

CHURCH GURLZ – BOOK 1

Mother's Black Book

A Novel

H. H. Fowler

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Acknowledgements

Thank You, Lord Jesus for giving me the fortitude to complete this project.

To my loving wife, Andrea, and to our three children: Ahmadasun, Ahmari and Ahriana. I love you!

So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves.

- Galatians 5:16 (NLT)

Chapter One

Twelve Years Prior

Jasmine Benton gazed into the grey eyes of her pastor's son. Two perfect ovals so

bright with innocence that Jasmine became besotted with them. With a creamy shade that

evenly coated his hairless complexion, Wynton Lakatos came as close to any Caucasian

boy Jasmine had ever encountered. For a sixteen-year-old stud, he was painfully

attractive. She used the tips of her fingers to trace the outline of his naturally flushed lips,

loving the supple feel of his flesh. She inhaled his maleness and allowed it to permeate

her senses. If there had ever been a boy that Jasmine wanted to be with, it was Wynton

Lakatos.

Jasmine whispered, her moist lips brushing against Wynton's chest, "I would be

stupid to believe that I was the first girl that you had ever been with."

Wynton grinned and then chucked a mischievous question at her. "Would that bug

you if I had been with someone else?"

"Not in the least. I don't care if it is your first time or not. I just need to know that I'm

the only one that you're sleeping with now."

Those giddy girls in their youth group simply probed for the 411 on his sex life, but

Jasmine wanted reassurance. Wynton interpreted that as exclusivity, which was a heavy

mantle to toss around a sixteen-year-old. As alluring as Jasmine Benton was – with her

thick ebony ringlets, he would not allow her to seduce him into saying or doing something he was not ready for. There was a stream of girls waiting in line for his

attention. Why would he constrict his taste to just a few?

He jokingly told Jasmine, “My Daddy didn’t raise me to be no player. Now if you

gonna waste the next ten minutes trying to check out my stats, let me warn you, I’m

losing interest already...”

Jasmine smacked Wynton’s chest playfully. “You obnoxious white boy!”

“It’s one of the reasons you chased after me,” Wynton quipped. “I’m something that

you’ve never had.”

“Oh, please!”

Wynton’s smug attitude only made him more irresistible. Jasmine locked Wynton’s

arms behind his head as if to punish him for his ‘rudeness’, but the impious way that he

stared, caused her to lose control of her hormones. She swooped down and eagerly

attacked his lips.

Wynton stopped her. “Whoa, girl, my lips will be sore in the morning,” he chuckled.

“Take it easy. I know they’re succulent, but –”

“Shut up! You know you are just a tease...”

Wynton’s smirk conveyed his deeply held opinions, in that he believed it was easier

for a girl to become more emotionally attached than it was for a dude. Wynton knew that

sex was a powerful connection, but he did not intend for it to lead him into early fatherhood. He stopped Jasmine again.

“Rubbers...I didn’t bring any.”

“We did it before without one,” Jasmine groaned. “I won’t get pregnant.”

“You sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. My friend has sex all the time without condoms and she hasn’t

gotten pregnant yet.”

“Maybe your friend isn’t telling you everything,” Wynton said. “Maybe we should

wait it out tonight –”

“Don’t ruin the mood.”

Wynton whispered between kisses, “I might have left some here the last time... just

being careful...”

“Of what?” Jasmine whispered back. “I’ve already told you – I can’t get pregnant.”

“Are you on the pill?”

“Hell, no...” Jasmine eased up from Wynton’s chest, visibly annoyed. “What’s this?”

The Spanish Inquisition? You want me or not, Wynton? Stop trying to psyche me out,

because it’s definitely killing the mood.”

Wynton pulled her back toward his lips, knowing he should have resisted giving in.

But he knew Jasmine was a blabbermouth and she would ruin his ‘lover boy’ reputation

with one word: Punk. He felt pressured, but he would rather battle his conscience than

carry around a derogatory label for the rest of his life. Five minutes into it and they were

whisked away by their unrestrained lust for each other – doing things two sixteen-year-

olds had no business doing. Their Christian upbringing did not stand a chance.

Sharon Benton stepped out of her white Mercedes with irritation swathing her visage.

Her husband had left the concert tickets at home on their dresser. The last thing she’d told

him before he scuffled out for the office that afternoon was to remember to bring the

tickets. She'd worked double shifts at the hospital and had not had time to do anything

but use one of the hospital's private rooms to change into her evening gown.

Now it was seven minutes past eight in the evening, which gave her about twenty-

three minutes to get back to the concert before it started. The only problem was that it'd

taken her over half an hour to make the drive home. She definitely would be late getting

back. As soon as she jabbed her key into the lock, her cell rang in her purse. She knew it

was Karl, because he had been calling every ten minutes since she'd hit the Interstate.

"Yes, Karl, I'm walking inside now," she spat at her husband. "Don't rush me, because I told you to bring the tickets. I had to drive all the way across -"

"Sugar Plum, I'm sorry. I was running late for my business appointment," Karl explained. "I simply forgot..." He stared in the rearview mirror at the stop sign he'd just

sped by. There seemed to be no police in this part of town, which he took as a good sign

that things would continue to go well for him and his family. "Don't be upset. We've

been planning to go to this concert for weeks."

"Which is why I don't understand how you could let this slip your memory," Sharon

huffed. She swung her plus-size figure through the front door. She made a right

turn and

then went down the two-steps into the family room. “What time did your meeting finish

anyway?”

“Err...minutes ago,” Karl fumbled. “I’m just now pulling out of the parking garage of

my building.”

“You can’t be serious,” Sharon cried. “When you called me I thought you were two

minutes away from the Convention Center.”

“Honey,” Karl tried. “You know how important this contract is to me – to us. It’s the

biggest I’ve ever received since I got into the real estate business –”

“But you told me two minutes, Karl!” A faint, thumping sound caused Sharon’s gaze

to fly upward. Her eyes lingered on a particular spot in the ceiling – the spot where the

sound appeared to be coming from. “That means you were going to be late no matter

what. I don’t like it when you are being evasive.”

“I’ll make it up to you, Sugar Plum,” Karl said quietly, knowing any further explanation would keep his wife on the phone longer than necessary. “And I have a

surprise for you. So meet me at the center as soon as you can. Would you do that for

me?”

Sharon closed her eyes and shook her head at the same time. Her husband knew how

to work her emotions – to the point where it was impossible at times to remain upset with

him.

“Bye, Karl, because you know this was just plain wrong.” Sharon disconnected from

the line and then dropped the phone back into her purse.

Several paces ahead, she flipped on the light switch in the hall and proceeded to climb

the stairs toward her bedroom. Karl had told her that he’d left the tickets there – on top of

the cherry-oak mantle. Once she’d made it to the top of the steps, the thumping sound

she’d heard a few minutes earlier became more pronounced. This time she knew her

mind wasn’t playing tricks on her. It was a steady rhythm – almost as if a band director

was tapping a wooden floor with his foot – four quarter-notes at a time.

A step closer and Sharon realized the sound was coming from her bedroom. She was

tempted to pull out her phone and call the police, but when she heard her daughter’s

voice, mimicking the screeches of a wounded animal, she launched forward and threw

her plus-size figure into the door. It swung open with a bang.

“Jasmine! Baby, are you all right –”

The air reeked of youthful perversion. The sheets were scattered on the floor.
When

Sharon’s gaze moved up and caught her naked daughter bent in a debauched
manner, her

bottom lip took a dive toward her feet. Before she could properly recover from
her shock,

Wynton jumped up and slammed into the headboard.

“Mrs. Benton!” he screamed. “This is not what you think it is...”

Chapter Two

Present Day – Ocho Rios, Jamaica

It was twenty minutes to midnight and the energy level of the crowd showed no signs

of exhaustion. Thousands of able-bodied Jamaicans – with muscles apt to cut the funkier

dance moves – kept the noise level pumped to its max. Since nine-thirty that night, they'd

been waiting on Wynton Lakatos—two-time Grammy winner for his platinum album,

Shine to make his show. He and his entourage had taken a ten-day road tour throughout

the Caribbean islands. Jamaica was their final stop, but it was by far the most receptive

atmosphere they'd ever experienced since Wynton's album went platinum.

It did not matter that his skin was white or that his penetrating grey eyes made him

stand out among his competition. Wynton's music artistry reached deeply into the hearts

of his fans. There were even Jamaicans who had features similar to Wynton's, but

Wynton's obsession with dancehall music, and having been reared as a Floridian, gave

him an unusual appeal. Most of his fans wondered – when hearing his songs for the first

time – if he'd been hanging out with Barrington Levy – one of Jamaica's well-known

reggae and dancehall artists.

The announcer of the night pushed the microphone to his mouth and thundered his

voice through the one-hundred-thousand-dollar sound system. "...this is it, Ocho Rios!

No more waitin'! Help me bring to the stage, the incomparable, two-time platinum artist,

the new face of dancehall music, and the only white boy I know that can dance holes in

his shoes –"

The crowd went ballistic – fists pumping like they were going out of style. Several

brown-skinned women in pum pum shorts wiggled their scantily clad butts to the front of

the stage, hoping to make eye contact with the grey-eyed beauty.

"Singing his most-aired single, from the United States to Canada," the announcer

continued excitedly, "here in the Caribbean and around the world. My boy is making big

waves in the music industry! Wynton Lakatos! Let me hear you make some crazy noise

up in here!"

Wynton's bodyguards moved swiftly into position. Two of them inched near the stage

and two ushered Wynton's mother and his fiancée behind the stage, away from the

jostling crowd. The two women could not stand each other, but Wynton had made them

both extend the 'olive branch' for the sake of his public image. If only the truce would

last until they all got back home to Brandon, Florida.

Wynton's mother, Doreen, watched as her son appeared on the stage in a grand display of music and smoke – a far cry from the way she was used to seeing him. She

scanned the crowd in disgust. All those girls shaking their bodies like they didn't have a

bone in their bodies almost made her puke. She did not approve of the path her son had

chosen. Actually, 'approve' was an inappropriate description. She literally abhorred this

mess her son called music. He'd grown up in the church, leading the praise and worship

team with dignified tunes. And, even within the church, Doreen had problems with that.

She had her own plan crafted for his life, but Wynton kept her and his father at arm's

length.

How had her son deteriorated from such proper training? His problem was the type of

women that he foolishly got involved with. Women like Jasmine and the current

whore

that he was engaged to. Doreen furtively cut her eyes to the left and glimpsed her son's

fiancée, who was grinning like a doggone hyena. Doreen would deal with both Wynton

and his brainless fiancée the second the opportunity arose. It was time for Wynton to put

away this childish fantasy of his and walk into the role he'd been born to accept. He was

a pastor's son and a pastor's son should not be gyrating his hips, stirring up the lustful

passion of the flesh.

During Wynton's closing act, Doreen instructed Wynton's bodyguards to take her up

to his dressing room. Her sharp gaze was enough to keep their questions at bay. They

knew not to cross her – especially when she'd been prompt with an agenda. There, in

Wynton's dressing room, she waited for him. Her grey-streaked hair was immaculately

pulled back into a slick bun. She'd worn the same style for the past twenty years and had

no motivation to change it now.

Why bother with the hassle? she would always say. Although the style of her clothing

varied, she basically stuck to three colors: black, blue, or charcoal. She was not the type

of First Lady to spend money on silly, doll-like dresses. She barely wore makeup because

she believed in taking good care of her skin.

The door to Wynton's dressing room opened, followed by bursts of laughter in the

hallway. Tara, Wynton's fiancée, entered the room first – unaware of Doreen's presence.

How could she have seen Doreen anyway, when Doreen was sitting quietly in the dark?

A few minutes passed and Tara had run out of patience. It seemed as if the people in the

hallway did not want to let go of her man. With a courteous smile, she gently pulled

Wynton into the room and closed the door for privacy. She'd been longing to slip her

tongue through those soft, full lips. Wynton embraced her just as hungrily.

"That's the way you two do it?" Doreen flipped on the light switch and locked her

eyes on the frightened couple. "Making out in front of a God-fearing woman? How

nasty! And if you're doing this now, I can't imagine what would be left for the honeymoon."

"Oh my God, Doreen," Tara pressed a nervous hand against her chest. "What the hell

are you doing in here?”

Doreen ignored the surprise in Tara’s voice. “Don’t question me about where I should

be or where I shouldn’t be. I’m here because of Wynton – because he doesn’t know that

he’s making the biggest mistake of his life – starting with you, young lady. Now this

hogwash has got to stop!”

“Mother, we had a deal.” Wynton gripped his fiancée in his protective arms. “I was

serious when I told you to stop the attacks on Tara, or else I would –”

“No son of mine will waste his gift on trash,” Doreen said coldly. “Consider this trip

your final tour – such a vulgar performance tonight. It felt as if I had been dumped in the

midst of a strip club. You were raised better than that –”

Wynton’s cheeks grew beet red. He shoved his fiancée behind him and pointed a

finger at his mother. “I did not ask you to come on this trip! You threatened my people

and now you’ve forced your way into my room. I told you before we left Florida: You

were not invited!”

Doreen sprang to her feet. “Shut up, boy! This slut has got you speaking to me as if

you’ve been drugged on morphine. Get a hold of your senses!”

Tara jerked her neck in disbelief. “You did not just call me a slut...”

“I’ve called you a slut behind your back and now I’ve said it to your face.”

Doreen let

a small smirk crease the corners of her mouth. “If I have anything to do with it, you will

never walk down the aisle as my son’s wife.”

“I WILL marry your son, and there isn’t a thing you can do to stop it.”

“Oh yeah? Don’t tempt me, little girl. My influence is far reaching.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Tara swatted the tears that tried to crawl down

her cheeks. “You already lived your life! Leave us alone and let us live ours!”

“Whenever the breath leaves my body, I will consider it! Know this for sure: You will

never be good enough for my family...”

Wynton pulled his fiancée out of Doreen’s face. “Get out of here, mother, before I

have my security guy put you out.”

“I will not listen to a weak command –”

“I said to get out, mother! Now!”

Doreen let out a short chortle. She stiffened her shoulders and strode confidently

toward the door. She stood with her back turned to her son and his fiancée.

“Wynton, my

dear boy, you are twenty-eight – a full man in age, but very immature in your choice of

women. Get rid of this hag before I put my hand into it.”

Doreen opened the door and left with a grunt.

Chapter Three

Brandon View Baptist Church

When Paul Lakatos introduced his son, Brian Lakatos, to strangers, they often walked

away with either one of two questions burning through their minds: Had Paul adopted

Brian Lakatos as his son, or had Paul married an African American woman? Genes

usually did not lie. Paul was a white man with powerful grey eyes, whereas Brian had the

smooth complexion of caramel toffee. However, as the First Family of Brandon View

Baptist Church – with Doreen and Wynton thrown into the mix – one could easily piece

together the puzzle. Wynton resembled Paul; the same way Brian resembled Doreen. But

strangely, in personality, Wynton was nothing like his father, as Brian was the total

opposite of his mother.

Brian emulated much of Paul's desire for the pulpit, and as he stood behind the oak-

laden monstrosity, outfitted in a Ralph Lauren three-piece suit, he watched his father

stroll into the sanctuary with Karl Benton – a man proud of his Hispanic heritage. The

two men had been friends long before Brian was born thirty years ago.

As a matter of fact, his mother, Doreen, and Karl's wife, Sharon, had been the best of

friends. However, while the bond remained strong between his father and Karl Benton,

the friendship between the women had shriveled to pure hatred. When one woman called

another woman's child a rapist, there was no restitution to be made. It might have been

twelve years ago, but Brian remembered vividly the hurtful words that had been exchanged between Doreen and Sharon...

"...don't you call my daughter a whore," Sharon had huffed in Doreen's face.

"Wynton is primarily the blame. He is known for sleeping around, forcing himself on

these poor, virgin girls –"

"You must be out your mind, Sharon, to make such derogatory statements about my

son," Doreen lashed back. "Jasmine is no virgin! Everybody knows that! Your daughter

was on all fours when you found her in your bedroom – sexual positions too advanced for

a virgin, don't you think?"

"Who told you that?" Sharon had fumed.

The only person who knew the explicit details of that night when Sharon burst in on

Wynton and Jasmine was her husband, Karl. Sharon didn't believe that Wynton was that

fond of his mother, to be as revealing as that. She cut her eyes to Karl, who at that

moment, seemed content to revel in silence.

"...it doesn't matter how I found out," Doreen had said.. "Jasmine is just as much

the blame as Wynton. I don't approve of any of my boys having sex at sixteen, but for

God's sake, Sharon, you're making my son out to be a criminal of some sort."

"I don't care what you say, Doreen," Sharon said. "Your son forced himself on my

daughter!"

"So, you're calling Wynton a rapist?"

"Well, blessed assurance! You took the words right out of my mouth..."

That night was the last time Brian had seen Sharon at their home. Two months later,

Jasmine was shipped off to a boarding school in New York – never to be heard from or

seen again. At times, Brian wondered if Karl had really gotten over that situation between

Wynton and Jasmine. He never talked about it, and in a way, Brian was grateful. Karl

was an excellent friend to his father, and Brian would hate to see such a connection

dwindle into nothingness. The two men had so much in common that it was

oddly

frightening.

“Brian! Join us,’ Karl yelled. The morning service had just ended and Brian had been

moving toward the exit. When Brian got close enough, Karl affectionately threw a hand

around Brian’s shoulder. “Your father and I want to show you something. Do you have

ten minutes?”

