soon as you can, John.”

Olivia slowly hung up the phone.

“What else did he say?” I asked.

“Janice is also pregnant, and there are some complications.”

“Well, I am not surprised.” I snapped.

Lena said, “This is too much. I’m going upstairs with Tevin.”

I sat down on the sofa, and Olivia sat next to me. We didn’t know what to say; we sat in silence.

### Chapter 3

#### *Let the Secrets Begin*

The silence between me and Olivia started to make me feel uncomfortable. I rubbed my right knee cap; it seemed to help. I wondered if Olivia thought about drinking. This is a perfect time for a stiff one. She will never admit it, but maybe she will.

Though me and Olivia were sister in-laws, people said we acted like sisters. We did mostly everything together. Lena was twelve years old when she realized that I wasn't Olivia's blood sister; I told her that me and Uncle Ben had been married for twenty-nine years. She told me that we act like brother and sister. I didn't have much of a family. Olivia's family is my family. I guess that's why I eat so much; it feels the gap of me not having my own family to fuss about. I can tell Olivia don't eat as much as I do. Perhaps, her drinking in secret helps to keep the weight off.

Now, when it comes to food, I ain't shy about supplying my body with all the food groups prescribed in the Food Guide Pyramid. My three hundred-pound shapely body frame is seductive to my Ben; I know so. Although my legs often felt as if there were little people inside, banging my knees with a hammer; my body does support the chores and activities I participate in.

Recently, I got this idea to take karate lessons to tone me up some. Olivia thought it was ridiculous for me to attempt something like that before getting into some kind of shape. Hell, I thought; it ain't no reason why I shouldn't try. I took one class and stayed in bed for two weeks; both of my legs were as stiff as one of the 2 x 4's outside, leaning up against the house.

I know my Ben has been totally frustrated with me. It's no wonder he had been out back in the garage drinking. The two weeks that I laid on my back, he waited on me, hand and foot.

*I feel guilty, now, about bossing him around with all of my demands. What difference does it make now? It's over. Ain't no sense in crying over spilled milk. I don't know what I would do without my Ben.*

John came over to the house during those two weeks just to give Ben a release from me. I know he did. I overheard Ben say something about me; I clearly heard the word, divorce. My leg pain miraculously left, and I jumped out of the bed so quickly that I could have been Bruce Lee, himself.

"Divorce!" I screamed.

I grabbed the old vase I've been thinking about getting rid of for months and threw it at Ben, missed hitting John's head by two inches. John excused himself. It had been a smart idea.

"Don't you ever mention the word, divorce, again in this house!" I screamed.

This fight amounted to a war.

"Listen to me, Cheryl; I'm not talking about a divorce."

"Damn it! Then why did you say it?"

"I just told John that if I were going to get a div-

"If you say it again, I will throw this damn lamp at your ass."

Ben took a deep breath and sat in his favorite recliner. He knew to wait before speaking to me. I needed to be calm.

The tears began to roll down my face. I needed my Ben.

“Is it because I didn’t give you a son?”

Ben walked near me, and said, “Cherylie, I’ve always loved you. There is no need to worry about me leaving you, ever. OK?”

I waited for him to wrap his arms around my large frame; he couldn’t reach his finger tips behind me.

“I’m sorry, Bennie.”

My Ben always knows exactly what to say to me.

I have been feeling that Ben has a secret, lately. But, then again, we all have secrets; don’t we? Everything I am, I share with my Ben, except one thing. It goes deep in me.

Years ago, I waited for Ben to return to his apartment from running numbers. His friend Chucky knocked on his door. It was a bright night; the moon seemed brighter than the sun that night. Me and Ben were headed to the movies once he returned. I waited so long: the sounds of the temptations played on the eight-track and the summer, light wind blew gently across my face; it was the perfect conditions for a good nap. I welcomed it. Chucky’s knock actually woke me up. Not sure how long he had been knocking, I tripped over myself hurrying to the door.

“Hey Chucky; what’s up?”

“Where’s your man?”

“Oh, he will be back soon, I hope.”

A big mistake.

“You hope? Well, how long has he been gone?”

I said naively, “Oh, couple hours or so. Sometimes he’s gone for longer.”

“Well, I’m gonna come in and wait on him,” Chucky said as he pushed by me.

A second mistake.

“Oh ok.”

He walked through Ben’s apartment looking in all the rooms, as if he needed to find something.

“I can tell him to come by and see you once he comes home,” I said.

“I am fine waiting, right here.”

Chucky walked over to the sliding door; it squeaked as he closed it.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I don’t want anyone to hear me. I have a message for Ben.”

“Oh O—“

Chucky slapped me so hard, I swirled around in a complete circle before falling to my knees; I faced away from him. I screamed, held my face, and tried to stand back up. The ripping of my panties and skirt made my ears ring. Was he about to rape me? Before I could say a word, Chucky placed his elbow in the base of my neck. He thrust me. I felt as if I was in a sex fight. The pressure of his weight on my back prevented me from moving; the pressure of his elbow in my neck made me faint.

When I opened my eyes, Ben stood over me. I frantically felt for my skirt and panties, but I felt a blanket instead. I had hoped it was a dream, but I knew it wasn’t.

“Who did this to you?” Ben’s voice, unusually calm, repeated his question before I could answer.

The tears rolled down my face, and my nose blew out bubbles. I didn’t see John standing near Ben at first.

John kneeled on one knee, and said, “Cheryl, who hurt you like this.”

His face looked like a cartoon through my tears.

“I shouldn’t have opened the door; I shouldn’t have...I knew it. Why did I--?”

John put his hand on my arm. “Cheryl, we need to know.”

“I want my grandmamma, Ben?”

Ben didn’t answer me. I knew his anger would drive him to do something hurtful that night. Then, I heard Olivia’s voice.

“Hi sweetie. I’m so sorry.”

She held me like my grandmamma would have held me. I clutched to her sweater trying to bear the pain, but the pain grew stronger.

“Cheryl. Cheryl. Listen to me. I’m here, and I’m not leaving you, but you have got to tell us what happened to you, or who did this to you?”

“I’m scared, Olivia.”

“I know you are. But no one is going to leave you. Just tell us.”

It was hard for me to say his name. I’m not sure why. I think it was an admission that I was raped.

“Ch...Ch...Chucky,” I whispered.

Olivia repeated, “Chucky?”

I said, “Chucky.”

The noise from John holding Ben from walking out the door seized my tears.

“Listen Ben, we’ve got to do this thing right.”

“Let go of me, John.”

“No, not until you calm down.”

“Let’s get Cheryl to the hospital first. OK...OK?”

When the smell of rubbing alcohol woke me up, I saw Olivia sitting next to me, holding my hand.

“Where’s Ben?”

“Now, don’t worry about Ben, Cheryl. He’s fine.”

“What’s he gonna do?” I asked.

“Now, Cheryl, you know we don’t get involved in their business.”

I yelled, “I don’t want him to leave me. I don’t want him to go to prison.”

“Shh...the doctor is coming in now; they called the police. When they come in here, you don’t know the person who did this to you. Understand?”

I nodded through my tears.

The police spoke words that I didn’t hear. I waited to answer the question the right way.

“Ma’am, do you know who attacked you in your boyfriend’s apartment,” the police asked.

I said, “No.”

“Well, why did you open the door,” the police continued his investigation.

“I thought it was my boyfriend, Ben.”

“That’s all the questions I have for right now. If you can remember anything else about this crime, please call me as soon as you can. I’m sorry,” the police said before he exited the room.

“Can I go home now,” I asked the doctor.

“Yes, you can,” the doctor touched my shoulder, and said, “I’m so sorry.” He left the room.

Two months later, there were rumors that Chucky had been missing. No one knew or asked any more questions about Chucky. After all, he was just a dope pushing, number running rat that would still anything from anyone, including sex.

What I didn’t tell Ben is that I had an abortion after the rape. I didn’t know who the baby belonged to, and I didn’t want to take a chance on loving and raising a child by a man that hurt me and hurt my Ben.

I wished I had told Olivia. Instead, I listened to an old friend who claimed to have had a couple of them done by her grandmother. My body ain’t never been the same after I let that old woman kill my baby.

How do you tell the man you love that you can’t have his son because you killed a baby that could have been his baby? You don’t. I just lived with the secret for all of these years. I know it’s the other reason why I eat; food is my security.

Lena interrupted me and Olivia’s silence. She walked into the living room; she had a stern look on her face.

“What’s wrong, Olivia asked.”

Justine and Frank interrupted Lena’s answer. They walked in the door, smiling and holding hands.

“Hello, everybody; sorry we are late,” Justine said

“Hi...hello,” we said.

“Well, we are glad to see you too. What’s with the long faces?” Justine asked.

Olivia said, “It’s Janice.”

“Hi baby,” Frank hugged Lena.”

“Oh no, now what,” Justine said.

“She showed up here, blood gushing out of her head, and looking all crazy. John and Ben took her to the doctor.”

“Do you know anything more about what Janice has gotten into?” Justine said as she squinted, making her eyes as narrow as a tiger’s eye.

Justine is a nosy ass woman. I once told her in confidence that her sister, Debbie, began dating a man twenty years younger. I asked her not to tell anyone until Debbie was ready to share. Within thirty minutes, six nosy family members called me, including Olivia and Debbie because of Justine. Debbie vowed never to share her business with me again. I didn’t blame her for getting mad at me.

Olivia invited Justine and Frank to sit down and relax.

Tevin, back from the second floor, greeted his uncle and aunt before walking into the kitchen. On his heels, Lena followed him. Grunting and rocking, I managed to get off of that damn sofa.

“Let me get you something to drink. Olivia you rest,” I said.

Before I entered into the kitchen, I heard Lena talking with Tevin. I listened; then I peeked in the swinging door. Lena stood to Tevin’s back with her hands on her waist, waiting patiently for him to get a glass of water from the refrigerator door.

“Tevin, what is the deal?”

“Lena, I can’t talk about it right now.”

“Why not,” she demanded.

“You know you are just like Aunt Cheryl, pushy!”

“Don’t change the subject, Tevin. Who got Janice pregnant? You?”

I knew Tevin to be a lady’s man, but this question was crazy!

“Damn it, Lena, back the fuck off!”

“Hey...Is everything ok in here?”

“Everything is just fine,” Lena said as she stared at the back of her brother’s head.

Tevin turned his body to face me and Lena, as the air rose in my chest.

“Well, I’m here just to get some drinks for everybody. Do you want to help me Lena?” I said.

Neither of them answered me. I stood still.

It felt as if an hour had gone by before he unlocked the stare between his and Lena’s eyes. Tevin withdrew based on his instinct and returned to drinking his glass of water.

Lena sucked her teeth, turned to march out of the kitchen, like a soldier going to battle. She couldn’t leave yet without knowing; she turned again toward Tevin.

“Ok, I will not ask you any specific questions. You tell me what you want me to know, and I will just listen and keep my mouth shut now and in the future. You can trust me on this one Tevin,” Lena said confidently.

He looked at me. He then slammed his glass down on the small table used for everything except for eating.

“I don’t want to talk about anything right now”

He walked by me and Lena, brushing Lena’s shoulder with his.

I managed to shake the numbness out of my legs. The lemonade pitcher sat at the front of the refrigerator; I grabbed it and poured it in four glasses. The swinging door still moved after Lena went through it. I let it swing behind me too.

Justine said nervously, “Lena, what’s going on with you and Tevin?”

“We just had a disagreement, that’s all.”

“What about,” she asked.

“Steen, let the girl be.” Frank said.

I walked pass them, set the tray on the coffee table, and sat my ass down on the plush love seat that faced them.

Tevin walked over to his Aunt Justine and began to make small talk with her, while his Uncle Frank flipped through the pages of a magazine.

During a few minutes of quietness, I closed my eyes and drifted off into a light sleep. The phone rang, waking me up. I opened my eyes and listened to the second ring. Lena answered.

“Hello? Hi Dad. I thought you would be home by now. Aunt Justine and Uncle Frank are the only ones here right now. Ok. Bye.”

“What did your daddy say?” Olivia asked.

He said, “Janice will be held overnight because she has a concussion.”

“What in the hell happened to her?” Justine asked again.

“What doesn’t happen to her?” I said.

“John and Ben will be able to tell us more about what happened when they return home,” Olivia said.

Tevin said, “Do we know if my favorite aunt is coming or not?”

Justine answered, "Who might that be?"

Everyone knew that Diana, Olivia's and Justine's other sister, is Lena's and Tevin's favorite aunt. Her warm smile lights up her entire face.

Tevin and Lena used to talk about how Diana was the prettiest of all their aunties. Diana's appetite for jogging allowed her to be the only one to keep her school-girl figure. She always looked and smelled lovely.

I know Justine is jealous of Diana and the men she dated. Diana, the last baby girl born, had never married. She dates men in all races with all kinds of money. She ain't a gold-digger, but she is truly selective. Hell, I can't much blame her. I've overheard her explain to Lena, "Baby girl, it's okay to date for love, but make sure you both understand that love don't pay no bills."

Olivia said, "Tevin, I don't know if Diana is coming. You never know if she will show up or not."

Justine said jealously, "What am I a piece of chopped liver?"

"Nah Aunt Justine," Tevin said, "I love you, too."

Remembering there was food, "Why don't we help ourselves to the food that Olivia spent all day preparing," I said.

"Good idea," Tevin said.

I led the crew to the dining room when the doorbell rang.

"Hey, Hey, where is the par-ty!" Debbie and her daughter, Shelley, came in.

We had greeted them in unison before Lena, Tevin, Justine and Frank entered the dining room. I turned back around to greet them both with a warm hug. As usual,

Debbie reeked of alcohol and smoke. It's a damn shame. She can't go anywhere without drinking.