“Sure,” Brian replied, and then added with humor in his voice, “Unlike you and my

father, I don’t have anyone to go home to.”

“A fine chap like yourself – I’m betting that will soon change,” Karl grinned. “A good woman is hard to find these days. They don’t make them like they used to.”

“I don’t know if I totally agree with that statement,” Brian said, as he traipsed behind

Karl toward Paul’s office. “My problem isn’t finding them. It’s choosing the right one.”

Karl spun around and met Brian’s pensive gaze with a mischievous smirk. “If you’re

talking about the ones that come here at this church – run for your life! They are too

much into themselves – not good wife material.”

“My brother is getting hitched in a few months,” Brian said. “And he appears to be

quite smitten...”

Karl held open Paul’s office door for Brian to enter, before adding, “All that glitters is

not gold; remember that. Besides, that girl has never stepped foot into this church.”

“What foolish advice are you giving my son?” Paul smirked, which seemed to

highlight the grey hair that grew beautifully at the sides of his head. He walked toward

the two men entering his office, attired in the same color suit as Brian. The only difference was that Paul’s suit was five sizes bigger and he wore a deep purple tie,

instead of the mint green that Brian wore. “Doreen and I have been working our butts off

to get this thirty-year-old ‘boy’ out of our house. Don’t ruin our hard work.”

“You better watch what you say, old man,” Brian teased. “Because you might just get

your wish.”

“Don’t you think it’s about time that you and Wynton give me some heirs before I

die?”

“But I thought we were your heirs,” Brian told his father.

“Proverbs 13:22 – a good man leaves an inheritance for his children’s children.” Paul

kept that mischievous smirk going. “I did not write those words, my boy; I’m just trying

to obey them.”

“Don’t sweat the boy, Paul,” Karl said. He gave Brian a casual pat on the back.

“Women come with their own problems. It takes ‘real’ men to maintain one for forty

years. So, take your time...”

“Karl, Brian doesn’t have time,” Paul said, his grey eyes coming alive with amazement. “He’s five years older than I was when I started to date his mother...”

Brian looked at Karl in mocked annoyance. “Please, don’t tell me that this is the reason you asked me to join you. Living with this man, I’ve had enough advice on my

decision in choosing a wife.”

Karl’s grin widened until it showed his pearly whites. “Of course not, our young protégé. We don’t wish to overstimulate your impressionable mind. Please have a seat by

that table.”

Paul bent his head and let out a quiet chortle. It tickled him to see the way that he and

Karl got under Brian’s skin. If Brian hoped to succeed him someday as Bishop over

Brandon View Baptist Church, the boy had better toughen up. Running a ministry of any

reputable size could bury an immature leader in frustration. Paul pulled up a chair next to

his son, while Karl took his position next to a projector screen that had been set

up by the

church's IT department.

Brian observed how his father and Karl had gracefully slipped into their professional

personas. With them, business was business and pleasure took a back seat. Karl had

evolved into a savvy real estate developer and had overseen the design of several grand

structures in Brandon, Florida. Over the years, Paul's company had provided the tons of

steel required to sustain projects of such magnitude. The men were two powerhouses that

had become inseparable, and at times, Brian felt a bit intimidated being in their presence.

"We are in the age of technology," Karl stated. "I don't see why we continue to kill

so many poor trees...help me out, Paul. Turn that thing on for me..."

The first image that materialized on the screen showed acres of land, piled high with

refuse, and surrounded by a forest of weeds that had gone unattended for months.

"Tell me what you see, son," Paul challenged Brian.

"Is this a trick question?"

"No, just tell me what you see."

Brian shrugged noncommittally. "I don't know; it looks like a dumpsite of some

sort.”

“Is that all you see?” Karl prompted. “A dumpsite? Come on, Brian. Look again...”

“But, that is what I see,” Brian said a bit annoyed. “A huge piece of land that looks

abandoned.”

“Use your imagination,” Paul said. “It’s more than a dumpsite.”

Karl grinned, waving a hand toward Brian as if to say ‘never mind’. “Paul, our work

will not be easy with this generation. Please, put up the next image.”

The old, abandoned-looking image was replaced with a clean copy of a well-

developed metropolis. Massive buildings, so intricately designed that Brian wondered if

such structures could ever be built. Every infrastructure appeared to be in place. Roads,

drainage systems, water supply, telecommunications, parks, public housing – the likes of

a city operating on its own power. Brian was undoubtedly impressed, but still he hadn’t a

clue to what these two men were trying to get across to him.

“This, my son is the future home of *Brandon View International*. Has a nice ring to it,

doesn’t it?” Paul stood up and faced Brian. “A municipality – where one of the largest

edifices will be erected in Brandon, Florida. I may not be around when it is completed,

but I promise you, this will be the remainder of my life's work."

"Our congregation is less than a thousand people," Brian said. "Why do you want to

build such a monstrosity?"

"It's called vision," Karl said. "Our membership is growing. In three years, we won't

have space to accommodate the people. Expansion is inevitable..."

Brian tried to hide his displeasure. He was not the type that chased after wealth and

grandeur. He was certain this was another one of his father's silly impulses – trying to

outdo his contemporaries. "What does mother have to say about this?"

"Doreen?" Paul's voice was shrouded in bitterness. "What choice does she have?

She's in Jamaica being a bloody pest to your brother and his fiancée. He called me this

morning complaining about it. But this project will be completed with or without your

mother's approval." He glared firmly at his son. "And I don't expect you to side with

your mother on this. In case you forgot, you're next in line to become the next bishop of

this church. So you better catch the vision and start acting like you care about it...I will

see you at home."

Chapter Four

“I agree with you, Miss. Edna,” Wynton said to his fifty-year-old event organizer.

“We had a swell time in Ocho Rios. Thanks for an excellent show; at least I know how

my money is being spent.”

“I’m pleased to be on your team,” Edna said. “You are in great demand, which makes

my job a helluva lot easier.”

Wynton, who was riding in his limo, stole a quick glance at his fiancée, whose back

was turned toward him. They needed to talk, so the sooner he got Miss Edna off the

phone, the sooner he could turn his attention to the woman whose name he planned on

changing to Mrs. Lakatos come November. However, he needed Edna to understand

where he was at this point in his life. Performing at sold-out concerts several times a year

and traveling from city to city was the dream of any serious musical artist, but it was only

part of what would complete his happiness.

“Now, Miss Edna,” Wynton said firmly. “I can’t do any more tours of this magnitude.

I’m getting married in a few short months and I need time to get some things

together.”

“So, that’s your way of telling me that I will be out of a job,” Edna joked.

“We’ve talked about this briefly, Miss Edna. Small gigs are fine, but let those sleeping giants sleep on – at least until I’ve settled a bit into my ‘new’ life.”

“How long are we talking here? You can’t afford the risk of slipping into obscurity.”

“I release two albums a year,” Wynton said. “A short break will not push me out of

the limelight. You said so yourself. My fans are crazy about the music that I put out.

Some of the other ‘big name’ artists are not as prolific as I am, but they are still flying

high. It’s all about building my brand. And we have done that.”

Edna accepted her defeat and kept her professional timbre going, “Well, then, let me

remind you now since I’ve got you on the phone. On Thursday – three days from today –

you have a short interview with Katie Donnahue at My Fox Tampa Bay, followed by a

stage performance. It’s a TV station located on the west of Kennedy Blvd.”

“That’s fine; I can do that,” Wynton said and then added in a humorous tone, “I am

not as old as you are, Miss Edna, but I have problems remembering my own name

sometimes. Send me a text or something.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Funny Man,” Edna grinned. “You will admit that I’m the

best in the business.”

“That you are, Miss Edna, that you are.”

Wynton disconnected the line just as the limo cruised out of the Lewis Airport. It was

a privately owned airport that Wynton used to escape the blitz that came along with being

a celebrity. It was not that he didn’t appreciate the open doors his talent provided, but he

was wary of the hungry sharks who wanted to capitalize on his fame. He’d had dozens of

reputable offers from big name music producers, offering him the world if he would

consider scribbling his signature on the dotted line. Wynton, however, was a shrewd

businessman, and was careful not to get too excited about the contracts being thrown at

him. He did not need big time producers as badly as they needed him, because he’d made

it to the top without them.

Wynton had his own record label and had been producing music under it for the past

four years. The aspects of the business that he could not handle were outsourced – to

industry gurus like Miss Edna, who handled most of his bookings and

promotions. The

only real pain in his butt at the moment was his distressing mother, who'd tried repeatedly over the years to sabotage his career in music. But he would fight her at every

turn to keep his company progressing – the same way he would fight to make Tara

Lamont the next Mrs. Lakatos. Wynton tapped on the glass to get the limo driver's

attention, who happened to also be Wynton's main bodyguard. Everyone called him

Tiger.

“Let me know when you are near Adamo Avenue,” he said. “I want to get some chocolate ice cream. You know the place I'm referring to?”

“Yes, sir...”

Wynton had hoped his words to the driver would pull Tara's listless gaze from the

window. She was crazy over chocolate ice cream. However, the deep slump in her

shoulder, and the prolonged silence suggested that she had no interest in being charmed

out of her depression. Wynton grasped the palm of her hand, and with his thumb, he

gently caressed it. He wished he could massage away the hurt she was experiencing, but

it was not easy getting over his mother's vicious verbal attacks.

“I love you,” Wynton said quietly. “That’s what’s important. It doesn’t matter, the

crazy things my mother says. She’s just a miserable middle-aged woman looking for

attention. She can throw as many tantrums as she wants; I’m not leaving you. Do you feel

me, baby?” Unhurriedly, he moved his strokes up Tara’s arm, allowing the tips of his

fingers to graze her neck.

Tara’s insides shuddered in response to Wynton’s touch. She knew if she turned to

face him at that point, she would give in to the feelings he was stirring in her. It didn’t

help that the limo driver had John Legend’s voice crooning in the background.

“Do you want some chocolate ice cream, or do you want me?” she heard Wynton ask.

“Or, if you prefer...” he paused, as his lips explored the contours her skin, giving small

kisses the way she liked it. “...you can have both. I’m here to please you.”

She squeezed Wynton’s hand. “Your mother really hurt me,” she said, turning to face

him. “I’ve never been called a ‘hag’ in my life.”

“Don’t take it so seriously...”

“Wynton, do you even know what a hag is?”

“You’re not one of them, so why should I care?”

“Do you think I’m ugly?”

“C’mon on, baby. I can’t believe you’re letting my mother get to you like this –”

“I’m serious, Wynton,” Tara huffed. Her pageboy haircut made her look fierce and

inviting at the same time – one of several reasons why Wynton was attracted to her.

“Why does she hate me so much? I’ve gone out of my way trying to get that woman’s

approval, but nothing I do, moves her. Am I too black for her ‘white’ son?”

The question made Wynton study the remarkable shades of their skin, which he often

did when they lay naked in his bed. His complexion looked a lot like coffee creamer,

whereas Tara’s was as dark as coco beans. “First of all, my mother is African American,”

he said. “So, I am as much an African American as I am of my father’s blood – call him

‘white’, if you desire. I don’t care. I wish I had been born with a little more melanin.

Maybe that would have pleased you.”

Tara felt Wynton’s fingers slip away from her neck – a sign that she’d made him

cross. She shot a guarded look in his direction. “Why are you getting upset? It’s not fair

that you should take it personal –”

“Because you’re making a big deal out of nothing, Tara. I’m not marrying my

mother; I'm marrying you."

"It would be just like I'm marrying your mother," Tara shot back. "She's never gonna

let us live in peace. She followed you from Brandon, Florida to every island during your

music tour. Last night she made the security guard open the door to your dressing room

and she hid in the dark like she was a bloody assassin. Now, you tell me, Wynton, if you

couldn't stop her from coming on the tour with you, what makes you think you can stop

her from interfering in our marriage? If that's how it's gonna be, we might as well end

this relationship between us right now..."

The limo stopped in front of a sign that read, *Mr. Roger's Ice Cream Parlor*. The

limo driver slid the small glass window behind him to one side and then leveled his fat

face toward Wynton.

"Boss, do you still want to get some ice cream?" he asked.

Without breaking his gaze from Tara, Wynton took a fifty dollar-bill from his coat

pocket and held it in the air. "Get as much as you can and then take me to my apartment.

My fiancée and I will be staying in for the rest of the day. Make sure my schedule is

free."

Doreen entered her home and blew kisses on both sides of her husband's cheeks. She

then hung her Louis Vuitton bag on his shoulder. She looked refreshed in a charcoal two-

piece suit, which had been tailored to fit her pear-shaped body. If Paul hadn't been

contending against Doreen's stubborn streak, he would have complimented her – as he'd

always done during the earlier years of their marriage.

“My darling, Paul,” she greeted enthusiastically. “It has only been ten days, but I've

missed you nevertheless...the rest of my luggage is in the car, do you mind getting it for

me?”

“I'm busy now. I'll get it when I'm done,” he said dismissively. “Why didn't you use

your keys instead of ringing the doorbell?”

Doreen patted Paul on the face. “Come now, darling, aren't you the least bit happy to

see me? Hmm? I could have gone missing...what would you say then?”

“Ten days wasn't long enough,” Paul mumbled. “I would do fine without you for a

month.”

Doreen laughed. “Not a one of you can do without me for any length of time. I'll

prove it.” She twirled away from Paul and inspected her home. “Did you have someone

look at that window in the sun room?”

“What window?”

Doreen turned and faced her husband. “Ah, do you see what I’m saying to you, Paul?

You don’t have a clue about how to maintain this home. Have the floors been mopped

since I left?”

Paul’s grey eyes became like steel. “How many Bloody Marys did you drink while

you were in Jamaica making a fool out of yourself?”

“You know I don’t drink alcohol, darling. Pastors’ wives should always be

levelheaded...” Doreen’s thoughts suddenly transitioned to the next concern on her

mental list. “Where’s Brian, by the way? I have a job for him to do.”

“Wynton called me,” Paul stated. “Didn’t I forbid you to go on that trip with our son?”

Doreen said sharply, “Somebody has got to do the dirty work, Paul. Wynton doesn’t

know what he’s getting himself into with that girl.”

“Wynton and Brian are grown men!” Paul flung Doreen’s Louis Vuitton bag to the

floor. “Let our sons decide what is best for their lives.”

“Jump over a cliff, Paul! My sons are Lakatos – a royal bloodline – and they will marry within their class. That black heifer Wynton picked up from the streets will never be accepted as one of us.”

“That girl did not come from the streets –”

“Her family is nothing but a bunch of blithering crack heads!” Doreen stomped her

foot in anger. “Tara had better skip back to wherever the hell she came from or else she

will have me to deal with for the rest of her life. Your heart is weak, so I would advise

that you stay out of this.”

Paul glared at his wife for a while before he spoke again. “You will not get your way

forever,” he said quietly. “Our sons will be men and they will live their lives the way they

choose. I promise you this one thing, Doreen – God is not mocked. Whatever you sow,

you will reap.”

Doreen shook her head at her husband in a pathetic kind of way. He would bring God

into every conversation they had. It was time for him to shut up, so that she could enjoy a

moment of quietude. She swiftly turned her back toward him. Paul knew when Doreen

did that, it signaled the end of a discussion. Soon, Doreen heard Paul’s footsteps

trotting

in the distance. Some time later, she heard a car engine roar.

Doreen smiled. Paul was probably going to the church to languish upon that poor carpet –as he usually did when things didn't go as he wanted. She, however, didn't give a

hoot about his juvenile behavior. He would come around and realize how stupid he had

been to challenge her.

She picked up her Louis Vuitton bag from the floor and placed it on the kitchen counter. Her stomach ached for something hot to drink. Hot chocolate made her vomit.

Coffee gave her headaches. Her choice of tea had always been chamomile, but she hadn't

any desire to put the kettle on. Instead, she drank in the silence surrounding her, and

allowed her thoughts to become embittered at the way Wynton had treated her in

Jamaica. Doreen blamed Wynton's fiancée for his actions because she had groomed her

sons to be pleasant. *Soon, my precious baby boy,* Doreen mumbled to herself, *Tara*

Lamont will be nothing but a faded memory.

Chapter Five

Brian felt a surge of depression tugging at his heart. Usually, he experienced such

bouts during the eve of his birthday. However, since he'd turned thirty last December, he

could not use getting older as the reason for his current mood. Then again, he could be

feeling the aftermath of turning thirty. Men his age generally had a sense of direction

about where their lives were headed – at least the ones he knew. For instance, by his age,

his father had been married with a new business on the way, and had been installed as the

church's first Deacon. In addition, his father and Karl Benton had invested some of their

profits, and within eighteen months, their returns were astounding.

His brother, Wynton, had built his fame from scratch, and had become the new 'face'

of dancehall music, both in Florida and in the Caribbean. Last month, he proposed to his

hairstylist while they were in midair, flying to Brazil to one of his concerts. Brian was

jealous of his brother's success, because his brother had done it all before he'd turned

twenty-eight. *Well, Brian thought, I should not feel like a total failure. I'm in line to*

become the next Bishop of Brandon View Baptist Church. To the secular world, Wynton

might appear successful, however, according to *1 John 2:16*, Wynton was wasting his

time playing on the devil's team.