“Debbie, it smells as if you've been to a party already,” I said.

Debbie leaned into me with her warm, stale breath, and said, “I got some of the good stuff from Shelley's old man.”

Shelley bowed her head in shame after our eyes met.

I finally said, “We are about to eat. Come on in and make yourself comfortable. Shelley, the food is in the dining room, and there is plenty of it. You can get your mama a plate.”

*This is a big mistake, Olivia—A big ass mistake!*

## Chapter 4

### *Abandonment*

Shelley knew that I wasn't about to wait on her drunk-ass mama. She can get her own food. Shelley wanted her mamma to be normal so badly that she thought being her friend would help her. Janice, the youngest and Shelley, the oldest, seemed to be the only ones who hung around her. I think they were all co-dependent of each other. Debbie—a creature of habit—didn't know any other way but to be a victim.

Debbie separated herself from her four children when they were small. Olivia would drag me along when she took Tevin and Lena over to their cousin's great-grand mama's house to play. During the visit, Debbie's name could not be mentioned. Their grandmother was well-known to everyone in the neighborhood as Bell.

Bell was an attractive, tall light-skin woman with shiny black wavy hair. She smoked cigarettes as if her lungs were a chimney. As soon as we stepped into her living room, she would say to me and Olivia: "Debbie ain't no damn good. She is a terrible mother, and she will never, ever see these kids again."

Olivia tried to reason with her, but Bell would say, "Olivia, these kids need a foundation, and Debbie can't provide them with one. She doesn't deserve to see these kids. I will not have it."

Olivia responded, "Kids need to know where they come from, Bell."

"It doesn't matter where they come from if their so-called mother can't give them the support they need."

"Bell, their father gets to see them because he lives with you, and I'm not sure he would want to see them if he didn't live with you. You know he's an alcoholic."

“Get the hell out of my house,” Bell would yell.

Me and Olivia would wait a couple of months, and then, we would go back to visit so that Lena and Tevin could play with their cousins. With the same attention she has about bringing her family together, Olivia had a driving force to ensure that Debbie’s kids knew their mother’s side of the family.

Debbie stumbled into the dining room admiring Olivia’s china and opened the door to the cabinet. I immediately closed the door and showed Debbie to a seat, so she would keep her damn hands to herself. Shelley sat her worn body next to her mama’s, still feeling shame and embarrassment for her mother.

Olivia screeched, “Debbie, don’t put your hands in the macaroni and cheese. Civilized people eat with silverware!”

“Shelley, take your mom into the kitchen while I make her a plate, please,” Olivia demanded.

Shelley and Debbie shuffled their feet as they left the dining room; we sat in silence until they left. The clicking of silverware against the dishes returned.

*Ring...Ring!* Before anyone could answer the front door, I heard Pete enter.

“What’s up, what’s up!”

Olivia yelled, “Come on in. We are in the dining room.”

Lena met him half way, and Pete followed her into the dining room.

Everyone sat in both the den and dining rooms eating the food and having small talk. We discussed the buzz about Eddie Murphy getting caught while picking up a transvestite. Ben and John returned from the hospital, looking weary, but relieved.

Justine said immediately to Ben and John, “How is Janice?”

I answered for them, “Janice is pregnant and only God knows who is the father of her child.”

“Cheryl, we know that, already,” Olivia snapped.

I said, “Is there any other news we need to know?”

Ben came near me, gave me a hug, sat down with his cap on his knee, and said, “It seems that Janice stole crack from a drug dealer. As a result, she got beaten. He even kicked her in her stomach. We hope the baby will be fine.”

Silence, again, filled the room.

“Let’s get started everyone,” Olivia said loudly.

*This woman will do nothing to stop this damn family reunion meeting. Don’t she see that it’s a catastrophe already? Damn it, Olivia! After this meeting, I’m taking my ass home. I’m done with it.*

I walked behind the others into the den.

The den had been a former parlor in this old historical house. I could see the den, over hundred years ago, holding top executives from Westinghouse Corporation, who shared cigars and Brandy after “supper.”

Olivia carefully studied the number of people. As she stood in place, she looked at the tall, solid-red, wooden double doors that separated the den from her living room. The tall windows of the formal living room were covered in layers of dark and light blue silk material. If the sofa and loveseat wasn’t so low, I would love relaxing on the. They each held dark blue pillows that were full and inviting. The light blue carpet covered with mini-rugs throughout the living room helped to protect the precious twenty-year-old carpet.

“Open up the doors Tevin, we need space,” Olivia sighed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“John, would you care to start us off in prayer?”

“Yes Olivia, in a minute. I need a moment.”

I knew what that meant. John needed to visit his haven, the old garage. He and Ben would indulge in drinking whiskey to get through the rest of this day. Hell, I wish I can join them. This visit called for a stronger potion. A straight shot of Jack Daniels would suit me just fine.

As John walked toward the kitchen, he rubbed his head. He left the room; I waited for Ben to follow.

Ben, wearing a red and white checkered shirt, disappeared into the kitchen. Pete sat quietly in the living room; Tevin followed.

Pete, always quiet, stood with his hands in his pockets. His wrinkled face showed years of doubt, worry, and fear even though he was just in his late forties. Pete dabbled around in many crack houses, and I never wondered why. We all accepted his destiny and understood that Pete’s droopy and sad eyes were a direct reflection of his troubled soul. He wanted to be more. But, the fear caused by abandonment, in general, prevented him from taking the leap of faith.

Pete adopted parents were long-time friends of his biological mother, Valerie. The rejection of Valerie’s love seriously affected him and Debbie, more than the rest of her siblings.

Some time ago, Olivia had heard about a young male that could have been one of her siblings, another one that Valerie gave away. Determined to find him, she hunted

him like a lion hunting its prey. At eighteen years old, Olivia told Pete that she was his sister. Pete's world caved in around him—he had changed. Is this the reason why he took on a life of drugs? No one knows, but I know Olivia blames herself for throwing a wrench in his perfect life.

In those days, people didn't go through all that worthless legal shit in order for a child to be taken care of. People just stepped in and became parents. Mothers who couldn't take care of their children were happy to give them away, especially if they had interests above rearing children.

Like me, Pete's adopted parents could never bear God's fruits. When his mother, Valerie, casually mentioned that she needed a \$1,000.00 to bail her boyfriend and high-class pimp out of jail, Pete's parents gave her the money. In return, Pete became their son.

Pete met his sister and brother-in-law a few days after he graduated from high school. Me and Ben stood behind Olivia and John as she met her younger brother.

"Pete, meet Olivia, your older sister and her husband John," his mama said.

Pete's mouth opened wide, but there was only silence.

"Pete, I know this is not a good time to tell you; but after five years of trying to find the right time to tell you, I decided that there is no perfect way or perfect time," Pete's mama said abruptly.

"Tell me what? I don't understand."

Disturbed by her lack of etiquette, Olivia said, "Pete, I feel just as awkward as you do right now. Why don't we just go have some lunch, and I can explain some things to you."

Pete's mama spoke again, "Honey, I'm not your biological mother. I adopted you at birth."

"What?"

"Olivia said, "I wished you had told him before I came to meet him."

"I didn't know how," Pete's mama said.

"I don't need food. I need to know the truth!" Pete yelled.

"Calm down," John said.

"No!" Pete's eyes filled with tears.

"I'm so sorry, honey. Your dad and I didn't know how to tell you."

"You know now!" Pete yelled.

"What do you want to know? I...we will tell you everything you want to know, right here, right now," Olivia said.

"Who are those people?" Pete asked.

I stepped up, and said, "I'm Cheryl, and this is my husband, Ben. We are your family too. John and Ben are brothers."

*Silence.*

Pete's mama said, "Let's all sit down. OK, Pete?"

Pete slowly sat down. We all sat in the dark wood-paneled living room.

Pete's mama explained that he was sold by Valerie for \$1,000; he sobbed in his hands. His vulnerability made me shiver. I knew he would never be the same after his first introduction to the Rouse family and their web of secrets. I remember feeling his pain.

Glad I could leave that memory behind; I took my eyes and attention away from Pete and looked at Olivia again. She started being impatient; it became necessary for her to get the meeting started.

With quick movement, Tevin perfectly positioned the stool for his Uncle Pete's backside, and Pete sat without saying a word, not even, "thank you."

*Sigh...* While I stretched, I looked around the den and noticed that John and Ben were leaning on the unused fireplace in the parlor adjacent to the den. John's lazy eyes and Ben's slumped shoulders revealed the heaviness from today's events.

The black and gray marble that outlined the fireplace never enhanced the den's beauty, but Olivia, impressed with the hundred-year-old marble in her house, cherished it. At this particular time, the fireplace held up John and Ben; the Jack Daniels started whipping their asses, and it should be. I am interested to see how the words intended for God will come out of a sinner's mouth.

Olivia sat in a kitchen chair placed directly in front of the door that led to the outside world. Folder, pen, and pad in her lap, her impatience showed through the gentle shaking of her legs.

Olivia's flared black and purple striped dress hung low, almost covering her black flat shoes, and her belt that was tied in a bow on the side of her plumb waist drew attention to her double-D sized breasts. The bun in her hair now rested at the base of her neck—another hour, the bun will fall, and her hair will reach her shoulders.

"I'm ready to start this meeting, everyone," Olivia said sharply.

*Cough... Cough...* Olivia cleared her throat as if she prepared to speak to a crowd of hundred people. She took one look at John and knew he would be praying in vain: he

had a facial expression that Olivia had seen throughout their thirty-two-year marriage – a constant orgasmic grin plastered on his face. Even when she yelled at him, he maintained that expression.

Olivia began her prayer:

Let us bow our heads. Dear Heavenly Father, we want to thank you for all that you do for us. We want to thank you for the opportunity to grace your presence. We thank you for your mercy and grace. We ask that you guide us in love and that we listen to our hearts. Dear Father God, please bless Janice and protect her and her baby. And Father God, please continue to bless each and every one of us here right now, from the top of our heads to the soles of our feet, and we will be so careful to praise your name Jesus. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

“Thank you, everyone, for showing up here today, and I’m very sorry that we got started so late.”

Here, we are: Me, Ben, John, Olivia, Shelley, Debbie, Pete, Justine and Frank, and Lena and Tevin. Only eleven of us have shown up. I couldn’t help but to think about the Rouse siblings.

*That’s a damn shame. Olivia has seven siblings that she knows of, and only three of them show up— the worst two of them all. Well, it will now be a short-ass meeting, and I’m glad. It’s been the only damn thing I’ve been happy about since I got here.*

Olivia continued her greetings, demanding all eyes be on her:

Today is a special day because it is our first attempt to bring our family together. In times like these, we need to support each other and genuinely get to know each other. Negativity and depression have touched every aspect of our race and our culture, so we need to rely on what black folks have already relied on for centuries – the importance of family. Black families started the tradition of family reunions to celebrate love and the family unit, our family unit. For the first time, the Rouse family will have our first annual family reunion. I will lead this effort as long as I can, and then, I expect the next generation to take over. Any questions? Good.

I curiously looked around the room and saw the blank stares on Pete's, Shelley's, and Debbie's faces. Debbie looked like she would rather have a sip of Crown Royal, her drink of choice.

“Now, the first thing we should talk about as a family is our niece, and Debbie, your daughter, Janice. We must discuss this issue before we move forward, and I will not keep you long for this first meeting,” Olivia said.

“Why do we have to talk about Janice?” Debbie yelled.

Justine and Frank began to press their elbows together.

“Debbie, you don't have to say one damn word about Janice. In fact, you don't have to say one damn word, period.” I said, “I'm tired of this shit, now. I'm ready to go home.”

Debbie stared at Olivia with wide blood-shot eyes. I think she wanted her to come to her rescue.

“She is my daughter,” Debbie blurted out.

“Biologically, Debbie, she is your daughter, and you are her mother, but you know and I know, OK, everybody knows that you haven’t been a mother to Janice since she was four years old. No one is blaming you. We are just here to help you and Janice.”

Olivia continued.

“Janice needs our help. This girl is twenty-one-years old and pregnant. She’s willing to have sex with anyone who will pay her attention. What is more disturbing? Janice has graduated to using heroin.”

Debbie jumped up quickly, clinging to Shelley’s arm, so she wouldn’t fall.

“Oh, I’m not going to sit around and listen to this shit,” Debbie said.

“Calm down, mom,” Shelley said.

“I will not. This doesn’t have a damn thing to do with a family reunion,” Olivia.

“Debbie, that’s enough,” John said as he moved toward her, leaving Ben stranded at the fireplace.

“John, don’t tell me to shut up. I’m a grown ass woman.”

“But you are acting like a child, Debbie.”

“I am not!”

Debbie started scratching her legs wildly. The guilt ate at her flesh. She chose to ignore her children through their childhood, and that reminded her of Valerie.

Olivia still sat with poise, but now her back slightly curved inward to handle the five pounds of pressure Debbie added to her shoulders.

“John and Shelley, please take Debbie to the kitchen until we finish this talk.”

“Shelley can take her, Olivia. I’m staying,” John said with authority, as he walked to his wife’s side.

“No one tells me what to do. No, wait! Shelley, if you touch me one more time! Shit! I’m walking,” Debbie demanded.

Shelley clutched her purse and pushed her mom into the kitchen. Their voices became distant.

”Olivia and John, what do you recommend? How can we help?” Justine said.

John answered, “Well, first, she will need to heal. She has a pretty deep gash on the side of her head, which caused her to receive seventeen stitches. Next, she is at risk of losing her baby because she is under-nourished. She has tracks on her arms. So, it appears that she has been using for quite some time. Has anyone noticed?”

Tevin looked sideways at his Uncle Pete and asked, “Have you noticed?”