Brian's Christian faith assured him of the promise of eternal life – where he would

bask in the best that heaven had to offer. Should that make him feel better? Maybe when

he'd lived to the ripe, old age of eighty. Brian wanted to enjoy life now – while his body

was still young and vibrant. He did not want to go around 'spilling' his seed – like his

brother, Wynton, had been doing ever since they were teenagers. Brian recalled how he

used to watch in horror as Wynton fondled the young girls while sitting next to them in

church. Their father would be preaching against sexual perversion, and Wynton would be

plotting ways to 'pluck the cherries' of unsuspecting virgins.

Some, Wynton had managed to seduce within a few hours. Brian saw firsthand how

those naïve girls were taken in by Wynton's deceptive charm – he'd wooed them as if

he'd mastered the art of seduction. Those girls fell so easily that Brian wondered if they

were mentally challenged. As disgusting as it had been to witness such debauchery, Brian

still wrestled with one truth he could not refute – those girls, however naïve, or however

stupid they might have been, those girls wanted his brother. They flung their bodies at

Wynton as if he were the god of fertility. The more sex Wynton had the more sex he

wanted. If that situation with Karl's daughter hadn't taken place, Brian was convinced

that Wynton would have ruined his life and the lives of those poor, impressionable girls.

What did Wynton have that I didn't? Brian thought, as he pulled his mind back from

the past. Did black women these days prefer white men with grey eyes? Brian had even

heard women say that white men had a tendency to be more affectionate. Brian didn't

think so. Black men could be just as stimulating as white men, or men of any race for that

matter. In his assessment, a good man was a good man, and having certain qualities

should not be bound to a certain ethnicity.

Brian was not 'white' like his brother. But he had height, a smooth, caramel

complexion, and lips that would make a woman stare for hours. Some thought that he

looked a little like Chris Brown. He was not muscular, but well-toned and could throw a

football to the North Pole. But most important of all, Brian had a strong faith in Jesus

Christ. What woman would not want a man like him?

At precisely ten-fifteen in the morning, Brian exited the ramp that would lead him

into State Road 60. He was scheduled to meet with Karl Benton at his real estate office.

Despite the fact that Brian's father owned a steel plant, Karl had offered him a job. Brian,

however, had not turned down the offer, but had asked Karl to give him several weeks to

think about it – especially after recently completing his Doctorate at Florida Christian

College. The only thing that bothered Brian about the job offer was why Karl wanted him

to keep it a secret.

“Good Morning, Mr. Lakatos!”

The brisk greeting stopped Brian dead in his tracks. His gaze leveled on an auburn

beauty sitting behind the receptionist's desk. He'd visited Karl's office several times

since returning from college, however, this was the first time he'd seen her. *Very*

attractive, he thought, *probably not wife material, though. Looks too independent...too*

worldly...He watched as she stood and left her cubicle to meet him.

“Mr. Benton is expecting you,” she gushed. “But he’s wrapping up a meeting at the

moment...would you like a cup of coffee while you wait?”

Brian could not stop staring at how vivacious the woman seemed. “No, I’m fine, thank you,” he managed.

“Would you like a magazine?” she said. “Mr. Benton told me that you love staying

abreast of current events.”

“He did? I mean, when I have the chance to...” Brian knew that his brows showed his

puzzlement. Why on earth would Karl inform his receptionist of such a personal detail?

Brian’s father had trouble remembering his birthday – much less, what he loved to read.

Moreover, Brian had never mentioned this part of his life to Karl. So, how did Karl find

out about it?

“...my name is Sheila, by the way,” the woman was saying. “What magazine do you

prefer?”

Brian decided to indulge her. “What magazines do you have?”

“We have tons in the sitting area.” She flashed Brian a warm smile as she gestured to

her left. “Follow me and I’ll show them to you.”

“I’ve never seen you here before,” Brian said. Sheila’s strides were long and fast, which made Brian feel as if he were in a competition to keep up.

“Then you must not have been here within the last three months. For two years, I worked at Mr. Benton’s office in New York. I’d had enough of the cold weather...” She

glanced at Brian and gave him another warm smile. “You’re cute. Mr. Benton did not tell

me that.”

Brian let loose a coy grin. “You seem enamored with whatever Mr. Benton tells you,”

he said.

“Karl is a wonderful man,” Sheila said pragmatically. “You should be proud to have

someone like him willing to show you the ropes.”

Again, Brian felt his brain scrambling to understand what he had just walked into.

Karl is a wonderful man... Brian wondered if Sheila realized she’d just referred to her

boss in a way that suggested a deeper, personal relationship of some sort.

Definitely not

wife material, he mentally concluded. Sheila was saying some weird things – like – *he*

should he be ‘proud’ to have Karl show him the ropes.

Brian’s father had operated a steel plant for over twenty years and Brian believed that

his father was just as capable of showing him the ropes. He didn't need another man to

take the place of his father. Truthfully, the only reason he had decided to meet with Karl

was because the man had been so persistent. Karl always wanted to 'show' him stuff and

always made him feel as if he was behind the 'eight' ball.

"The world of choice is before you," Sheila stopped in front of a rack of magazines

and bent her body so that her tight, miniskirt revealed the curves of her thighs. She

looked over her shoulder and smirked at Brian. "All you have to do is select whatever

one you want. It's all yours..."

"Thanks. I'll keep that mind," Brian mumbled. He felt dizzy all of a sudden. Sheila's

suggestive vibes were ringing loud and clear in his face – too bad he wasn't interested in

a woman who appeared too worldly for his taste.

"I will come back to you in a few minutes," she told him before walking away in long

strides. "I can see why Mr. Benton is so fond of you – you're adorable..."

Brian tried not to look at Sheila's hips as they swung slowly from side to side.

However, the temptation was too strong. *One look wouldn't harm me*, he thought. *Just*

one, quick look... Their eyes met instantly. Brian knew he had been caught in the

act of

‘perversion’. “Oh my God, I am such a sinner!” he spat under his breath.

“Have a seat, Brian,” Karl said. “I’ll fix you something to drink. What do you like?”

“I’ve got scotch and soda, Hennessey...”

“I don’t drink,” Brian said. “You know that.”

“Oh, right...” Karl grinned facetiously. “If you ask me, temptation is a bit overrated,

don’t you think?”

I didn’t ask you, Brian thought, but instead he said, “I don’t agree.” He recalled how

he’d miserably failed the ‘eye’ test several moments ago. He should have resisted the

urge to look at Sheila’s swinging hips. “For a Christian, temptation is to be respected for

what it is – you play with fire and you will get burned.”

Karl’s grin turned into a guffaw. “Brian, you are such an old soul. A good axiom,

nonetheless, but Oscar Wilde says it better, *‘The only way to get rid of temptation is to*

yield to it’ – and that, my boy is the most sensible thing I’ve ever heard someone say.”

“That is why the world is in the mess it’s in,” Brian countered. He wondered why

Karl wasted his time coming to church when all he did was disagree with

everything that

was preached from the pulpit. “Everyone is doing what seems ‘right’ in their own eyes.

Oscar Wilde should have read the Bible before making such a disparaging statement.”

“Spoken like a true preacher.” Karl took a swig of the scotch he’d poured into a shot

glass. He then patted Brian on his shoulder. “I’m betting your father did not waste his

money when he sent you to those fanatics – excuse me – Bible College...you seem to

have grasped whatever it is you studied. However, you should be doing something more

fulfilling with your talents. There are too many Bible Thumpers in the United States – if

you ask me. That is the only difference that separates your father and me. He’s a better

businessman than the preacher he tries to be...just don’t tell him I said that...”

Brian stood up, visibly injured by Karl’s words. “This is not a good idea, Karl, I shouldn’t be here. You should not disrespect my father’s legacy –”

“Oh, come on, Brian. Don’t take life too seriously.” Karl gently pushed Brian back

down into the chair. “Your father, Paul, has dealt with my ‘imperfections’ all these years.

You should try to do the same. Your father knows where I stand on the issue of religion.”

“Imperfections? That is what you call them?” Brian shot Karl an exasperated look.

“I’m not interested in the job the offer. Coming here has made me realize that.”

Karl knew it was a lie, but he would not consent to Brian’s whimsical sentiments.

There were other ways of attaining what he sought. He stared at Brian a good while

before he shrugged and said, “Okay. If that is what you want. I will just inform my

daughter of your decision. She will certainly be disappointed to know that you’ve turned

down such a great opportunity.”

Brian’s brows furrowed so deeply that he felt his facial muscles throbbing in pain.

“What does Jasmine have to do with this?”

“But you just told me that you’re not interested in hearing about the offer. Did you

change your mind?” Karl crossed both his arms and his legs as he leaned against a huge

entertainment center. The tidbit about his daughter seemed to have pinned Brian to his

chair – exactly as Karl had anticipated. “Look, all I need is fifteen minutes of your time –

you never know, Brian – it could be the most important fifteen minutes of your life.”

The past is behind, learn from it. The future is ahead, prepare for it. The present

is

here, live it.

– Thomas S. Monson

Chapter Six

Battery Park City – New York

“We could make another counter-offer, Mr. Boston,” Jasmine explained to her irascible client. “But bear in mind; the appliances were included with a six-month

warranty. Trying to move down here to New York in the winter could be cumbersome. It

will definitely save you a trip to Home Depot...”

Jasmine leaned back in her swivel chair and then switched the receiver to her other

ear. She’d been on the phone with Mr. Boston for nearly an hour and she was ready to

dismantle her fresh hairdo. The man was intolerable.

“...you want the seller to pay the closing costs, as well?” Jasmine rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “Mr. Boston, we have counteroffered three times. The seller made it

clear that she doesn’t want to pay the closing cost. Can we meet for dinner this evening?

Because we really need to sit down and make a decision. Time is running out... okay, Mr.

Boston, I’ll meet you at six this evening...”

Jasmine disconnected from the line as soon as her client had agreed. She would call

him later about the location. She was just anxious to get off the phone so that she

could

regain some peace and quiet. She would rather get a tooth pulled than spend fifteen

minutes explaining “real estate” to Mr. Boston. Wealthy people believed the world

revolved around them – at least, the ones Jasmine had been dealing with in her six years

as a real estate broker. Money was not an issue for Mr. Boston. He could purchase that

villa by the lake with the interest he made on his millions. He just chose to drive a hard

bargain, which Jasmine did not have the patience for.

She eased to her feet and moseyed over to the window of her elaborate office. The

scene overlooked the Hudson River. Battery Park City was smack in the middle of the

financial hub of lower Manhattan. The World Financial Center stood across the street on

West Street, and behind it, Jasmine could see the new, partially completed One World

Trade Center. For months, she’d been watching the towers rise gracefully in height. Her

office was located in one of the finest buildings in Battery Park City – a two thousand

square-foot room, high on the thirteenth floor. Her father had acquired the office space

when he found out that she had decided to ‘follow’ in his footsteps.

Karl Benton’s Real Estate had become a household name. While Jasmine’s father had

strayed into property development, she preferred the role as real estate agent – where she

toiled as the person between sellers and buyers. Her persuasive skills had always gotten

her clients the best offers, and for now, Jasmine felt she should keep her focus on her area

of strength. Property development, on the other hand, was a multifaceted business –

consisting of a range of activities – from the renovation and release of existing buildings

to the purchase of raw land. Her father was proficient at converting ideas on paper into

monuments of beauty. Maybe someday, Jasmine mused briefly, she would acquire the

courage to broaden her business acumen. However, it was her father’s dream that she

would eventually take over the family’s business.

The unobtrusive ring of her phone eased Jasmine’s gaze from the window. She

glanced at her wristwatch before moving over to her desk to answer it – she had been

expecting the call.

“Hi, Mummy. You feel any better since we spoke yesterday?”

Sharon’s coughs preceded her response. “Jasmine, I am as sick as a dog,” she

groaned. “I’m vomiting all over the place.”

“Well, did you go to the hospital to check things out?”

“I’m a nurse, Jasmine,” Sharon said mulishly. “I should know whether or not I need

to go to the hospital. Besides, I don’t think it’s that serious. There’s a stomach virus

going around –”

“Mummy, stop. Listen to how you sound. You’re wheezing with every breath. I’m

surprised that Daddy didn’t drag you out of that house by now.”

“Your father?” Sharon’s cough exploded in Jasmine’s ear. When she finally recovered, she gave in to a weak sigh. “That man doesn’t care if I puke my guts to death.

Everything’s changed between us. He never stays home.”

Jasmine pulled the swivel chair from behind her desk and then sat down in it.

Everything’s changed between us... That line brought a slew of suppressed memories

back to Jasmine’s mind. Ever since her father shipped her off to New York, her parents’

marriage had suffered terribly. From the moment the idea had been suggested, Sharon

never agreed that Jasmine should go to New York. But Karl was forceful on controlling

the situation.

It was the only way he thought he could salvage his daughter’s good name. Karl

felt

that after a certain number of years, people would forget the rumor that his daughter had

‘lied’ about being raped. The truth was that Jasmine and Wynton, (Paul’s wayward son)

had indulged in consensual sex, and as a result, Jasmine ended up getting pregnant with

Wynton’s child. Of course, Karl had wanted to give the child up for adoption, but in a

twist of fate – Jasmine had a miscarriage at eleven weeks.

“It’s been twelve years, Mummy,” Jasmine reflected. “I have forgiven my father, but

he is still treating you as if it is your fault.”

“You are his only child,” Sharon said. “He wants nothing but the best for you – remember that.”

“It amazes me how you still stand up for him.”

“Regardless of what happened in the past, Jasmine...” Sharon paused as she waited

for her coughs to subside. “Karl is still your father and he loves you.”

“So you have told me a million times. It’s just that –” Jasmine was interrupted by yet

another spell of her mother’s dry cough. That was it. Jasmine could no longer ignore the

anxiety she felt building over her mother’s condition, and with her father not being

around, made her want to drop everything and take the next flight out to Brandon,

Florida. “Mummy, I really don’t like how sick you sound. I think you should go and see a

doctor – maybe I should come home and stay with you for a few days.”

“I’ve been trying to get you to come home for years,” Sharon said. “Maybe it’s best

that I visit you.”

“No way. I think it’s best that I come. You don’t sound well enough to travel.”

“I have visited you in New York for the last seven Christmases. I should be fine.”

“Mummy, I want to do this – you were there for me during one of the most difficult

times of my life. I think it’s time for me to come home. It’s been long enough.”

“I know,” Sharon said quietly. “I just want to know if you’re ready to take that step.”

A good question, Jasmine thought as she placed the receiver into its cradle. Her

mother had a point. Was she really ready to go back to Brandon, Florida and face the

fragments of her past? The answer had eluded Jasmine for months and even now, she

could not say for sure if she would ever satisfy that question with an answer. However,

Jasmine was not the same sixteen-year-old girl who’d left home covered in shame.

Through God’s strength, she had endured and had morphed into a successful,

well-

assured businesswoman. Renewing her faith in God had been the key to her rediscovering

her self-worth. It was one of those decisions she'd made at a spot in time when she

realized she had nothing to lose. And, she was glad she had, because the experience had

been rewarding ever since.

But in life – no matter how well a person seemed to have adjusted after a trial – there

were always a few mountains left to climb and a few rivers left to cross. Jasmine still had

not completely won the emotional battle of losing her baby. Every now and again she

wondered what it would have been like to have a daughter – or a son—who would have

turned eleven years old this year. *It would have been Wynton's first child.* The thought

sent a cold shiver down her spine. It had been twelve years and Wynton did not know that

she had gotten pregnant. She wanted to keep it that way. They had been teenagers – too

young to understand the far-reaching effects of their actions.

Jasmine stood up again, and instead of heading back to the window, she walked over

to the office of one of the agents. There were three agents all together – all

sharing a

space big enough to be an eight-bedroom mansion.

“Hi Julie, please take my messages,” Jasmine said. “I’m going out to get some fresh

air.”

Julie did not glance up from her computer. “Okay, will do. Bring me a turkey on rye

when you’re coming back. I’ll reimburse you.”

“Sure, but I don’t think I’ll be back within the hour.”

“That’s fine, Jasmine. I’m working on something anyway,” Julie said. “I’ll take a break when you come back. Thanks!”

Jasmine took the elevator to the ground floor and exited the building into the August

heat of the city. She flagged down a cab and instructed him to take her to Brooklyn.

There, she would seek the company of a woman who had helped her back on the road to

wholeness.

Chapter Seven

Wynton had finally given Tara the green light to move her things into his apartment.

Now, she knew without a doubt that he was serious about making her his wife. For

weeks, she had been pleading with Wynton to let her move in with him, but so much of

his mother's training was in him that he had often brushed her suggestion aside. Tara

sensed that Wynton did not want to lose her.

It was no secret that Wynton's mother was a sore pain in the butt, but at least,

Wynton did his best to keep her happy. That fiasco in Jamaica had actually worked out

for Tara's benefit. Doreen demanded that Wynton get rid of the 'hag', but in response,

Wynton decided to bump up the wedding date by two months. Doreen would be the last

one to find out about it.

Tara sauntered into Wynton's studio wearing nothing but one of Wynton's tee shirts.

She straddled his lap and then pressed her lips against his. "About five weeks to be exact

and I will be Mrs. Wynton Lakatos," she announced. "Are you sure you want to do this,

babe?"

Wynton enjoyed a passionate kiss with Tara before he responded with a quiet, “Yes.”

Then he added in a husky voice, “That’s why I’m in the studio this morning. I’m working

on a new tune for you.”