“No,” uh, I mean, yeah.”

“When,” Tevin said sternly.

“I’m not sure. I think maybe couple months ago.”

“Bullshit.”

“Tevin, you watch how you talk to your uncle,” Olivia said.

Everyone focused attention on Tevin because he wasn’t his usually playful self; something was unsettling about his gaze at his Uncle Pete.

*Um, hm, there is some shit that’s about to go down.*

Tevin began to speak:

The cold that night didn’t bother me and Lamont because we felt warm inside and out from the champagne. After our law school graduation, Lamont and I decided to hang out in Oakland. We were pumped up after we left both of our parties, talking about how we are going to move to California to practice entertainment

law. Students were still roaming the streets late that night, especially on Forbes Avenue, you know, the street dividing Pitt University from Children's Hospital. I remember well; light snowflakes thinly covered Forbes Avenue as Lamont and I walked to Dirty O's.

I knew exactly what Tevin was talking about. Originals Restaurant, also called "Dirty O's—a name Pitt students cherished for the always overly crowded place. If anyone wanted the biggest plate of greasy French fries and fine, beautiful girls, Dirty O's was the place to go. I can sure say that I've been there more than I would like to admit.

I, also, know that the crowded streets of Oakland attracted others from the underground world. Tevin, Lena, and John kept that part away from Olivia, but I know the truth. Pan handlers, crack heads and female and male prostitutes were drawn to Pitt University in Oakland.

Tevin continued:

I immediately recognized Janice sitting on a concrete ledge near an empty building. I've seen a lot of people hang around that place, but I never thought I would see my cousin there. Holding a Newport in her right hand and a 40 oz can of beer in her left; Janice was kissing a thin and scrawny man whose frame could barely hold the hooded sweatshirt, which hung lifeless on his body. The man's hands were in his pocket, his back toward me and Lamont, and Janice's long legs were wrapped around the man's legs. I couldn't believe that her skirt was short enough to see her black underwear. Lamont knew I wasn't paying attention to his words, and asked, "What are you looking at, man?"

"My cousin."

“Where?”

“In front of us. She is the girl with the green jacket.”

“The one lip locked with the dude in the black sweatshirt?” Lamont asked.

“Yep.”

“Damn, they should just get a room.”

“Agree.”

So, I walked closer to get Janice’s attention; Lamont and I stopped directly behind Janice and her mystery man. Since they both were tongue kissing without intention to come up for air, I decided it was time to interrupt this public indecency. I called her name, “Janice! Janice!”

She put her head over the right shoulder of the guy and looked at us.

“What in the hell are you doing, Janice?” I asked her.

I’m not surprised that she was speechless.

This skinny guy recognized my voice and snapped his head, pulling his body from Janice’s body so quickly that she fell off the ledge. I couldn’t believe it; I yelled, “Uncle Pete! Uncle Pete?”

My stomach began to churn.

It was a knee-jerk reaction: I leaped on Uncle Pete.

I yelled at him, “How could you? You bastard!”

Before I knew it, I had grabbed Uncle Pete by his clothes and rammed him into the concrete ledge, and I yelled and yelled, “You fucking pervert! She is your niece, ass hole!”

I guess Uncle Pete couldn't talk, but I didn't care. He didn't resist getting his ass kicked, either. Lamont pulled me off of Uncle Pete, and Janice staggered down the street with her 40 oz wrapped in a brown paper bag. I couldn't believe my eyes! Lamont and I walked away from Uncle Pete. Dirty O's didn't see us that night.

I looked at Tevin's chest rise and fall, now slower. He silenced the room, yet again. The air seemed thick. My throat felt as if it had landed in my knees. I looked at Olivia; she looked like a ghost.

Tevin stared at Pete with such disgust. His body language and the way his eyes rolled around in their sockets revealed that Pete could feel Tevin's x-ray beam on him. Pete shifted back and forth on the bar stool.

Breaking the silence, Olivia spoke. "Pete, are you aware of Janice's drug activity? Are you involved in any way? Do you know something? Do you know the father of her baby?" Olivia's voice shook. I wondered if she really wanted to know the truth.

## Chapter 5

### *Family Denial*

*It always takes Olivia a long time to read between the lines or catch on to bullshit. Olivia often said, "Cheryl, you always look for the worst." And my response has been always the same, "You are too damn naïve."*

*I can smell a rat before he can see me. Pete got them all fooled. Working at the Police Department, you see all the rats; the ones disguised as good rats, the ones that are proud to be rats and even the ones that come with breasts. Pete is disguised as a poor, helpless rat. He lurked in and out of alleys doing his bullshit sliding under doors and in and out of windows and then come around acting like his filthy hands are clean. That's why his hands are always stuffed in his pockets; so, we are not able to read the palms of his hands. Well, damn-it, I see the writing on his palms, on his forehead and his bony chest and the shit ain't right!*

I felt the energy bounce off Tevin, and I heard Pete's shallow and quick breaths. I was always told that I could hear through a steel door. Frank and Justine nudged elbows for the third time late that afternoon, never stopping the silent gossiping

I cleared my throat and made my first attempt, moving my fat ass off of Olivia's sofa. The silence was so loud, it made me uncomfortable.

Ben said, "Let me help you, Cheryl."

My husband came to my rescue and put one of his large hands on my ass to give me a push. I stood to look at Pete and saw the pitiful look he used to gain empathy, and I looked deeper pass the fake shit.

“Pete, do you want to go and talk in private with the other men because I believe you have a lot to say,” I said as I refrain from cussing his ass out.

Pete shrugged his shoulders.

*Oh hell no. You know something. You know that you are screwing your niece.*

I felt Lena’s and Olivia’s body heat now standing near me, Lena to my left and Olivia to my right.

Pete’s eyes became cloudy and distant, the kind of distance that said “I wish I was dead.” Within twenty seconds of my question to Pete, beads of sweat marched down the side of his face, and his shoulders had sunk deeply into his gut.

*Crash!*

Tevin jumped from his bar stool and ran to his Uncle Pete. John and Ben ran to aid Tevin. Ben, John, and Tevin lifted Pete from the floor and placed his frail body on the sofa. I saw Lena moving quickly from the kitchen, with another one of her mama’s decorative kitchen towels. Again, Olivia thought so preciously of her dishtowels. John snatched the towel from over his right shoulder without looking to see who brought it to him. He placed it on Pete’s entire face.

Breathing heavily through her nostrils, Olivia spoke, “Do we need to take Pete to the hospital, John?”

No answer.

Unable to walk directly into the living room because of the large red oak doors, I left the den and walked beside the kitchen into the living room.

I stood behind John and Ben smelling the liquor, “Do we need to take him to the hospital?”

Pete sat up from the sofa as if a bee had stung him, looking around at all of our faces. He looked confused as John asked, “Are you OK?”

“I fainted.”

“Are you OK?” John repeated.

“Yeah.”

Ben asked, “Are you sure, Pete?”

We all stepped back from Pete as he stood on his feet. Ben and John continued to hold their arms out to catch him, but Pete didn’t fall.

Olivia spoke loudly from the den, “Pete, I think you need to sit back down for awhile. Listen, everybody. This meeting is over, and I will call everybody soon to talk about the family reunion, but right now, this is too much.”

Justine and Frank both hugged each side of Olivia, and she responded with both of her arms without looking at them.

“We will be in touch Olivia,” Frank said, as he walked toward the front door slightly squeezing Olivia’s left shoulder with his right hand, while his left hand rested on the lower back of his wife. Justine bent her head, took a deep breath, and walked outside; less drama awaited her. As Justine always said, “It ain’t her drama, and she would rather stay out of it as long as she knew all the details of the drama. It was compelling stuff to discuss with the church ladies who disguised themselves as her friends. She never gave the church ladies ammunition to talk about her or Frank. She was too smart for that.

Pete’s voice grabbed my attention again.

“Really, I’m Ok. I just need to go home for awhile.”

“Are you going to your parent’s house, Pete?” I snapped.

“Yeah”

“Tevin, take your Uncle Pete home,” Olivia demanded.

Pete said quickly, “No, I’m alright. I can make it on my own.”

“What if it happens again? Olivia, call his mama to ask if she can come and pick up Pete,” John said.

Pete walked by us. We saw his back going through the kitchen doorway. We followed him, and John staggered a bit before he reached for the wall that held the doorway into the kitchen.

Pete disappeared into the small alley filled with metal trash cans.

All of us stood in the large kitchen puzzled as to what to do next. We all stood speechless until Olivia broke the silence, again.

“I’m so tired right now and want to get some rest,” Olivia said.

I turned my body toward Olivia who was standing near the wall phone. “We are not going to talk about this shit?” I demanded.

“Cheryl, this has been a long day for everybody,” Ben pleaded with me.

“I’m not talking to you, Ben,” I said. I didn’t bother to look back to see his face. I hated when Ben interrupted me.

“It’s a great idea, mom. I’m tired too. I will help you clean up the kitchen, and then I’m out of here,” Lena said quickly as she walked toward her mom.

Olivia’s voice now softer said, “We should have called Pete a “jitney.” I hope he gets home alright.”

I listened to Olivia’s words as my mind traveled to the jitney station that Ben and John’s father owned. Jitney stations are illegitimate cab companies that developed in The

Hill District. The Hill District use to be the place for Black folks. *I use to love me some Hill District. I used to walk up that mountain folks claimed to be a hill and party my ass off.* Ben's father, Moses, sent Ben to pick me up from the "Go-Go Club." Ben told me to keep the \$5.00 I would have paid for him to take me home, thirty minutes away. Those were the good ole days. Black folks owned our own businesses, our own land, and our own music back in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. You could get anything you want or ever needed from the Hill District. Shit. We even created our own newspaper. If you made the *Pittsburgh Courier*, you were somebody. That's where Ben and John heard that Lena Horne was coming home for a concert at the Civic Center. I knew Ben planned to ask me to go with him. I sewed a dress for the concert before he even asked me. I was ready.

The Yellow Cab Company wouldn't pick up poor, black folks, so those with cars would charge a few dollars to be the neighborhood cab drivers. Soon, jitney stations popped up all over Pittsburgh, and it became the organized crime of cab driving. Hell, we didn't need nothing from nobody. Moses had four jitney stations at one time. But when he got too large, Uncle Sam shut him down. It didn't keep Moses from opening up another one.

My mind snapped back to my surroundings.

"Olivia, you sit down. You don't look so well. Me and Lena will clean up this mess."

"Thanks Cheryl." Olivia disappeared. John followed his wife being careful not to stagger.

Tevin sighed, "Ya'll need any help?"

Tevin, a gentleman, always offered to help because that's what he was taught to do. I know he wanted to get the hell out of here, and I couldn't much blame the poor boy.

"You go ahead, son. We can handle this."

"Later Tev," said Lena.

Tevin left the kitchen, keys in his right hand and a plate of food in his left. He must have fixed him a plate of food before all of the drama started.

Me and Lena had already begun to pull plastic bowls out of the cabinets to store all the leftover food.

"I will begin bringing the food from the dining room, Lena."

"OK."

I walked pass John and Olivia relaxing on the sofa in the den without saying anything and wondered where Ben had disappeared to. If we didn't have so much trouble during the day, most of the food would have been eaten. I entered and exited the kitchen, leaving my trial of silence.

*Poor Olivia. She tried so hard to make this day special and to bring this family together for something good. ...That no-good ass Pete taking advantage of his niece. He knows that poor girl ain't got no brains. I guess he doesn't have any either. Damn it! That baby going to come out looking and acting like Mildred Jones' boy. His left eye does what it wants to do, and he talks as if he's been studying another language. Everybody saw her cousin coming out of her house all times of the night. Mildred is in denial, but everybody knows she got caught with her hand in the cookie jar. That shit don't make no sense. Pete needs his ass beat real good.*

“You need any help, baby?”

“You scared the shit out of me, Ben.”

“I’m sorry, baby.”

“I bet all this drama shit brought you and John down off your buzz, huh?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have been out back drinking with John, Ben,” I said as I turned to grab the last three dishes on the table.

Ben grabbed the bowl half-filled with yams from my hands. He said, “Do you believe this shit? Pete has been molesting his niece!”

“Shhh, Ben. Keep it down.”

Ben leaned closer to me, and I could smell that faint smell of sin on his breath. “I don’t know why Olivia just don’t let things be.”

“I know,” I said.

“Valerie did a job on this family. I’m sorry, but Olivia keeps asking for this shit to blow up in her face,” Ben snapped. “Her mother was a damn prostitute that gave away or sold all of her kids. They are all screwed up!”

“Ben, Let’s talk about this at home. Right now, I need to finish these last dishes and make sure Lena doesn’t need any more help,” I pleaded.

I was too tired to discuss all of the drama, and I felt my ankles swelling because I stood on my feet too long.

On the way out of the door, I hugged Olivia, and Ben and John shook hands after we had already said goodbye to Lena.

It was such an awkward silence in the house after hearing about Pete and Janice. It was the same for Ben and me. I don't think neither of us wanted to talk about it.

I looked at the sun setting over the trees and houses that lined the side of Mountain Washington. The houses always looked liked doll houses, the way they were carved into the side of the mountains. The back of the houses seemed to be missing. I've been in Pittsburgh all of my life, and I have always been amazed at how the houses looked on the side of the mountains. I remember begging my grandmamma to take me up there to prove to me that they weren't going to fall.

"Cherylie," she used to call me, "I promise you, baby, that those homes are not gonna fall off that darn mountain."

I pleaded, "But, grandmamma, can you take me to see one?"