“Oh, wow, babe. You know just how to make a girl gush.” Tara could feel Wynton’s

muscles contracting beneath her gentle strokes – it was a sign that she had awakened his

sexual appetite. It didn’t take much to get Wynton going. Her man was a ferocious beast

in bed and Tara knew if she didn’t get up off Wynton, the movers would meet them

‘frolicking’ in the middle of the floor. “I don’t know what to say, Wynton. You are an

amazing man...”

“I’m glad that I have succeeded in making you realize that,” he said. “How much time do we have?”

“For what?”

Wynton smirked as he stared at Tara through eyes that were half closed. “You don’t

come in here kissing me and stuff and expect me not to react.”

“Oh, that...” Tara paused and let loose a seductive giggle. “I was just showing you

how grateful I am for the way you stood up to your mother. I’m proud of you, babe.”

“I don’t want to talk about my mother right now,” Wynton said. “You are the only

thing on my mind at the moment.”

“You mean sex is the only thing on your mind,” Tara said and then added in a playful

voice, “Sometimes, I feel you are just using my poor body to satisfy your selfish ‘needs’.”

Wynton kept his gaze on Tara. “Make up your mind, girl. You want a lover or a eunuch?”

Tara’s laughter exploded from her stomach. “You are such a fool,” she said, placing

one of her fingers on his lips. “I’m only making sure that you love *me* more than you love

my body.”

“How could the two be separated? Your body *is* you.”

“I’m serious, Wynton. I don’t want us to always use sex as the only way to settle our

arguments.”

“Am I doing that?” he asked her in a genuine tone of concern. “I love you – I thought

you understood that by now. I’ve never let a woman move into my place...”

“It is complicated.” Tara saw Wynton’s grey eyes dithering with confusion, so – to

keep things flowing smoothly between them – she decided to ditch the subject for the

time being. While she loved the way Wynton was able to express himself in such a

‘physical’ manner, sometimes, she would prefer for him to just ‘talk’ about their problems, rather than ‘push’ his tongue into her ears.

It fixed things temporarily, but at a different time, the same problem would rear its

ugly head. Her man was not big on communication, per say, but she did her best to make

him see that being in a relationship was more than sex. “Tell you what, babe, why don’t I

let you get back to putting the finishing touches on that song. I want to unpack my

suitcases before the movers show up with the rest of my things.”

Wynton held Tara’s legs down and asked her, “You sure this isn’t a fight?”

“I’m sure, babe.” She planted a small peck on Wynton’s lip before she wiggled out of

his grip. “You just made me the happiest girl alive by moving up our wedding date. Why

would I pick a fight now? Doesn’t make sense, does it?”

Wynton responded with a smirk. Who would have thought that he would be marrying

his hairstylist within the next month? One of his boys in the music business had recommended Tara as being one of the hottest female barbers in Brandon. For a ‘white’,

successful boy like him, that was important. He could not simply walk into one of his

local barbershops like he used to do back in the day. He had become too famous for that

and he did not want to make himself an easy target. He'd had two stalkers in the past

who'd tried to get into his apartment. His 'normal' routine had been altered dramatically.

So, he arranged for Tara to bring her services to him. One look in the mirror at the

wonders she had done to his hair won her huge points with him. It was the sharpest-

looking buzz cut that he'd ever received.

"...stop staring and get back to work," Tara said, pulling Wynton back from his 'walk' down memory lane.

He observed Tara's long, dark legs gliding beneath his white tee-shirt. The image of

vanilla ice cream, sprinkled with melted dark chocolate began to mess with his thoughts.

It was the perfect picture of their bodies intertwined. Wynton could not let Tara know

how much she really satisfied him. She would truly think that sex was the only thing that

he wanted from her. "Just so you know," he called after her, "I'm just about done with

this song. So, don't think you will be unpacking all day – I have other things planned for

you."

Doreen never went to bed before she had scribbled in her 'black' book, lengthy paragraphs of organized thoughts. She trusted no one with her private musings, which

included her husband, Paul, to whom she'd been married for nearly thirty-one years.

Doreen could not even remember the last time she'd entertained Paul with a bit of

'church' gossip. He was an extreme bore who usually resorted to jamming scriptures

down her throat. His favorite verse was found in Galatians 5:15, "*But if you bite and*

devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another". It was Paul's way of

a rebuke over the way she treated Wynton's fiancée.

Of course, Doreen would ignore Paul – just as she was doing that night. Her head had

been down in her black book ever since Paul entered their bedroom. He knew not to

bother her when she was busy writing in it. So, in silence, Paul proceeded to change out

of his linen slacks. That would have been fine with Doreen if his movements hadn't been

accompanied by grunts – which sounded as if Paul had swallowed a blithering hog.

Doreen looked over the plastic frames of her eyeglasses – evidently pissed. She

watched him pull his V-Neck T-shirt over his head – revealing the fuzzy grey hairs on his

chest. The excessive fat that had been held in place by the rigid material, bounced free

and settled unattractively over his boxers. When Paul turned to face Doreen, she almost

gagged.

“When are you going to lose that disgraceful-looking stomach?” she snapped at him.

“It looks like a sack of potatoes!”

“Excuse me?”

“Just look at that body, Paul. You’re sixty years-old, but you look like a dratted eighty-year-old slob.”

Paul’s heart sank at the words of his wife. “Doreen, say something nice for a change,”

he said quietly. “Because if you take a careful look at your body in the mirror, you would

realize that you are not twenty years-old anymore. You’re aging as well.”

Doreen brushed off Paul’s response with a flick of the wrist. “I don’t like that bastard

you call a friend, but at least, he stays fit. Karl is fifty-five, but he looks fifteen years

younger than his age. Why don’t you ask Karl for some pointers on how to get rid of that

fat? You could die soon for being obese.”

“Then, let me die, Doreen,” Paul spat, no longer able to fight off his irritation.
“I’ll

have peace in heaven – away from you and your disparaging woes.”

“You know I’m right,” Doreen pressed. “Your father died of a heart attack when he

was fifty-two. Your brother died when he was –”

“Oh, for hell’s sake, Doreen, drop it!” Paul walked off to the bathroom and slammed

the door.

Doreen swallowed two Vitamin B12 tablets and then resumed writing in her black

book. Outside of the columns she scribbled, *Tomorrow morning, I will empty the refrigerator and restock it with bottles of Noni Juice. I’ve heard it has laxative properties*

– great for bowel movement. Paul needs a good pass. Below that she wrote: *I will pay*

Wynton a surprise visit tomorrow afternoon to reinforce my demands. I have huge plans

for both you and your brother... She closed the book and hid it in a special spot. Just

before she shut off the lamp on the dresser next to her, she slid to her knees for a five-

minute prayer.

The greatest gift that you can give another is the purity of your attention.

- James Arthur Ray

Chapter Eight

6:24 a.m.

Sharon woke with excruciating pains in her lower back. She tried to sit up, but ended

up rolling to one side and onto the floor. She stayed there until the pain subsided to the

point where she felt as if she could crawl to the bathroom. She managed to push her face

in the toilet and almost immediately, her stomach began to heave violently. Her moans

were loud enough for Karl to have heard her; however, there were no sign of him coming

to her aid. After a few minutes, she relaxed against the porcelain and soon felt herself

losing consciousness.

An hour later, in a cold sweat, her eyes flung open. Parts of her body had grown

numb and her skin felt clammy to the touch. *These are no ordinary symptoms,* Sharon

feared. *Something is really wrong with me...* She needed help if she wanted to go to the

hospital, and Sharon could not remember if she'd seen her husband lying in the bed. It

had been dark when the pain struck. Maybe Karl was in his office, which was far away

from their bedroom. That could explain why he hadn't turned his attention to her

by now.

How unfortunate that the week she decided to take a vacation from her job as a registered

nurse, these symptoms had come upon her. She hadn't any warning signs and she hardly

ever was sick – circumstances too unusual for her to make a reasonable assessment of her

condition.

For sure, she could rule out pregnancy. She had gone through menopause more than

five years ago, and even if she hadn't gone through menopause, Karl hadn't touched her

in months. And, if it had been a twenty-four-hour bug or some stomach virus – as she

told Jasmine the other day – then, she should have recovered by now and should not feel

as if she were on the brink of death.

Sharon managed to hobble down – one step at a time – toward the living room, in an

attempt to find her husband. Maybe if he saw how sick she was he would not think that

she was trying to put on an act in an effort to win his affection. However, the pain inside

of her was so severe that she doubted she could even make it to Karl's office. She was

better off scribbling her final words of instruction on a piece of napkin and let

her body

be found sprawled in the middle of the floor.

She leaned against the wall to catch her breath when suddenly she heard the start of a

lawnmower. It was Tuesday. The gardener showed up every other Saturday. Her neighbors, who lived on both sides of her home, had mulch-covered landscapes – so they

did not need a lawnmower. So, what other reason was there for the noise? With her

curiosity getting the best of her, Sharon ditched her attempt to get to Karl's office, and

instead, turned left into the dining room and dragged her steps to the bay window.

Her eyes connected with the back of a man who'd taken his shirt off to reveal a well-

toned body. He wore a blue bandanna on his head. *If I'm not hallucinating,* Sharon

thought, *I could swear that man looks just like my husband.* Now, she was not only

doubled over in pain, but she was also confused. The last time Sharon remembered Karl

mowing the lawn was when Jasmine had been a little girl. Why, after all those years, had

Karl decided to mess with the gardener's job?

She opened the door and leaned against the doorpost for support. She did not have the

strength to call his name, but Karl, who made a U-turn with the lawnmower, spotted her

almost immediately. The look in Karl's eyes was one of undiluted shock. He leaped over

the garden tools toward Sharon – not certain if his eyes were seeing correctly. He'd been

pulling weeds for almost half an hour in the blinding sun.

“Sugar Plum! What's wrong?” Karl moved his sweaty body in behind his wife. “You

look as if you're about to pass out...”

“Karl, I feel so weak...” Sharon's knees buckled, causing her heavy frame to drop

completely into her husband's embrace. “I feel like I'm about to die...”

Karl shook her gently, trying not to give into his jittery nerves. “Sugar Plum! Sharon!

Honey...” When Sharon didn't respond to any of the names he usually called her, Karl

shook her a little harder. “Come on, honey, wake up! Don't you dare leave me this way!

Sugar Plum, open your eyes...”

Sharon weighed more than two hundred and fifty pounds, but Karl held her as if his

muscles had grown accustomed to lifting her over the years. He needed to call an ambulance and with no one in sight to assist, he eased her body to the floor and bolted for

the nearest phone.

Brian traipsed behind the hostess as she led him to a corner booth in an Olive Gardens

restaurant. He glanced at his watch and noticed that he was fifteen minutes late. His

'date' had promised to meet him there at one in the afternoon, but it looked as if both of

them were running late. Either that, or his date had gotten cold feet. Brian was grateful

for the opportunity to gather his nerves. Internet dating was nerve wracking, especially

for an introvert like himself. He hadn't intended for things to go this far, not from just

reading one email that popped up on his iPhone. It had succinctly read, "*Do you want to*

do lunch tomorrow? Let's meet at Olive Gardens for 1pm. I think it's time that we meet..."

Several months ago, Brian joined a Christian dating site, simply wanting to satisfy his

curiosity, along with a desire to drive away his loneliness. The site boasted about having

over twelve million members. Certainly, with that number of prospects his chances of

finding a wife should be pretty good. Karl had always warned him about marrying a girl

from the church. And when Brian asked him why, Karl would shrug and say that

church

girls were all the same – clingy and overbearing – not wife material. Of course, Brian

knew that Karl always had a complaint when it came to the church. Finding the right

woman was important to Brian, and the casual way that Karl treated the matter left Brian

wary of Karl's intention.

Unless, Brian thought, Karl's actions had an underlying agenda. There had to be a

reason why Karl was pressuring him to work for his real estate company. Karl knew such

a request would create bad blood between him and Brian's father – yet, Karl showed no

regard about the negative impact on their friendship. Everything now had become

centered on Jasmine – about how Karl had given her control over the real estate office in

New York.

About how smart and how beautiful Jasmine had turned out to be. A totally 'changed'

woman, Karl bragged – a woman he was proud to have as his daughter. The way Karl

had been going on about Jasmine made Brian feel as if Karl was making a case for

Jasmine to become Brian's wife. No wonder Karl was against Brian marrying

any of the

girls at the church.

Brian was beginning to see right through Karl's Machiavellian ways – a master manipulator of people's feelings, who didn't care who he hurt in the process. Brian was

much wiser than Karl thought. If Karl thought that Brian and Jasmine would 'hook' up

and saunter down the aisle of Brandon View, Karl had better think again. *There is no*

way, Brian thought, *I would get together with a girl that Wynton had taken to bed.* Brian

did not care how long ago that 'incident' had happened between Jasmine and Wynton, he

was not about to be suckered into anyone's game. Karl was delusional to have even

brought up Jasmine's name during the discussion about the job.

When Brian peered up from his table, he was not expecting to see a woman

eyeballing him as if she had come to settle a score. Her unflinching gaze startled him to

his feet.

"Hi, you must be Marcia?" Brian offered his hand nervously. When his date did not

make any effort to shake his hand, he gestured for her to sit, and then tried to make small

talk. However, Marcia's stare felt as if it had created a hole in his face. Brian could not sit

down with this woman until he found out if all was well with her brains. For all he knew,

Marcia could have just shot a guard and escaped from the Looney bin. He should have

listened to his intuition. Internet-hookups were not God's plan for his life. "Is everything

okay? Why are you staring at me that way?"

Suddenly, Marcia broke into a warm smile and then whispered to Brian, "I'm blind.

Can't you see that, silly?"

Brian observed her closely and it was only then that he noticed her cane. Her fingers

opened and closed gracefully, as if waiting for him to respond to her unexpected announcement. "You did not tell me that –"

"What? That I'm blind?" Marcia began feeling for a chair with her cane. "Would you

have met me here if you knew that I was blind? You sound effortlessly handsome, by the

way. Your tones are very cultured."

Brian did not know if he should say thank you, or make a quick break to his car. She

would not see him sneaking away from the other end of the table. The only thing that

kept him glued to his spot was Marcia's toothy smile. Apart from Marcia's disability –

and Brian felt uncomfortable even saying that – she seemed like a normal

person.

“I could feel you staring,” Marcia said. “I might be blind, but my other senses are

alive and kicking.”

“I’m sorry. I just wasn’t expecting...” Brian paused when he noticed Marcia was still

struggling to sit down. He was so knocked off balance that it took him a few seconds to

recognize his discourteous behavior. He reprimanded himself while he assisted Marcia

into her chair. A gentleman should remain a gentleman – no matter the circumstance.

Marcia seemed to appreciate the kind gesture. She groped for Brian’s hand across the

table, and having brushed against it, she said in a small voice, “*Thank you*” .

“For what?”

“For not running away...”

I almost did, Brian thought, but instead he answered solemnly, “That’s not the Christian thing to do, is it?”

Marcia sniggered, making her cheeks flush with a flash of anger. “These days I wonder what it means being a Christian – just a fad for many people – nothing all that

serious. You’re just nicer than all the others who have hurt my feelings.”

The others ? Even though Marcia was blind, Brian was sure she could see the

confusion swathing his expression. A hundred questions bombarded his mind, but he

could not decide which one to ask. *How long had Marcia been meeting guys on the*

Internet? How many times had she been hurt? How had she been able to communicate –

without the ability to see the computer screen? Did she drive here? How did she know he

was sitting at this table? And why had she deceived him? The questions went on and

on...

“...I could sense that you’re uncomfortable,” Marcia was saying. “It takes some getting used to – talking to a blind, beautiful woman, like myself.”

“How do you know you are beautiful?” Brian could have slapped himself for asking

such a dumb question. He tried to retract it with an explanation, but he failed miserably.

“What I meant was –I didn’t mean it the way – well, I meant, um, well, never mind...”

Marcia giggled at Brian’s nervousness. “I don’t need to look into a mirror to know

that I am beautiful,” Marcia said, her voice as graceful as the word itself. “I wasn’t

always blind. Besides, beauty opens from the heart– it’s a virtue that lasts forever. Not

some superficial features that will fade away with time ...” She paused. Her

smile melted

right through Brian's suspicion, and for a brief moment, it caused him to ignore her

disability. "I don't need eyes to discern that you are a nice person, Brian."

"Why do you insist that I'm nice?" Brian said, a bit annoyed. The shock of seeing

Marcia for the first time had worn off and he now felt confident enough to tell her how he

felt. "You can't make me stay by saying things like that. You deceived me. How do you

know that I don't want to leave now?"

"I don't know that –"

"As far as I'm concerned," Brian continued, cutting Marcia off sharply, "I have a right to be teed off right now. We talked for several months...how have you been able to

communicate on the computer in your condition?"

"Well, I –"

"Don't worry about it. The point is – you should have told me that you had a disability."

"You're right..."

"You don't even look like the same person who is in that photo you sent me."

"I know. I had my hair out and I wore shades..."

"You should have told me –"

“– that I have a disability – as you have so ably pointed out,” Marcia said, and then

added in a soft, but buoyant tone, “I should have told you, Brian. And I’m sorry. I really

am. Why can’t you get past that and just have lunch with me?”

“Because you were dishonest.”

“No, I believe it’s because you can’t imagine yourself being married to a blind woman.”

Brian felt his heart pumping mightily in his chest. The sensation caused him to spring

to his feet. Marcia did not just use the word, ‘*married*’ in an attempt to tell him how to

choose a wife. No, he was not going to sit and listen to a blind, deceiving woman do that

to him. God forbid that he should ever talk to her again. Marcia had certainly shown him

that she was absolutely *not* his type. *What a total waste of my time*, Brian thought.

“Please, don’t take this personal,” he said. He pulled his coat from the back of the

chair and walked out of the booth and into the aisle of the restaurant. “Let this be a

mutual understanding between us. We are not right for each other. I pray that you will

find happiness, Marcia. Honestly. Because you really seem like a decent, young woman. I

am sorry that this did not turn out the way we had hoped.”

Marcia’s tears gushed out of her eyes at the sound of Brian walking away. Her shoulders heaved and her world felt as if it were falling to pieces. What was she going to

do now? The man she thought that God would have given her for a husband had just

walked out of her life. She really thought Brian was different from the previous men

who’d made her heart bleed. *How could Brian do this to me?* Marcia thought. *To us?* She

dug out a piece of napkin from her pocket and blew her nose into it. Soon after, a young

woman gently wrapped her arm around Marcia’s shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, honey. I saw him walk out of the restaurant.”

“Oh, Phoebe, he did not like me,” Marcia sputtered while she leaned her head against

Phoebe’s shoulder. Even her previous job as a social worker – where she had encountered

dozens of sad stories dealing with abuse and neglect – hadn’t softened the blow of

rejection. “He thinks I’m ugly. Am I ever going to get married? I wish that I had not been

born, or I wish I could have my sight back because no man will ever give me the time of

day...and here I am thinking that Brian was different from the rest of them...”

Phoebe was accustomed to such situations. She was Marcia’s hands, feet, ears,

and

eyes – the only true friend that Marcia had ever had since becoming a Christian. She had

warned Marcia about taking this route, but when Marcia made up her mind to do something, there was no stopping her.

“Come, honey,” Phoebe said, as she helped Marcia to her feet. “Let me take you home. We’ll talk about it over a cup of warm chocolate. God has not abandoned you, remember that, darling.”

Chapter Nine

Wynton's two-bedroom apartment reeked of Tahitian Vanilla oil – jars of scented candles that Tara had placed throughout various rooms. The aroma had a creamy, caramel odor and when Wynton smelled it, he knew instantly that his life as he once

knew it was over. The days of his bachelorhood were quickly dwindling, and now,

having to incorporate a woman's flavor into his regimen was like experiencing culture

shock. His eyes fluttered open and came to rest on a pair of chocolate mounds, positioned

in the way his lips had left them last night. He could not complain. Tara's breasts tantalized him senseless, and if he wanted enjoy them whenever he wanted, he had to

keep her pinned against his chest.

Wynton had a habit of naming Tara's body parts after different kinds of food. That

way he could speak to her in codes when they were in public, and avoid getting into a

tangle with the paparazzi. They were hungry to make a headline story out of nothing.

Even the lyrics of Wynton's songs, "*My Yellow Strawberry*", and "*Suga Pineapple*" –

which were now inching their way to the top of the music charts – droned about a

woman's body, based on the sensation of a delectable fruit.

Wynton did not want to admit to anyone that he had a sex addiction. The term did not

even make sense to him. As far as he was concerned, women were twice as wild as men

when it came to having their bodies pleased. He should know. He'd had multiple

partners since he was fourteen, and he'd seen just how *wild* a woman could get.

How often was too often for a person to have sex? Wynton did not know, but he certainly didn't think nine times a week constituted an addiction. He was about to back

away from Tara's breasts to prove his point, but when her bosom began to rise and fall –

almost in a hypnotic kind of way, his lust came roaring back to full life. It seemed as if

Tara sensed the familiar change in his mood, and with her fingers, she pressed gently

against Wynton's chest.

"No, babe," she groaned. "You will kill me, I swear. I need to get up so that I take

care of my clients at the boutique. I haven't seen them for over two weeks."

Wynton pinched her cheeks. "That's because you work for me now. Don't worry, though. You will be *compensated* for your services in Jamaica..."

Tara rolled her eyes in jest. However, she loved the husky quality in Wynton's voice.

She turned to face him and said, “Don’t get it twisted, big boy. You didn’t need me to tag

along. There were tons of hairstylists in Jamaica –”

“I would have not been interested in anyone else.”

“Don’t kid me...”

“No kidding. You’re better than anyone I’ve ever had. Much better in many respects.

The way your fingers work my scalp...”

“Hey now, are we still talking about haircuts?”

“You tell me,” Wynton smirked. “You’re the one kissing my body.”

Tara giggled, but deep down she prayed Wynton’s statements would not come back

to haunt her. It was becoming difficult keeping up with a man who possessed such a

voracious sexual appetite. “In that case, I had better take control of this situation.” She

stood up and wrapped a sheet around her naked frame. “Ta-ta, my handsome Hercules

...”

“What are you doing, girl? Come back here!” Wynton reached for her but he was not

quick enough to catch her. He ended up falling face down into a pillow. “Awww, baby,

forget those silly clients. They are only jealous of you anyway...”

Tara popped her head back into the room. “I will have you to know, Mister, that I

have made many good friends at that place. I can't just *drop* them, like you so foolishly

suggested. Besides, having sex all day is not all that I'm good for."

One thing Tara was happy about was that Wynton had a spare bathroom that was off

his gourmet kitchen. That way she could have at least twenty minutes alone – without the

constant caressing of Wynton's hands. The bathroom door that was in his bedroom could

not lock and she dare not take the chance of sitting in that Jacuzzi. For obvious reasons,

Wynton would want to join her. *Not happening*, she thought. *If I let this man control me*

this way, soon I'll be no good to myself. Apart from my mother, I have allowed this man

to wash away my Christian upbringing...

In passing the laundry room, she grabbed one of Wynton's shirts and then pulled it

over her head. A hot cup of tea seemed more appealing than taking a shower at the

moment. As soon as she slid a cup of water into the microwave, Wynton's front door

came alive with an annoying buzz. It frightened Tara every time it buzzed. She did not

care that the sound was part of Wynton's security system; all she knew was that she

wanted it to stop before it gave her a heart attack. Then again, when she thought of how

her man had been shot at recently, she immediately gathered her senses and thanked God

for such wonderful technology.

Normally, she would have waited for Wynton to open the door, but the delay in

Wynton's response told her that he was probably occupied with something else. She

wished she knew how to work the buttons on the security keypad. Wynton had shown her

several times how to do it, but she did not pay attention. Now it was to her detriment that

she had to play the guessing game by air.

"Is that you, Tiger?" Tara called. One of Wynton's bodyguards would usually show

up around this hour. "Could you give me a few minutes?"

"This is Doreen, Wynton's mother," the voice called back. "And I would hope my

ears are deceiving me."

Tara froze. She could not even pretend that she was someone else. Doreen had

recognized her voice immediately. That was Doreen's MO – to mentally program every

detail about a person she wanted to bury in the sand. Tara wanted to cry, because she had

seen enough of that witch during Wynton's music tour. Why in the world was she

troubling them now?

“Doreen, could you wait for a few minutes, please –”

Doreen kept her finger glued to the buzzer, making Wynton’s place sound as if there

had been a prison break and all the alarms had been turned on. “You unrighteous slut!

How dare you keep me away from my son? Open this door this instant!”

Tara fumbled with the lock, not aware that her heart rate had risen to toxic levels. She

was convinced Wynton’s mother had been enlisted in the army from hell – who’d been

pulled from the Maximum Security division because no human being was as evil as

Doreen. The door swung open and hit Tara squarely in the face.

“Oh my God, Doreen!” Tara yelled while she gripped her forehead in pain. “That was

totally unnecessary.”

“It should have killed you!” Doreen marched around Tara and made her way into the

open area. She took one look around Wynton’s place and immediately decided that

something was out of whack. She wedged her hands deeply into her sides and murdered

Tara with her eyes. “Where is my son? And what in God’s name is that unpleasant

scent?”

“Don’t I get an apology? My head feels as if it’s been split open –”

“You are one disgusting looking child,” Doreen spat, swatting Tara’s words to the

floor as if they were dirt beneath her shoes. “Such a horrible face for a woman. You

won’t get a thing from me except a swift kick in your flat backside!”

Tara willed her tears to stay in place – she, however, was too stunned to cry anyway.

The things that Doreen said were enough to make a person commit suicide.

“Don’t just stand there, looking like some flesh-eating disease.” Doreen’s glare

became even more murderous – if that were possible. “Go and get my son!”

“No, Doreen. I will not let you come in here and boss me around like that.” Tara tried

to match Doreen’s glare, but she knew her expression would not move Doreen one inch.

“Call me all the names you want. You are not as important to Wynton as you think. All

you’re doing is making the situation worse by showing up here. Don’t you have your

little church meetings to attend? Well, never mind that, as miserable as you are, I doubt

anyone wants you around, anyway.”

Doreen wrinkled her nose in disgust, cutting through Tara’s emotional rant. “Did you

just have sex with my son?”

Tara's stare flew a mile beyond disbelief. "That's none of your business, Doreen!

How rude –"

"Don't lie to me, you dreadful duck. You're walking around in Wynton's shirt as if

you've moved in."

"Oh my God, I can't believe you're saying the things you say..."

Doreen grabbed Tara's fingers and smelled them. "Unrighteousness!" She drew back

and slapped Tara's hairstyle back into place. "You have corrupted my good son."

Tara held her cheeks and screamed at Doreen, "Get out of here before I –"

"Before you what? Kill me? You have no respect for your elders."

Doreen attempted to land another slap, but Tara caught her hand and tossed it to the

side. "Enough, Doreen, enough! I am not your child!"

"I will tell you when it is enough, and that will be when you're long gone out of my

son's life!"

Doreen reached for Tara, and with all of her fifty-five-year-old strength, ripped

Wynton's shirt far enough to reveal Tara's breasts. That began round one of the hair-

pulling wrestling match. Both women lost their balance and plunged into the sofa. Their

cat-like cries brought Wynton pelting out of his bedroom, dripping water from head to

toe. The only thing that covered his nakedness was a big white towel he'd wrapped

tightly around his waist. He wasted no time in trying to part the women.

"Break it up, you two, break it up!" Doreen's strength for her age was incredible. So

much so that Wynton found it almost impossible to weaken the grip she'd latched around

Tara's throat. "Mother, you're going to kill her! Take your hands off of her..."

Doreen ground her teeth and fought to keep her weight on Tara. "Let her die,

Wynton. You will be better off without her."

"No, I won't!" Wynton's muscles kicked into play, and with one swoop he hoisted

Doreen into the air and lifted her to a safe distance. He waited a minute for her to calm

down before he went off on her. "Mother, I am ashamed of you! This is so below you. I

don't even know what to say..." He paused and looked at the way his coffee table had

been kicked over, so shaken that his entire body shook with disbelief. "Look at this mess!

How the devil did you get in here anyway?"

"Didn't you hear the buzzing?" Tara said hoarsely. She'd slipped to the floor, and had

been trying to bring her breathing back to normal rhythm. "That was her. When I opened

the door, she pushed it into my face and then attacked me..." Tara rubbed her

forehead

and felt a huge lump swelling up. She groaned, “Oh God, Wynton, I didn’t sign up for

this.”

“It was self-defense,” Doreen said. “And I’m sticking with that.”

“Self-defense? Mother, you had my girlfriend pinned into the sofa! I can’t believe

you’re standing there proud of what you’ve done. What has Tara ever done to you for

you to hate her this much?” Wynton ran a nervous hand through his wet hair, feeling as if

he were out of options about what to do with the ongoing feud between Tara and his

mother. He would be surprised if Tara even stayed with him after this. “I can’t even take

a bloody shower in peace...”

“Well, you won’t need to tell me to leave,” Doreen said to her son, her voice as

poised as one speaking the Queen’s English. She straightened her jacket and wiped her

lips clean. “I’ll save you the trouble. My work is done for today...”

Wynton’s grey eyes became fierce at his mother’s impertinence. “Next time you

show up here like this,” he told her, “I will have you arrested. And you know I don’t

mince my words. Either you accept that Tara is going to be my wife, or we’re through.

It's as simple as that.”

Doreen smiled patiently, as if her son was going through a little immature phrase. She

kissed him on the cheeks and then whispered in his ear, “Wynton, my dear boy, not even

God Himself can bring a separation between us. Just remember, mommy loves you,

darling.”

Wynton sat down next to Tara after his mother had walked through the door. He had

no words to console her, so he resorted to the one thing he knew how to do exceptionally

well. He leaned over Tara and began to plant soft kisses from behind her ear lobes to the

nape of her neck. But to his surprise, Tara pushed him away and jumped to her feet.

“What is wrong with you?” she snapped, her eyes now awash in tears. “Sex is not

going to fix this! Don't you see this huge contusion on my forehead? I'm in pain –

physical and emotional pain!”

“I don't want sex –”

“Yeah, of course not, Wynton!” Tara rolled her eyes and walked off, but before she

completely disappeared into the spare bath, she turned and added in a stern voice, “Deal

with your mother, Wynton. If not, I am out of here! And I mean it this time.”

God gave us memories that we might have roses in December.

- *J.M. Barrie*

Chapter Ten

Battery Park City – New York

August nights in New York sometimes took Jasmine back to her wild teenage years,

which had been laced with much rebellion and self-gratification. Where she stood, on the

sun deck of her two-bedroom flat at 22 River Terrace, the views of the city at night

starkly mirrored certain spots of her hometown in Brandon, Florida – places where her

father had left his mark as a real estate developer. Her father was a fanatic for tall

buildings, and in the early years of his career, he'd 'mimicked' several architectural

designs in New York, with his first being that of the Tribeca Bridge Tower – a twenty-

six-story, rental building, that had made its presence known among other magnificent

high-rise designs.

With competitive features of the Tribeca Bridge Tower, the red brick building at 22

River Terrace boasted windowed gourmet kitchens, complete with stainless steel

whirlpool appliances and granite countertops. It had a twenty-four hour attended lobby

and valet service. A fitness center, a package room, and a bicycle room – amenities that

Jasmine rarely took advantage of. Her taste over the years had veered away from the

extravagant lifestyle. Even though she could have afforded a larger place, the square

footage of her apartment was a little less than eight hundred feet. Jasmine did not think

she needed any more space than that. Being a single woman and all, a larger space would

have only reminded her of how alone she felt at times.

She would often work from home and would labor over her clients' contracts for

hours – combing through the 'fine print' with a meticulous eye. Unbeknownst to her, it

had eventually given her an edge over her competition, in that she tended to settle

negotiations between sellers and buyers in less time. Although Jasmine knew her late

nights had become more of an excuse to 'bat' away her depression, her clients saw it as a

commendable trait. She was part of the reason why the Benton's name was esteemed in

the higher echelons of real estate. Mr. Boston – one of her most distressing clients – had

left with a smile after having dinner last evening at Merchants River House.

Her professional life seemed to be flying high, but it was not enough to banish her

desire for more out of life. *Twelve Years*, Jasmine thought, as she cast her

longing eyes

toward the calm of the Hudson River. The words of her mind rumbled for answers:

God, didn't You promise to meet my uttermost needs? Why am I still feeling this pain? This depression? I am grateful for all that You have already done for me, but,

Lord, I am not content. I am twenty-eight years-old and by now I thought that I would

have had a family of my own. Had I stayed in Florida maybe my baby would have lived.

Maybe Wynton and I would have ended up together as husband and wife...I don't know.

It was such a long time ago, but I can't help but wonder how my life would have turned

out if my father hadn't forced me to come to this place...

Jasmine was about to settle into another round of questions when the shrill of her phone suddenly broke the silence. It was ten minutes to midnight. She was tempted to

simply let it ring, but it was not in her to ignore something that could turn out to be

urgent. At this hour, she would hope the call was important. She stepped inside and

pulled the sliding door shut. A red Persian rug that was in the hallway massaged her feet

as she walked over it toward her bedroom. She would have answered the phone in the

living room, but she had plans to take a shower and turn in for the night. She snatched up

the phone and wedged it against her ear.

The first thing that Jasmine heard coming through the receiver was quiet whimpering,

almost as if the person struggled to maintain composure. However, the familiarity of the

tone did not escape her. “*Daddy?*”

“Yes, honey...” Karl inhaled deeply at the sound of his daughter’s voice, because he

knew that what he was about to tell her would shatter her world to pieces. “How are you,

Jasmine?”

“I was doing fine until I heard your snuffles – and that is not like you.”

“I see you’re still keeping those late hours –”

“Don’t beat around the bush, Daddy. Why are you calling me so late?”

Karl inhaled again and then said in a protective tone, “This is so hard to tell you, Pumpkins. I wish I was there with you...”

“Just tell me, Daddy,” Jasmine prompted. “What is it?”

“It’s Sharon...she’s, um...” It sounded as if a frog had suddenly jammed itself in Karl’s throat. Clearing it, he added in a stronger voice, “Honey, I know that your mother

loved you very much...”

Jasmine gripped the phone in panic. “Am I missing something? What’s wrong

with

my mother?”

“I really didn’t see this one coming –”

“Oh God, Daddy, please, quit it! Just tell me what’s wrong.”

“Sharon didn’t make it, honey,” Karl finally said. “I tried calling you –”

“Didn’t make what? I know she has been trying to get that new position at the hospital. I’m assuming she didn’t make the cut?”

“Your mother has died, Jasmine,” Karl clarified as gently as he could, adding softly,

“She passed away thirty minutes ago...”