I had to know for myself, and at seven years old, it was one of the most fascinating things for me to stare at as we rode the Pat Transit down the Turnpike, heading to downtown. The Allegheny River was one of the three rivers that bullied Pittsburgh's roads. The entire city roads were constructed around those massive rivers. The Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers kissed the center of downtown Pittsburgh. "The Point" is the name we gave it, but the city folks seemed to have stolen our name and called it Point State Park.

The day she took me to Mount Washington, I had on a yellow and white flowery dress that my grandmamma made for me. It was our day to go "bus riding," something poor, black folks did to have a make-believe trip. We left the Hill District and took our first bus ride to the North Side near Allegheny Mall. We transferred to the North Braddock bus and headed East of Pittsburgh, and we then transferred to the bus that lead

us back to downtown. I spotted Mount Washington and hoped that was our next stop. On Fifth Avenue, the busy street and the heart of downtown Pittsburgh, I carefully read the words, Mt. Washington as we stepped on the bus and headed to the back. Although there were laws to say black folks can sit where they wanna sit on the bus, I think it was understood by both black and white folks that it would take time for both to make the change.

We arrived on Mount Washington Road, and I thought just traveling up the side of the mountain on the bus would be my experience, and then we got off the bus.

“Where are we, grandmamma?”

“Mount Washington, baby.”

I held my grand mama’s hand waiting for her next surprise. It seemed we walked forever. I didn’t mind because I could see all of Pittsburgh and everything and everyone looked like ants. It was my first time seeing where I lived. I fell in love with my home. We finally were standing on the steps of Mrs. Adler’s house. I found out later in my life that Mrs. Adler was a distant relative of the Heinz family. Heinz ketchup is a part of Pittsburgh’s culture.

“Ann Spearman, how are you? Do come in.”

“Hello Mrs. Adler. How are you?”

“Fine, darling and who is this little princess?”

After grandmamma had nudged me with her hand that she placed in the middle of my back, I answered, “Cheryl.”

“Don’t you look lovely today?”

With the help of grandmamma again, I said, “thank you.”

“I’ve been expecting you, Ann.”

Mrs. Adler’s voice trailed off into the sky that looked over the entire city. I no longer heard her and Mrs. Adler talking. It was beautiful. I ain’t never seen a living room that size before. Her windows were as large as the ones I saw on the buildings downtown, and everything seemed white: the sofa, the walls, and the curtains were all white.

My thoughts were interrupted by Mrs. Adler, “You can go closer to the window, dear, if you wish.”

I did. The windows seemed to hang over the cliff. I pushed my nose against the window when I heard grandmamma call my name.

“Cherylie, do not touch the windows.”

Grandmamma had cleaned those same windows for many years before Mrs. Adler’s husband left grandmamma a whole lot of money. I didn’t know that then, but I know now. Grandmamma and Mr. Adler became close friends after my granddaddy died. I understood when I got older that he was the man I saw a couple times standing at the back door of grand mama’s kitchen. But in those days, kids didn’t ask questions about grown-up business.

Grandmamma spoke, “Cherylie don’t understand how the houses were able to stay on the side of the mountain without falling off.”

Mrs. Adler answered in her teacher’s voice, “Dear, when you walked to my house from the bus stop, was it flat or was it hilly?”

“Flat.”

“You see, it appears as if the homes are hanging off the side of the mountain. Actually, the homes are built on flat surfaces. But, the basements are constructed deep inside the mountain. Not everyone have basements. Do you understand?”

‘Yes, ma’am.’

I was afraid to say that I didn’t understand. It was a decent enough answer for me. That afternoon went by fast. Mrs. Adler and grandmamma talked about sewing patterns, material, and the weather over tea and cookies. I sat in the same spot looking over the city and dreaming of having a home just like that some day.

When grandmamma died, I found letters from Mr. Adler claiming his love for her. But, she was a respectable woman. I could tell by some of his letters that he wanted every aspect of her and wanted to take her away so they can live in secret peace. I believe she gave Mr. Adler comfort, but that was all.

Ben’s cough brought me back to the car ride home.

The city lights glared off the Allegheny River that paralleled the highway. The party boats were gearing up for the night, and their music was in the air. Ben did not begin speaking until we reached downtown, heading to our home on the south side.

Ben said, “We’ve known Olivia and her family for a long time, and what I see now is that Valerie has really caused her children to be screwed up.”

“It is a damn shame she made her kids crazy as hell. What’s worse, she don’t want nothing to do with them or their drama,” I said.

Ben said, “Sound familiar?”

“Yeah, Debbie is just like her no-good as mama, and I hope Olivia don’t mention Pete and Janice to her. She’s always too damn drunk to understand anyway.”

“But, baby, you know Janice is always walking around with those little dresses on...”

“You mean skirts, Ben.”

“Yeah, skirts. They are so short that you can see everything when she bends over or sit down.”

“Ben, now you know that is no excuse for him to have sex with his niece.”

“I’m not making excuses for him, Cheryl. Believe me. It’s just...look at the family. They didn’t find out that there were all siblings until they were all just about grown.”

Ben had a heart bigger than I would like some times. He always looked at the reasons why people make some dumb ass mistakes. I didn’t care most of the time. Stupidity is stupidity.

Ben turned left, and we went through darkness inside the Liberty Tunnel. Our voices stopped with the darkness.

As soon as we saw the city lights again, Ben continued, “All I’m saying is that Pete is just not the blame.”

I snapped, “All I’m saying is that his damn ass knows better and if that baby comes out looking retarded, then who’s gonna take care of it, really. Who’s gonna take care of it period? Janice ain’t in no shape to take care of no baby.”

We parked parallel to the street and sat there for a few minutes.

Ben sighed and said, “Janice offered herself to me, Cheryl.”

My body froze. I was scared to ask the next question. My life with Ben suddenly flashed before my eyes. We had no children of our own, and I always wondered if Ben regretted it.

Ben said, “And no, I did not take her up on her offer, Cheryl. And before you begin yelling, I thought there was no need to tell you because I didn’t do anything, and I didn’t want you to get upset.”

“You didn’t want me to get upset! That little bitch!”

Cheryl, Janice is on drugs. People on drugs do all kinds of things. She wanted money, and she threatened to start selling her body if I didn’t give her any.”

“Did you tell her to sell on?”

“No, I gave her money, and she wanted to thank me.”

I felt like Olivia looked, I was exhausted and wanted to go to bed. I saw Ben standing on the passenger side of the car and didn’t realize that he even got out of the car. He helped me out, and we went to bed that night without speaking another word about the day. There was always tomorrow.

The next morning, the sun peaked through the white blinds of my bedroom, waking me. The old oak tree no longer shielded my side of the room from the sun. The mauve walls were saying to me, “Good Morning.” Of the seven different colors that had visited my bedroom walls, mauve was my favorite and Ben’s least favorite color.

“Are you up, Ben?”

“No.”

I grunted and rolled out of bed. My feet touched the soft tan carpet, as I searched for my white slippers before I slipped both feet into them. It took about fifteen minutes

before the events of yesterday made my stomach feel sour. While the coffee brewed, I sat and looked at the yellow house outside of my kitchen window. Bicycles and plants filled the Evan's back porch.