She passed thirty minutes ago... Jasmine felt the walls moving toward her at top speed, making her feel as if she’d been thrown into a dark trunk. She had just spoken to

her mother less than thirty-six hours ago. It was impossible for her father to be telling the

truth. Her mother could not have been that sick. Nevertheless, whether Jasmine believed

it or not, she lost all strength and dropped to the carpet in a heap.

“Jasmine...” Karl’s message was cut short by the painful shrills of his daughter.

“Jasmine, honey...talk to me...”

Karl’s voice faded in the background as Jasmine’s cries spiraled out of control. In a

fetal position, her body shook uncontrollably. How could this be? Her mother was *dead*?

Sharon had been there for her daughter all these years – helping to restore Jasmine back

to wholeness. To accept a loss at this level was simply unfathomable. There, on the

carpet, Jasmine remained, bewildered as to how she was going to overcome what she

thought to be the worst pain in the world.

Karl could not listen to his daughter’s cries without being in New York to comfort

her. So, after several failed attempts at trying to get his daughter to respond to him, he

disconnected from the line. He dropped his head between his knees and allowed his tears

to roll silently. It did not matter who saw him – slouched against the wall outside of

Sharon’s hospital room in his workout clothing.

He should have been sharing his daughter’s grief; however, he was completely

overcome with guilt. It was his fault that his wife of nearly thirty years had succumbed to

her sickness. He knew she’d been sick for a while, but had not taken her condition

‘seriously’. Sharon craved his attention and he had always felt that she would have done

anything to get it. Even to the point of pretending to be sick.

When Sharon collapsed in Karl’s arms, he hadn’t any idea that Sharon would

have

deteriorated so quickly. He thought that she would have revived, but minutes later,

Sharon's body convulsed, and she went into a coma. By the time the ambulance came to

their residence, Sharon's blood pressure had dropped significantly. Karl could barely feel

a pulse, which he knew was a dangerous sign that Sharon's life was slowly ebbing away.

The doctor had told Karl that it would take a miracle for his wife to make it through the

night. The doctor had been right. Sharon was declared clinically dead at 11:22 p.m.

Karl was known to keep his emotions in check, but he could not withstand the pressure that *maybe* he was responsible for Sharon's death. He should have taken her

actions seriously. Their marriage was not the best, but the least he could have done was to

show Sharon a little more attention. Maybe things would have turned out differently.

"Mr. Benton?"

Karl raised his head from between his knees and leveled his gaze on a tall, lanky

Easterner. His nametag read: Doctor Peter Abdul. As a nurse, Sharon had worked along

with him up to the time of her death. His eyes told Karl that he was a man of great

intelligence. “Yes,” Karl said hoarsely. “How can I help you?”

“Do you have a moment? I would like to speak with you.”

Karl did not miss the heavy accent. If they had been under different circumstances, he

would have cracked a smile. “Of course,” he said, standing at the same time. He regarded

the doctor for a second before adding in a concerned tone, “Should I follow you?”

“No need,” Peter said. “There isn’t anyone here at the moment. I just want to bring

something to your attention.” Peter rested his hand on Karl’s shoulder briefly before

continuing, “You know that your wife has worked along with my team for many, many

years and I would consider it a poor act of care – if I don’t handle her death as if she had

come from my own family.”

Karl kept his words wedged in his throat and tried to anticipate where the doctor was

steering the conversation. Karl could tell that Sharon’s death had moved Peter

emotionally and that he was struggling to maintain his composure. However, Karl could

care less about the ‘bond’ the doctor had shared with his wife. The only thing that

mattered to Karl was to wrap up Sharon’s burial plans as soon as possible.

“I had a conversation with the medical examiner,” Peter pressed on. “And we

were

very much concerned about Sharon's symptoms, which we believe have led to her death.

It is a widely held view that autopsies should be performed..."

Karl's heart jumped at the mention of the word, "autopsies". He barely heard anything else the doctor was saying to him. "Autopsy?" he repeated audibly. "Why

would my wife be subjected to such a barbaric procedure?"

"Keep in mind, Mr. Benton," Peter touched Karl's shoulder again. "Having an autopsy performed isn't always enforced, or sometimes even possible, but there are

certain cases a medical examiner would 'suggest' that it be done. It is simply to determine the true cause of death. I just learned about Sharon's symptoms some thirty-six

hours before her demise. Rather sudden, don't you agree? She had called me complaining—"

"She called you?" Karl glared at Peter suspiciously.

"Yes..." Peter paused, as if trying to discern Karl's tone. "Was that a problem? She

said that she could not reach you. Her condition sounded critical over the phone and I

suggested that an ambulance be dispatched to her residence. But, of course, you know

that your wife could be very stubborn. She refused my suggestion."

“I was around, doctor,” Karl spat. “And Sharon did not seem as ‘critical’ as you have

indicated. You think I don’t know my wife?”

“I was merely alluding to the fact that –”

“What’s the sense of discussing this now?” Karl interrupted. “My wife is dead. Cut

me some slack, man!”

“Forgive me for my insensitivity,” Peter said, and then added with a tight smile, “but

I’m afraid – in light of the unusual circumstance surrounding your wife’s death – we

must request consent for an autopsy through the courts.”

Karl stepped closer to the doctor’s face, baring his teeth as if repulsed by the doctor’s

audacity. Karl’s eyes were swollen red with tears, but Peter could not overlook the rage

he saw blazing in them.

“Let’s just see how far you get with that silly idea,” Karl threatened. “My wife has

written instructions to have her body cremated. Trust me, doctor; you don’t want to fight

me on this. My name speaks for itself. Now, please excuse me as I go to say my final

good byes to my dear wife.”

Peter did not move until Karl disappeared into Sharon’s room. He was left with an

unsettling feeling in his stomach. The man's actions toward his wife were completely

unbelievable. Sharon, on the other hand, had always made it seem as if they had the best

of marriages. *Quite a contrast, Peter thought. Something is not making sense here. Why*

are you refusing to have an autopsy performed, Mr. Benton? Your wife died unexpectedly

and you're not the least bit interested in finding out the reason.

Peter rubbed a hand through his curly salt and pepper hair. He resolved within himself that the next few days were going to be one heck of a ride. He would not allow

Karl to frighten him away. If Karl desired a fight, then a fight would be employed.

Chapter Eleven

Wednesday Morning – Lakatos Steel & Co.

Paul sat down to catch his breath. He kept promising himself that he would not work

so hard at his age. Sixty-year-old men should not be trying to run both a church and a

steel plant at the same time. However, Paul's catalog of conditions excluded some of the

most-qualified men from taking rein of the business. There was no doubt that Paul loved

both of his sons. He could not have asked for any better young men than Wynton and

Brian, but if the decision had been left up to Paul, and all other avenues failed of him

trying to find that 'right' fit, he would have preferred that Wynton to succeed him as

CEO of Lakatos Steel & Co.

Wynton was the one with the business acumen, and if the company ever moved into

the global arena, Wynton would be the one more qualified to do it. The boy had worldly

exposure, class, and charisma – ingredients that were not obvious in Brian's life. The fact

that Brian had been against the expansion of Brandon View Church told Paul that Brian

was not ready to handle the future. Brian was thirty years-old and hadn't even begun

dating, much less found a wife.

The Lakatos men had all been married by the age of thirty. *Was this a sign?* Paul thought. *Am I wasting my time with the wrong son? Maybe I should put my focus on*

Wynton. At least he would understand how to operate the administrative side of the

church. If only Wynton would recommit his life to the Lord... Paul sighed quietly. He

admitted that much of Wynton's aversion against the church had to do with that 'incident' involving Karl's daughter. But had Doreen and the congregation kept their

negative criticisms out of Wynton's ears, Paul believed Wynton would not have been

driven away to revel in the pleasures of sin.

Paul stood and glanced at his wristwatch. In twenty minutes, he would meet with Karl

to look over the blueprint of Brandon View's new facility. The blueprint had already

been approved, but there were a few other concerns that Paul needed Karl to address. It

was a multimillion-dollar project that required a huge financial budget, but Paul had

convinced himself that with his company supplying the steel and with Karl's fortune

spearheading the development, money would not be an issue. They had partnered to

make this project a success – as they had always done in the past with previous endeavors. Whatever he and Karl put forth their hands to do, it would turn to gold.

Paul wilted in his emotions at this new move in the life of the church. He was excited,

but at the same time, he knew once Doreen found out about the expansion, she would

hasten to dampen his spirit. He withheld his ideas from Doreen because she was not a

supportive wife. She would try to swindle him out of his life's dream and would enjoy

belittling any accomplishment he strived to achieve – especially when it came to the

church.

The way Doreen spoke to him made him feel as if he were not capable of doing anything right. But he would show her soon enough that he did not need her to validate

him. God alone did that. *In time, Doreen, in time ... I will show you I have been divinely*

directed to pastor that church...

A soft knock caused Paul's gaze to fasten upon his office door.

"Come!" he shouted.

The door pushed open slowly and the first thing that Paul noticed was Karl's shoes –

an expensive pair, made by Salvatore Ferragamo. They were the kind of shoes that made

men look effortlessly elegant. Paul had seen a pair that cost a thousand dollars, but Paul's

inspection was cut short by Karl's lethargic steps. Everything about Karl looked well-

polished, except for his two, red, swollen eyes that appeared as if they were about to pop

out of their sockets.

"My heavens, Karl," Paul exclaimed. "What has happened to you?"

"I am a man who keeps his appointments," Karl said to his friend. "And I have made

plans for lunch for two at Bennigans. Are you hungry?"

"And are you out of your mind," Paul countered. "I can see that something's wrong

with you. I've known you for over thirty years. You can't fool me. I have seen you cry

once – and that was when your mother died."

Karl kept his eyes steady on Paul, which exhibited a distance that Paul could not place.

"Sharon died last night, Paul, and I think that I might have killed her."

Paul's cheeks flushed red as he stumbled back into his chair.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice. Tara has gone out for today." Wynton

greeted his brother with a tight hug and then broke into a mischievous grin.
“Your chest

is almost as big as mine. What are you pumping up for and you don’t even have
a woman

to enjoy it?”

Brian playfully pushed Wynton back into the apartment. “I’m pumping up to
whop

that little smug of your face –”

“Hey, stick to your calling, preacher,” Wynton teased. “You are not a violent
man, or,

should I say a renegade, like me.”

Brian hated when Wynton referred to himself as a, *renegade*, which to Brian
meant

that Wynton did not intend to go back to his Christian roots. What had been
Wynton’s

source of inspiration had now become something he made a mockery of. “You
are God’s

anointed,” Brian explained to his brother and then added with a pat on Wynton’s

shoulder, “You are simply misguided at the moment. We’ve been taught that God
is

married to the backslider.”

Wynton shook his head and walked away. “You have more confidence in me
than I

have in myself,” he said. “I’ll give you that. However, I am satisfied with the
way my life

has turned out. I don’t have to answer to anyone for my success. The question is,

my big

bruh, are you satisfied with the way things have turned out for you?”

Brian kept his expression plain, but on the inside, Wynton’s words sacked him like a

ton of bricks. “Having Christ is the best decision any wise person can make. What does it

profit a man to gain the security of this world, but lose his soul to damnation?”

“I did not call you to preach to me, Brian,” Wynton said. “I simply asked if you were

satisfied with the way...forget it –” Wynton realized he was about to have the same

conversation he’d had with his brother a thousand times. It made no sense arguing

because none of them were going to compromise their beliefs. He continued to walk

toward the kitchen with his pants sagging across his hips. “You want something to drink,

big bruh?”

Brian took a seat on the sofa and threw up his feet on Wynton’s coffee table.

“What

have you got?”

“I have a rack full of liquor,” Wynton quipped, adding a smirk for good measure.

“You want some?”

“You love being a clown, don’t you? You and Karl are the devil’s advocate.

Leave

me out of your unhealthy habits.”

“Man, you need to lighten up. The Bible warned about drinking in excess. It did not

say that you couldn’t drink. It says we should not get drunk and my intention is not to get

you drunk. Am I making sense to you?”

“Oh, where have I heard that crap before? Get behind me Satan! Be gone, back to

your filthy pit!”

Wynton chuckled as he plunged down in a chair opposite Brian. He wagged a bottle

of Guinness in Brian’s direction. “One of these days, old boy, I will get my way with

you. Just don’t get married any time soon, because that night before you stroll to the altar,

I will give the orders to lace your fruit punch with Ecstasy. It will be easy to control you

then. I promise that you will not begin your honeymoon as a virgin.”

Brian stopped giggling and said seriously, “You had better be kidding with that

nonsense, because that isn’t remotely funny. Why does everything have to be a joke to

you?”

Wynton took a swig from the Guinness bottle, which did little to mask his lopsided

grin. “You had better elope and haul tail to the Justice of the Peace. I will not stop until I

get you over to the ‘other’ side...having bedroom experience is priceless...”

“Wynton, I will not allow you to contaminate my ‘sanctified’ ears. You are acting

like the devil and you know it...”

The spirited banter between the brothers began to ebb toward a more staid topic.

However, Brian could not keep the amusement out of his expression when Wynton began

to relay the wrestling match between Tara and Doreen.

“...Tara gave me an ultimatum,” Wynton was saying. “You should have seen them –

grappling like two ghetto chicks from Ybor City. I had all of the hell, pulling mother

away from my woman. She gave Tara a concussion...”

The situation was serious, but Brian felt himself giving in to his laughter.

“This is no joke, man,” Wynton told his brother. “Our mother is crazy! She followed

me and my entourage all the way to Jamaica, got into my dressing room and waited in the

dark. Those are the actions of a psycho.” Wynton flailed his hands in defeat. “I have no

idea how to correct what’s going on inside that woman’s head.”

“You don’t need to convince me,” Brian chuckled. “I still live at home with her. I’m

surprised the old man hasn’t snapped by now. I can hear them arguing every night. I’m at

the point where I'm considering looking for my own place.”

“It’s about time. A grown man like you should be ashamed.” Wynton took another

swig from the Guinness bottle as a blur of nostalgia showed up in his eyes.
“That’s why I

got out of there as soon as I could, man – too much drama for my taste...” Then he said,

almost as an afterthought, “I did not want Jasmine to go to New York, but she never

would have survived under mother’s tyranny. Jasmine was a tough cookie back then, but

even she is no match for Doreen Lakatos.”

“I’m impressed,” Brian admitted.

“Over what?”

“That you’re not upset. Jasmine had the whole church believing you raped her.”

“I blame that fat brood – Jasmine’s mother.” Wynton still had that look of nostalgia in

his expression, but this time it was attended by an amalgam of perversion.
“Sharon may

have caught me with my pants down, but one week later, Jasmine was all over my chest.

We ended up on the floor of that abandoned house – the one that was across the street

from the church. We had sex another two times after that...that girl was just plain

rebellious...”

Brian shook his head, appalled by his brother's admission.

"What?" Wynton smirked. "Jasmine could not get enough of me. I can't help it if my

physique has been built to satisfy a woman's sexual cravings."

"You mean that the other way around. It is you who can't get enough," Brian said. "I

can't believe you are bragging about that mess."

"What did you expect me to do? Turn her down?"

"Yes! The police had even gotten involved after that incident between you two. You

should have stayed away from her instead of convoluting the matter."

"Relax, Brian. That was twelve years ago. I have nothing against Jasmine but mad

love. I'm over and done with that juvenile part of my life. I'm about to marry one of the

'sexiest' girls in Brandon, Florida. Hence, my big bruh, I have called you here. I have

moved up the date of the wedding."

"Thank God," Brian said, "You and Tara are living in sin every night."

Wynton swatted Brian's religious comment with a biting remark. "Do I sense a pinch

of jealousy, you forty-year-old virgin?"

"There's nothing wrong with that," Brian shot back. "At least the woman I marry will

not have to worry about me shooting blanks. I'm like a new car that has never

been

driven off the car lot.”

“You know, you say some really weird things sometimes,” Wynton chuckled.

“Shooting blanks has no relation to the thousands of times a man has sex. I was always

careful never to get any of those silly girls pregnant anyway. My ‘soldiers’ are marching

quite fine. Tara and I will have a house filled with good-looking babies. I can assure you

of that.”

“You can’t assure me of anything, because you don’t have any children to prove that.”

Wynton waved Brian off. “You are more naïve than I thought. You really need to find

a woman quickly and have some sex – seriously, man. I see a little bit of Steve Urkel in

you.”

“So,” Brian said after an awkward moment of silence. Wynton’s last words still stung, but he hid it beneath a casual air. “When is the wedding?”

Wynton leaned over and reached for a current issue of a GQ magazine. He tossed it to

Brian, where it landed with a slap against Brian’s palm. The heaviness lifted and it

appeared as if the brothers were enjoying each other’s company again. “In several

weeks,” Wynton said. “You are always in a suit and tie. You would do a better job in

choosing what we should wear.”

Brian studied the white, blonde-haired dude who graced the magazine cover in a rust

single-breasted coat. Navy blue slacks and a striped white shirt that was open at the neck.

“This magazine serves as a sharp reminder,” Brian said, “that you are more white than

black.”

Wynton responded with a grin, “You shouldn’t tease me so much. Your little juniors

might come out looking like me. You might be the color of caramel, but Caucasian is in

your genes.”

Brian laughed. “Admit it, man, you light up when people call you white boy.”

Wynton shrugged noncommittally. “That’s why I don’t trust my taste in certain

things. I’m leaving everything up to you. You’re the best man and these are some of the

things that best men do.”

Brian just stared at his brother in amusement. Sometimes, he wished he could exude

some of the easy-going qualities he observed in Wynton’s personality.

“Several weeks are quite different from three months,” Brian said, as he casually

thumbed through the magazine. “Have you told mother about the date change?”

“Heck no! She’s the reason why I moved up the date. Three months will give her too

much time to do something stupid. I’m convinced I’ll lose Tara by then.”

Brian closed the magazine and let out a small sigh. “I’ll tell you this much, Wynton,

moving up the date is not going to solve anything. This feud between Tara and our

mother needs to be fixed before you guys tie the knot. Mother will always think the

worse of Tara if you don’t try and change that.”

Wynton flailed his arms in the air a second time. “Well, do you have any bright ideas,

Mr. Fix It? Because I have tried everything, but nothing works! I’m about to go insane. I

don’t get why she hates Tara so much.”

Brian thought for a moment, and after a short while, he said, “There is an

advertisement I came across some weeks ago while I was on the Internet. It might help if

you and Tara are open to it. It’s a four-day retreat on an island in the Bahamas.”

Wynton shot Brian a stare of incredulity. “Are you for real? I’m in the middle of world war three and that’s all you’re offering me? A bloody retreat?”

“Just hear me out, man, before you shoot down what I believe to be a great idea,”

Brian explained. “It is a reputable organization. Their aim is to help develop healthy

relationships between women, particularly in mother and daughter-in-law relationships.

To be honest, when I first read the article, I immediately thought of Tara and our mother.”

“Come on, man. Do you really think Tara is gonna spend four days locked up on some remote island with our mother?”

“Who said anything about the Bahamas being a remote island? Your focus should be

on trying to convince Tara that this is a good idea. I will handle our mother.”

“I don’t see it happening –”

Brian held his hand up to stop Wynton’s negative rants, “All I’m asking you to do is

to try, Wynton. What is so difficult about that?”

When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery

rather than avenge it?

- Eleanor Roosevelt

Chapter Twelve

Doreen owned a Tea House just outside of Brandon in Lakeland, Florida, operated by

three young twenty-somethings, desperate to make a good impression. They only saw

Doreen twice a week, which was sufficient for them because Doreen's visits were cruel

and frightening – especially when she came to the Tea House in a bad mood. Doreen was

a perfectionist, a stickler for details, and anything that was out of line was met with a

swift rebuke. She, however, paid them handsomely, which probably was the only reason

why her employees tolerated her wretched personality.

Certainly, Doreen was a difficult person to deal with, but she ensured that her

customers languished in elegant, serene surroundings – complete with décor that tea

connoisseurs would appreciate. Doreen had always wanted to open up a Tea House, but

her husband, Paul had always been against it – reminding her that her priorities should be

in the church. Her role as First Lady came with many responsibilities and any

‘extracurricular’ activities could hinder the work of God.

Running a Tea House, as Paul had explained, put one's interpersonal skills to the test

and pulled on one's availability. It required much physical stamina. Smiling was extremely vital, along with long hours, and if not taken seriously, it could be the deciding

factor on how long a Tea House would survive. Doreen, of course, paid Paul no mind.

She went ahead and had it opened anyway.

The Tea House was her little secret. She'd had it for three years and Paul did not have

a clue about its existence. It was her way of saving up for a rainy day – *just in case that*

fool goes bankrupt, as she would normally say. Doreen knew of Paul's plans to expand

the church. She knew of the acreage that he and Karl had recently acquired to construct

the new, multi-million-dollar edifice of Brandon View. Paul kept his plans hidden, but

her sons told her everything, just as she told them everything that concerned her. She

thanked God for such 'good' sons – who refused the instructions of their weak father. But

if she had anything to do with it, the expansion of Brandon View Baptist Church would

never see the light of day.

Paul, you are such a blithering hypocrite, Doreen thought, as she eased her big-

bodied black Mercedes Benz in front of the Tea House. *You are against me having a*

business of my own, yet, you have been running a steel plant right alongside running a

church. I wonder where you are going to get the money to fund your silly little project.

Karl would be a fool to lend his money to you. You've already exhausted our life savings,

paying people's rent and utility bills...

With a huff, Doreen pushed open her car door and stood on the pavement. She

snatched her bag haphazardly, causing her 'infamous' black book to plummet near her

feet. Like a vulture going after a fresh carcass, she scooped down and scraped it up. She

looked around in hopes that her actions had not called for an alarm. If anyone ever got a

hold of her black book, she could forget about her precious Tea House and everything

else that was dear to her. The content of the book was so sensitive that if exposed she

would be immediately ushered into Maximum Security. Doreen was aware of the risk,

but she could not imagine keeping her black book anywhere other than on her person.

"Mrs. Lakatos!"

Doreen practically took flight out of her caramel-colored skin. She spun around,

almost losing her balance in her Marc Jacobs heels. When she recognized the person

who'd nearly given her a heart attack, she became enraged.

“You bumbling idiot!” She screamed at one of her Tea House employees. “Is it necessary to yell out my name that way? What the hell do you want?”

The young man backed up a few steps and pointed toward the Tea House. If anyone

had been standing next to him, he would have been mortified, having been talked to so

harshly. “Two inspectors are here from the health department,” he told Doreen.

With muscles pulled tautly in her face, Doreen glided forward and stormed through

the entrance of the Tea House. Two burly-looking gentlemen, who looked as if they

could be in their fifties, approached Doreen with an air of ‘rehearsed’ professionalism.

“Are you the owner of this establishment?” one of them asked. His light brown suit

looked as if had not seen an iron in months.

Doreen folded her arms in defiance and responded viciously, “And, what if I am?”

“It has been brought to our attention that the sanitary standards of this place have

been comprised by rodents. The ventilation is inadequate and your bathrooms are being

attacked by sulfuric compounds.”

Doreen waved her hand wildly in the air and said to the men, even more viciously, if

possible, “Take a good look around gentlemen! Then take a good, long look at me! I

accept nothing short of excellence. Everything in here is Victorian-designed. Very

expensive décor. I had recently gotten an inspection of this place and it was deemed safe

and operable as far as the law is concerned! Who deceived you to come here and disrupt

my flow of operation?”

The men looked at each other, a little less confidence appearing in their visages. They

did not expect to face a woman whose outspokenness outmatched their wit to respond.

“Ah, several reports have been made against this place –”

“Don’t stumble now,” Doreen spat. “Out with it! Who sent you bastards here?”

The men continued to stumble in their reply. “We are here to enforce a safe environment...”

“Get out of here before I call the police,” Doreen threatened, and when the men did

not attempt to move, Doreen stomped her foot in anger. “I said to scram!”

One of the men grew rigid, attempting to rise to the challenge. From time to time,

health officials would experience this type of resistance and they had been thoroughly

trained to stand their ground. “We are not going anywhere until we have meticulously

investigated the complaints against this place,” he said. “So we suggest that you comply

the easy way or we’ll turn this place upside down; you’ll think a tornado blew up in

here.”

Doreen did not take to threats too kindly, but she could sense that these fools were

looking for a reason to embarrass her in front of her loyal patrons. However, no one toyed

with Doreen Lakatos and got away with it. She stared those two burly men in the eyes to

let them know that she was not intimidated by them.

“You break it, you fix it!” She stormed off and left the health officials to question the

frightened employees.

As if on autopilot, Tara’s fingers glided over the small gash that Doreen had put into

her forehead yesterday. It still throbbed with pain, but it was the least of her worries at

the moment. She had accomplished a small victory. In comparison to what a life-long

association with Doreen could bring, Tara knew this act of revenge would help remind

her that there were other ways to get back at Doreen. She was not going to sit passively

on the side and let Doreen disrespect her womanhood.

A smile of enjoyment crept over Tara's face. Payback was certainly sweet, even if it

only lasted for a fleeting moment. With the help of a few friends, they had set a series of

complaints in motion and had made the matter seem so urgent that the health department

wasted no time sending out their agents to carry out a surprise investigation.

The idea of rats 'nibbling' over the customer's food would raise a concern to any decent habitué. Wynton might not have told Tara much about Doreen's life, but she was

sure glad that he had mentioned that his mother owned a Tea House. Tara wondered what

other information she could pull out of Wynton that would assist her in Doreen's demise.

"Put the car in drive," Tara instructed one of her girlfriends. "I'm done here. Doreen

doesn't know who she's messing with."

Chapter Thirteen

Tampa International Airport, 2:11 p.m.

By the time the aircraft had crawled to a stop on the tarmac, Jasmine was weeping

loud enough to get the attention of the passengers sitting in front of her. She did not want

their pity, so she kept her face toward the window until it was time to vacate the aircraft.

Karl was already waiting in the baggage claim area. He knew that she would need a

shoulder to cry on. And, after having spent twelve years away from Tampa, he knew that

she could become overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity of her surroundings.

Each time that Karl laid eyes on his daughter he saw more and more of his Hispanic

heritage in her features. She had the fierce dark eyes and the smooth black hair, but even

more prominent was the fire in her personality. He stood up in anticipation to greet her as

she stepped off the escalator. In Compton, California where he'd grown up as a rebel in

the early seventies, the Hispanics and the Blacks ruled the streets. It was notorious for

several gangs, particularly those associated with the Bloods and the Crips.

For a brief season, Karl had run with the Crips and had terrorized the citizens of

his

neighborhood. His mother eventually shipped him to Florida to live with his father,

hoping the change in environment would modify Karl's focus. Fortunately, it had not

only modified his focus, but his entire life – to the point where Karl's name in Florida

now carried much fame and influence. Due to his positive outcome, Karl had taken the

same action with his daughter.

He did not regret sending Jasmine to New York – as he had been initially, because if

she had stayed in Florida, where she had been born and raised, Karl was convinced her

recalcitrant ways would have eventually caught up with her. He could not dismiss the

sudden impression that maybe Jasmine's past had a lot to do with them being so much

alike. They craved the adventurous side of life. Now, as he looked her over as she walked

toward him, he saw a woman who had finally taken charge of her purpose. Not even the

pain of her mother's death could spoil that image.

Karl pulled his daughter into a tight embrace and whispered in her ear, "Hi Sweetie. I

am so sorry that I had to tell you over the phone."

“What choice did you have?” Jasmine told her father. She eased away from Karl’s

chest, adding in a voice clearly distraught, “Mummy did not give us any warning. Please

take me to see her.”

Karl could not stomach looking at the frozen cadaver of his wife, and he assumed that

his daughter shared his sentiment. “Are you sure you can handle that?” he asked.

“Yes. I *need* to see her – if only to convince myself that she is actually gone.”

Karl placed a gentle hand on Jasmine’s shoulder and said as fatherly as possible,

“Maybe later, Pumpkins. I don’t think now would be the right time. I prefer that you

relax–”

“Don’t.” Jasmine shrugged her father’s hand away. After all these years she was still

not comfortable with Karl’s attempt at being affectionate. She hadn’t lied when she told

Sharon that she had forgiven Karl for what he had done. She just needed time to adjust to

the new dynamics in their relationship. The fact that Karl made little effort to visit her in

New York proved they had a long way to go.

“...you’ve had a long flight,” Karl was saying. “You need to take it easy.”

“Daddy, really?” Jasmine spat. “I was on pins and needles on the way here and now

you expect me to take it easy? How could you even suggest that?”

“I’m worried how this all might affect you, Jasmine. Sharon’s body is in pretty bad

shape. It doesn’t even look like your mother...”

Jasmine fixed her stare on Karl in a way that plainly told Karl he was wasting his

time. “I’m not going anywhere until you take me to see my mother,” she said.

“Don’t

worry about me; I will be fine.”

“Well...” Karl said, as he walked ahead toward the carousel, “let me help you with

your luggage.”

Karl introduced Jasmine to Doctor Peter Abdul and then they both followed the

doctor down a long corridor toward the morgue. Jasmine asked several obvious questions

related to her mother’s death, but Doctor Abdul kept his answers succinct, being careful

of how Karl would perceive his intentions. He did not want Karl to know that he had

requested the court to have Sharon’s body autopsied.

“Please, this way,” Peter said, motioning with his hands. A double door swung open

before them and all of them entered. They stood before giant freezer doors that seemed to

be about six feet tall. Peter offered Jasmine a warm smile as he tugged down on

one of

the door handles. “Again, please accept my condolence, Ms. Benton. Your mother was an

incredible woman.”

What an awkward time to say such a thing, Jasmine thought, but she did not catch the

suspicious look that Karl had given the doctor. She was more aware of the buckling in

her knees as she watched Peter roll out a metal bed. He removed a white sheet from what

appeared to be her mother’s face. The angst that was stitched in Sharon’s cold visage

took Jasmine completely for a spin. Her mother had turned two to three shades darker

from that peanut butter complexion she’d maintained while she was alive. Jasmine

gasped and her tears plummeted to the floor.

“Mummy, look at you,” she sobbed quietly. “I just spoke to you a couple days ago.

How did this happen? I told you to go and see a doctor, but you were so stubborn. You

should have listened, Mummy, you should have listened...”

Karl moved in behind his daughter and gingerly guided an arm around her waist. Out

of the reservoir of his guilt, he said, “I did not know your mother was so ill. I thought she

just wanted my attention. You know how your mother acts when she gets into those

moods.”

“Mummy had been trying to get your attention for years and you never gave it to her!

Look where it has gotten her!”

“Pumpkins, that is not fair –”

Jasmine swatted her father’s hand away from her waist. “Mummy is dead! Not you!

How can you stand there and talk to me about being fair?”

Karl blinked back his astonishment and tried to swallow what his daughter had just

said. He was sure she did not mean it the way it came out. Nevertheless, her words stung

him hard. “We should not discuss this here,” he tried. “This is the reason why I suggested

that you not come here. You’re not ready for this.” Karl began to tug lightly at her arm.

“Let me take you home –”

“Daddy, just go and leave me alone!” Jasmine jerked away from Karl and walked

around to the other side of the metal gurney. “I want to be here with my mother.”

“Pumpkins –”

“You should wait outside, Mr. Benton,” Peter said, interrupting as politely as he could. “Don’t worry. I will bring your daughter back to you in a few minutes.”

Karl did not trust the doctor alone with his daughter, but with Jasmine so infuriated

with him at the moment, it was not prudent to stay in her presence. “If she’s not out in a

few minutes, I’m coming back in,” he warned. “I want her away from this place as soon

as possible.”

Strange you should say that, Peter thought but said aloud, “Yes, I understand. I will

do my best to comfort your daughter.”

“I did not ask you to comfort her,” Karl barked. “Do as you were told. Bring her out

in a few minutes.”

Karl burst through the double doors, not caring how they slapped against the wall.

Chapter Fourteen

8:22 p.m.

Hello, Brian, please answer my text...I want to start over, now that the truth is out in

the open. I was only kidding – you don't have to marry a blind invalid like me. I just want

us to be friends. Coming from the Christian perspective, is that really too much to ask?

Don't let months of confiding in each other go down the drain...

Brian must have read Marcia's message a dozen times that night and the only thing he

couldn't get out of his mind was how in the world she was able to type and text such an

organized paragraph to his phone. He'd never heard of a blind person having such

unusual capabilities. However, once he'd gotten over the initial shock, reality began to

kick in. *This is the woman who deceived me at the restaurant.*

He thought it was extremely low of her to play the 'Christian' card on his emotions. It

did not matter if she had been joking about the marriage thing; Brian simply could not see

himself with a woman who had not been up front with him about such a serious

condition. There was no telling what other secrets she had stashed away in her tank of

ideas.

Yet, Brian could not shake Marcia from his thoughts. He knew he had wounded her

with his words, and had probably shattered what was left of her self-esteem, but he could

not find a justifiable reason to apologize. Well, his Christian background would argue

differently, but as a man who had been completely honest about his identity, and had

even shared a few intimate details of his life, he strongly felt that Marcia got exactly what

she deserved.

Maybe that was the reason men had taken advantage of her and had slept with her as

a form of revenge. That was a sad way to live, but Marcia was not his problem. God had

not called him to be her knight in shining armor. He was certain, beyond any reasonable

doubt, that marrying a blind woman was not what God wanted for his life. He wished

Marcia God's blessing, along with a prayer that would shove her in the right direction.

Brian soon shifted his thoughts to the next order of business. He had promised

Wynton that he would corner Doreen and try to convince her to take a four-day trip to the

Bahamas with Tara. And, he had been geared up to do it. He just hadn't

anticipated

Doreen coming home in a sulky mood. Even now, as he sat up against the headboard,

attempting to read his Bible, he could hear snippets of his parents' voices echoing

through the house. He would have ignored it – as he usually did when they fought,

however, the gravity he detected in his father's voice was enough to make him close the

Bible. He got up and cracked open his bedroom door. The noise level went from almost

zero to ear-splitting.

“...how do you know that it was Tara who flattened your tire?” his father was asking.

“You would blame that poor child for blowing up the World Trade Center if you could.

This is not the time to be spiteful. Did you know that Karl lost his wife last night?”

Doreen did not have a flat tire. She only used that as an excuse to express her anger to

Paul over what had happened at the Tea House that afternoon. And, because Paul did not

know about the Tea House, she could not reveal her suspicion that it was Tara who had

sent those health officials to her place.

“I will make that black hyena pay. If it's the last thing that I accomplish—”

Paul slapped his hands together and yelled bitterly, “Doreen, did you hear what I just

told you? Sharon is dead! Where the bloody hell is your heart?”