*Ring...Ring.*

I didn't want to answer the phone this early afraid of what I may hear. I decided not to answer until I had my first and only cup of coffee. I loved Olivia, but I wasn't going to repair her problems today.

After I took the last drop, the phone rang again. This time I answered on the second ring.

"Hello."

"Good Morning, Cheryl."

"Good morning, Olivia. How are you this morning?"

With her tired voice, Olivia answered, "Not good."

"Olivia, this is not your problem so don't make it your problem"

"I'm not, Cheryl. But, how can I just ignore this?"

I snapped, "Easy, Olivia. Just look at the example of Valerie, your mother or at least that's who we think she is."

*Silence.*

Olivia spoke, "Valerie gave some of her kids away, sold two or three of them that we know of, and dropped her kids off with anyone who would raise them without the least concern if they would be hurt, healthy, beaten or anything. How does a woman do this to her kids, Cheryl?"

“We’ve gone through this a thousand times, Olivia. She don’t care. She didn’t care back then, and she don’t care now.”

Olivia, Justine, and Debbie were raised by their paternal grandmother, Ada Whipple. They called her Mama. Olivia remembered looking out of the back window as they drove away in a jitney. Olivia’s daddy, Ely, was in the service; that’s what everyone called the Army. When Mrs. Whipple came to get her grandchildren, she found that they were left in the house for four days without any money, food or adults to look after them. Olivia said she could only remember eating saltine crackers during that time. Valerie wasn’t there when they left and never called to see who had them or where they were. She disappeared from Pittsburgh shortly after that. Ely came home to stay with Mrs. Whipple and became the neighborhood drunk when he realized that Valerie was gone for good.

Olivia grew up in the Hill District, and Elder Whipple died soon after Olivia and her siblings went to live with them; Mrs. Whipple soon became the Bishop of his traveling church. Olivia was six years old and didn’t remember much about her mother back then. Mrs. Whipple never held back any information about Valerie to those girls and showed them pictures as they grew into young ladies.

One day, Olivia was ten and Debbie was seven, they were walking down the red-bricked street, Penn Avenue, when they saw a beautiful woman that sparkled with diamonds. It was a hot summer day in June. Olivia said she thought she saw a movie star. The woman walked beside a little dog that, too, had a collar full of diamonds. Olivia’s heart began to beat fast, and she stopped dead in her tracks.

“Debbie, I think that’s our mother, Valerie.”

Debbie eager to see said, “Where?”

“There,” she said with her arm and finger slightly above her right thigh.

“Oh my God, Olivia, how do you know?”

“I look at her picture every night before I go to bed, and that’s her.”

Debbie didn’t know what to say. Finally, she spoke, “Do you want to say hi?”

“Do you think we should?” Olivia asked with her voice full of excitement.

They walked toward the woman that sparkled. Olivia first said hi to her dog.

“Hi doggie. What’s his name?”

Valerie responded, “Her name.”

Olivia and Debbie both asked in unison, “What’s her name?”

“Rockette.”

Debbie said, “I like her collar. I like the way it sparkles.”

Both girls were playing with the dog while Valerie stood still in her shiny white shoes. Olivia could see her perfectly painted toes sticking out from an opening of her shoes. The red polish stood out against the white shoes, and Olivia couldn’t help but to look at her shiny legs and the bottom of her pretty white dress. The top of her dress was sleeveless and hugged her waist tightly. The diamonds that draped around her neck and wrists sparkled in the sun, and her earrings glared every time Valerie tilted her head. She smelled like a movie star. Olivia could sniff her all day.

Debbie blurted out, “Is your name Valerie?”

Olivia was relieved that Debbie asked because she didn’t think she had the nerve.

“Yes, it is. And who are you?”

“My name is Debbie.”

“I’m Olivia.”

Olivia said Valerie’s nose flared; her eyes squinted, and the smooth, plump look of her lips soon looked like dried up red raisins.

Debbie blurted again, “Olivia thinks that you are our mother. Are you?”

Olivia remembered the slight breeze that fluffed up her sundress. She thought it took forever for Valerie to answer her question. Olivia looked into Valerie’s eyes and knew that she was her mother. But, she also knew that Valerie would not admit that she felt Olivia’s feet and hands tickle her stomach in her womb.

The ice cream man played his music, which helped Valerie to escape. She pulled out money from her left breast with her right manicured hand and handed it to Olivia. Since Olivia couldn’t bring herself to open her hand, Valerie shoved it into Debbie’s hand, instead.

“You girls go buy some ice cream. Now run along.”

Olivia could hear the clicking of Valerie’s high heels on the broken concrete. She gently yanked Rockette, pulling her in the direction she wanted to go. With her head held high, she perked her shoulders up like a movie star.

Olivia and Debbie stood there with broken hearts. Debbie pulled Olivia along.

“Come on Olivia.”

Tears rolled down Olivia’s face while Debbie held her hand. Debbie held back her tears. When she got older, she would later use alcohol to assist her through the pain. Liquor became her best friend and what she spoke to when she thought of Valerie.

My attention returned to Olivia's babbling over the phone about Valerie. This ritual of listening to her pain has been going on for many, many years; I think I am about tired of it. I cleared my throat.

"Olivia. Olivia. Olivia."

"Huh?"

"That's enough. I don't want to hear anymore."

"You are right. I'm sorry. I didn't ask what you had planned today."

"Oh, I think I will go and visit grand mamma's grave site. I haven't been there in a couple of weeks."

Olivia said, "That's good, Cheryl. That's good."

I continued, "And then I think I'm going to do some water aerobics."

"Do you think it will help your knees?" Olivia asked.

"Oh, you notice they were bothering me?"

"Yes, I saw you rub your knees, yesterday."

"I sure hope it will. Do you want to come?"

"Ah...no, I don't think so," Olivia said.

"Why not? Come on; it will be fun."

"I have to go and see Janice; she may get out of the hospital today."

"Can't Debbie go to the hospital instead? That's her damn mother," I snapped.

"Olivia, you know Debbie. She is so much like Valerie. Did you know that Valerie—"

"You are doing it again. I don't want to hear one thing about Valerie today, or Janice."

“Well, this is what’s going on in my life, Cheryl.”

“It’s because you want it in your life. I don’t want to hear this shit, not today!”

*Silence.*

“Have I ever degraded or didn’t want to hear what you had to say?” Olivia asked.

“Yes! I mean, no. But, because you talk so much about that damn family of yours, you don’t give me a chance to talk about anything else.

“That’s not true, Cheryl.”

“It is. I don’t want to talk about it. I always go with you in support, but do you ever go with me, supporting me in the things I like to do? Huh...No, you don’t.”

“As far as I’m concerned, this conversation is over,” Olivia snapped.

“It’s about damn time,” I said slamming the phone down.

*Not today, Olivia, not today, damn it! I wondered where I packed my bathing suit. I hope I can still wear it. Pool, here I come!*