“What do you want me to do, Paul? I have not spoken to the woman in years.”

“My God, you are cruel...”

“She called our son a rapist!”

“You’ve been holding on to a grudge for twelve years?” Paul threw his hands up in

astonishment. “Unbelievable! Sharon died knowing you hate her. What kind of Christian

example is that for a First Lady?”

“Don’t you toss that sanctimonious garbage at me!” Doreen thundered. She fell in

line with her husband’s quick gait, who appeared to be making his escape through the

front door. “You knew from day one that I did not want you to open up that church. I

begged you not to; nonetheless you went against my wishes and wasted our savings on

your frivolous impulses –”

“Your wishes?” Paul interrupted, but kept his stride moving forward, unable to get

over the shock of Doreen’s indifference. He looked at her sideways and said, “Who the

hell died and made you Queen over Britain? You are nothing but a disrespectful,

obnoxious beast!”

Doreen gasped at her husband’s outburst. Hardly anything Paul said hurt her, but tonight it felt as if Paul was winning the fight. She shot back, trying to regain control of

her authority. “No, Paul, you are the beast! You are the green ogre in this marriage...”

She grabbed at him like a ticked-off pit-bull, almost toppling over onto Paul’s feet.

“Where are you going at this hour?”

“Get away from me, woman!”

Doreen struggled to hold on to Paul’s jacket, but his movements were too swift. In

anger, a torrent of foul words flew out of her mouth.

“Paul, you get back here this instant!” she screamed. “Did you hear me, you old, feeble man? Get back here!”

Paul jumped behind the wheel of his car, but he had one last thing to spit at his wife.

“One day, Doreen, you will pray for death, but it will elude you like an infectious disease.

You’ve caused Karl and his family enough pain to last a lifetime. I feel sorry for you

when that day arrives.”

“You’re weak and impotent! That is why you are running away! You can’t stand up

to a woman who has more sense than you!”

Doreen slammed the front door so hard it appeared as if the entire house shook.
When

she spun around, Brian was in her face. The disappointment in his eyes told
Doreen that

she was about to be reprimanded for her churlish behavior. She tried to push him
to the

side, but Brian blocked her at every attempt.

“Now that I think of it,” he said somberly, “you are the reason why I am
probably not

married as yet. I’m terrified of bringing my dates home to meet you. And, soon,
if my

brother doesn’t be strong, he will never get the chance to walk Tara down the
aisle. Your

actions were despicable. I heard Dad telling you that you are not setting a good
example

as the First Lady of Brandon View. I agree with him. Charity begins at home and
I would

add that you are not setting a good example even as a mother.”

“Oh, don’t be foolish, my son –” Doreen’s voice had suddenly mellowed into a
casual

tone. She pinched Brian’s cheeks, as if he were a chubby five-year-old kid.

“Don’t let

your father poison your mind, Sweetheart. We live in an uncaring world and only
those

with backbone will survive. Your father doesn’t have a backbone...”

“Stop belittling Dad in my presence,” Brian spat. “No matter what you think of

him,

Paul Lakatos is my father!”

“But you are nothing like him,” Doreen persisted. “You are the total opposite. You

don’t even have his skin color – that dingy white leathery skin. It has wrinkles and it is

covered with spots –”

“Are you listening to yourself? Describing my father as if you picked him up from off

the streets. Why did you marry him if you hate him so much?”

“I did not have a choice.”

“There is always a choice, Mother!”

“Don’t you raise your tone with me,” Doreen warned. “And don’t tell me I had a choice, because you were not around during my early years...” She walked a little ways

off as a sign that she was finished discussing the subject. “Let me retire to my room,

Brian, because fighting with your father drains my strength.”

Brian had a whole heap of things to discuss with his mother, but trying to have a civilized conversation with Doreen was as difficult as trying to get a cat into a hot tub of

water. His mother would not allow anyone to question her past. “There is one thing I

want to ask,” he said, as Doreen resumed her stride toward her bedroom.

“However, in

respect to Mrs. Benton's death, I will bring it up at a more appropriate time –"

Doreen stopped and turned promptly at her son. "What is it, Brian? Don't stall."

"I want you to try to get along with Wynton's wife," he said.

"I thought you had something sensible to say."

"Marrying Tara is important to Wynton. The amount of time they spend together; she's practically his wife –"

"That hyena is not his wife!"

"Well, mother, you had better get used to the idea, because Wynton is in love with

that girl."

"No, he is in love with her body! You know from early on your brother has always

struggled with a demon of lust. It eventually got him into much debauchery with Karl's

daughter. Thank heavens she's not around to spread her poison."

"In any event, Mother, Wynton wants to marry the young woman, and the last time I

checked, it was his choice to make. So get over it."

"We will see about that," Doreen huffed. "My sons deserve better than hood rats

looking to cheat them out of their inheritance. And that is exactly what Tara plans to do. I

can sniff a gold digger from a distance."

"You leave me with no alternative," Brian said, trying his hardest to ignore his

mother's warped perception of Tara. "I'm going to side with Wynton on this issue. How

does a four-day trip to the Bahamas sound?"

A wide smile pulled Doreen's lips upwards, and with an air of daintiness she responded, "Why Brian, I have never been to the Bahamas. Mother's Day has already

passed. Has it not?"

Brian rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. He wondered how his father made it through

three decades of being married to his mother. "This has nothing to do with Mother's

Day," he said. "You know exactly what I'm getting at. The trip and the organization

behind it are about building relationships between women, which I see as the perfect

opportunity for you and Tara to start the bonding process as mother and daughter..."

"Very interesting—"

"And don't even think about turning me down or I won't speak to you for the rest of

my life."

Doreen chortled at Brian's shallow attempt at coercion. "Darling, I will go at once."

"That's it? You're not going to put on your boxing gloves?"

Doreen released another one of those wide smiles. "Don't be silly. I heard much

about that exotic island. As I have said; I will go at once.”

“You are missing the point,” Brian said. “This is not some pleasure trip. The focus is

on you and Tara coming together to –”

Doreen silenced Brian by placing one of her fingers on her lips. “Don’t go on and on

about it. I know what you’re trying to do. I will do my best to accommodate that hyena –

excuse me, I meant, Ms. Tara Lamont.” She concluded with another smile, “In the

meanwhile, I will go to my room now and regroup. I’ve had quite an unusual day.”

Brian watched his mother exit the room, her movements as smooth and as vibrant as a

woman half her age. He could not get over at how quickly she had consented to his

suggestion. It was almost as if she had been waiting for an opportunity to get Tara alone.

Suddenly, Brian felt sick to his stomach. Literally speaking, he had stuffed a poor,

innocent lamb between the teeth of a lioness. This was not the picture he had in mind.

Lord, please,” Brian prayed. *“Do not let this plan backfire.”*

Chapter Fifteen

Thursday 8:11 a.m.

“Wynton, you are at the top of your game now, this is not the time to make your fans

upset. Where are you?”

“Stop stressing, Miss. Edna, I’m on my way,” Wynton croaked into the phone. “I forgot that I had to perform this morning...”

“I texted you three times,” Edna said. “You did not respond. That’s why I’m calling.

And by the sounds of it, you haven’t gotten out of bed as yet.”

Edna was right, but Wynton wouldn’t dare tell her that. He and Tara had spent the

first part of the night quarreling over Doreen. The night ended with them having sessions

of ‘makeup sex.’ Now, Wynton could barely keep his eyelids open. “Just tell me where

I’m going and I’ll be there in twenty minutes,”

“The TV station is almost thirty miles away. It is impossible for you to be there in

twenty minutes, especially in this morning traffic.”

“Well, what time do I have to be there?”

“The interview starts at nine o’clock, Wynton,” Edna said. “Get up and be there not a

minute after!”

Wynton heard the sudden ‘click’ in his ear, which told him that Miss Edna was ticked

off. The way she acted sometimes made Wynton wonder who was in charge. By and

large, she was a very aggressive woman – a trait that was extremely vital in the music

industry if an artist was to survive the competition. Though Wynton appreciated that

quality about Miss Edna, he did not appreciate being disturbed from his sleep. He sat up

in the bed and tried to rub the lethargy from his eyes. His alarm clock said that he had

roughly forty minutes to get dressed and be out on the road to fulfill a silly nine o’clock

interview. *Who the heck got up this early anyway, to talk about themselves?* Wynton

thought. Being famous was so overrated.

Tara had gotten up thirty minutes before and had used the shower in the guest bath.

She was not one of those women who took two hours to get ready. She could run alongside any man and not get left behind. However, by the time she returned to Wynton's bedroom, he was pushing his feet into his shoes.

“That was quick,” she told him. “Did you even wash your stinky skin?”

“I washed what was important,” Wynton said. “I don't have ten minutes to waste in a

full shower. Are you coming with me?”

“No way!” Tara pointed to her forehead. “Do you see this ugly thing? Not even makeup can hide it. Besides, I have a few clients that are coming into the boutique today.

I would rather be there than in front of a dozen cameras.”

“Come on, baby, it doesn’t look that bad.”

“What are you smoking, Wynton? Your mother put a gash in my face. And I still can't get over the fact that you want me to spend four days alone with her in the Bahamas.

I might be shipped back to Florida in a wooden coffin.”

“Again, I’m sorry, baby. But you did tell me last night that you were gonna think about it.”

“That was after you pushed your tongue in my ear. I've had time to sleep on it and I

have come to my senses. I'm not going.”

The buzzer sounded and delayed Wynton's response for a moment. He knew it was

one of his bodyguards who had come to pick him up in the limo, but he did not want to

leave his fiancée with such a negative reaction to what they'd discussed last night.

He planted a gentle kiss on her cheek, and simultaneously inhaled her fruity

fragrance. “Promise me that you will keep an open mind, because I really want you and

my mother to get along. This nonsense has got to stop between you two.”

“But your mother is the one doing all of the hating...”

“That is all the reason to consider my suggestion. It would be the perfect opportunity

to talk to her and get her to open up to you.”

“I'm not a miracle worker, babe,” Tara said. She pulled Wynton's face toward her lips

and returned the kiss on his cheek. “Get out of here before you really are late. I'll give

you my decision when I get back from the boutique.”

Wynton gave Tara an affectionate stare and said softly, “Just remember that I love

you and no matter how things turn out with my mother, I want you to know that you will

always be my utmost priority.”

“Thanks, babe. I really needed to hear that.”

As Wynton's limo glided to the front of the TV station, he did not expect to see a

throng of people stretched along the sidewalks. If Wynton had not noticed the huge

posters with his name on them, he would have thought the Queen of England was getting

ready to make her show. He could not believe the level of recognition. *These people are*

crazy, he smiled inwardly. However, he could not take all of the credit. Miss

Edna was

good at what she did, especially at getting the word out about his live appearances.

The excitement was contagious. Wynton now felt the urge to jump out of the limo

and high-five as many of his fans as possible before entering in the building, but he did

not have sufficient time to do so. He even felt guilty complaining about the ups and

downs of being famous. Almost as an automatic reaction, he dipped his head and sniffed

his armpits. He then checked the freshness of his breath by blowing in the palms of his

hands – just to make sure his personal hygiene was in order. It would not be cool if it

were discovered that his fans fainted because of his odor and not because of how much

they loved him.

Miss Edna collided with Wynton and his bodyguard in the corridor of the studio.

Smartly attired in an army green business suit, Miss Edna began to rattle off a slew of

instructions that she thought Wynton should follow.

“Remember to keep those pearly whites in front of the camera,” she spat. “Pay close

attention to the questions being asked. If you freeze up, make a joke out of it....”
And on

and on she went with her ramblings. In their discourse, they kept a brisk pace, but

Wynton, already fighting back his frustration, had heard enough. He paused briefly and

shot Miss Edna a look that did little to hide his annoyance.

“Miss Edna, chill out,” he told her quietly. “You are making me nervous with all of

these rules. Just let me be myself.”

Because Miss Edna went out of her way to satisfy her clients’ needs, she was careful

not to become easily offended. Her lips pulled back into a reassuring smile.

“You’re

right, kiddo,” she said and gave Wynton one of her motherly stares. “You are going to do

great – you always do. Go in there and knock ‘em dead.”

Wynton’s thanks were swallowed up by the shouts from the set’s director. He

hastened toward them with an incredible sense of urgency. The man wore leather pants

and they were so tight that it looked as if they had been painted on him.

“C’mon people,” he lisped. “Get into position; we’re coming back from commercial

in forty seconds. No hanky panky; just action, people! Roll with the punches and let’s do

this! Oh my God, you are so much more beautiful in person...”

Wynton looked behind him and wondered who the heck this fellow was talking to.

Compliments from other men were red flags in Wynton's book – especially compliments

coming from men who looked as if their hipbones had been kicked out of joint. However,

he played it cool and kept his expression as friendly as possible. Just as long as the fellow

did not touch him in any inappropriate manner, they would not have a problem.

“This way, honey,” the director said to Wynton. “Katie Donnahue is dribbling to meet

you. Ooohh, I can't wait til' you get up on that stage and shake your thang. You are one

sexy, white hunk...”

Wynton swore if that dude had said one more word to him, he would have released

one those of Mike Tyson blows and locked his jaws in three places. Thank goodness, he

was whisked into the studio before he slipped and pulled a scene. Immediately, he heard

Katie Donnahue announcing his name with great enthusiasm – exciting the crowd with

the lyrics of his music. The only thing left for Wynton to do was to strut toward the front

as if he owned the TV station. If Tara saw him now she would shake her head and tell

him he was ‘overly’ full of himself.

The only other woman who had ever used the same expression was Jasmine

Benton.

This is so strange, Wynton thought as he eased his butt into a black and white sofa, that I

would be thinking of you, Ms. Benton, especially when half a dozen cameras are staring

down my blessed throat. Now, what does that mean?

Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.

- Sir Walter Scott

Chapter Sixteen

It had been just under thirty hours since Jasmine flew in from New York, but it felt as

if she had been in Brandon, Florida for an entire week. The stress of her mother's death

weighed heavily on her and she could only imagine how the coming days would affect

her equilibrium. The worst had been when her father announced that he wanted to have

Sharon's body cremated as soon as possible. It was her mother's wish, and her father

seemed hell bent on carrying it out. If Jasmine had anything to do with it, her father

would have a difficult time getting what he wanted, because there was no way she was

going to let her mother's body 'cook' to a spoonful of ashes.

Her father did not even care to find out the cause of her mother's death. He seemed

listless and out of touch with his emotions. They had fought last night about the way

Sharon's body should be laid to rest. How cruel of her father to suggest that her mother's

body would be better off burned than to be subjected to a senseless autopsy. Dr. Peter

Abdul did not even have to convince Jasmine that an autopsy needed to be performed. It

was naturally assumed that a person who had died so suddenly, without any prior medical

conditions, would need to undergo the 'butcher's knife' – if only to obtain conclusive

results.

"I need to go into the office for a short while," Karl said. He stood behind Jasmine,

who had fallen asleep on the chaise at three o'clock that morning. "Do you need anything

before I leave?"

"I don't want my mother to be cremated. Besides that, there is nothing else."

Karl's muscles stiffened at Jasmine's words. It took almost a minute for his anger to

subside before he responded in an even tone, "We discussed this at length last evening.

I'm not changing my mind. In fact, it is what Sharon wants. I have sent instructions for

your mother's body to be picked up from the morgue and taken to Crest Hill Mortuary

and Crematorium. They are the best in the business."

Jasmine turned to face her father and glared at him with her puffy, red eyes. "At least

let the hospital do an autopsy on her. Aren't you interested in finding out how Mummy

died?"

"Of course, I'm interested," Karl snapped. "I just don't see the sense in such a

procedure. Your mother is already dead. Preliminary tests showed that her kidneys failed.

Having an autopsy done is simply unnecessary.”

“And setting her body on fire is even worse, if you ask me.”

“I am not asking you, Jasmine. I’m telling you what I’m going to —”

Jasmine stumbled to her feet, interrupting her father. “Is that how you want to remember your wife? As a handful of dust, which you are not sure would even be hers? I

have never recalled Mummy ever having problems with her kidneys. Something is going

on here and we need to get to the bottom of it.”

“Jasmine, my decision is final! The sooner we get closure; the better for everyone

involved.”

“Why are you rushing through this process? You are not even thinking about my feelings —”

“Why should we delay it?” Karl said. “Only poor people do that.”

Only poor people do that? It was a statement that Jasmine had heard all through her

childhood years. Her father had always depended heavily on his affluence when it came

down to making any decision. It was Karl’s measuring stick that he used to determine the

success of a person’s influence. Jasmine knew it would only take one word from her

father's lips and he would get exactly what he wanted.

“All these years I've been away from this place and you have not changed one bit,”

Jasmine said, her fight obviously deflated. “You are a very controlling and manipulative

man. God saw my mother's pain and decided that it was best to take her to heaven. If you

want to cremate my mother – after I've begged you as your daughter to reconsider – then

go ahead. I will not stand in your way. You've made me learn the hard way not to go

against your decisions. But know this: Don't hold me responsible if I don't ever speak to

you again.”

Karl nodded his response and got out of Jasmine's presence as quickly as he could. It

felt as if he was about to have a meltdown and he did not want Jasmine to witness it. Five

minutes into his commute on the Interstate, he was sputtering on the phone to the only

person who had the competence to quiet his nerves. They agreed to meet at their usual

spot, and within minutes of arriving, their lips came together into a hungry kiss. Karl

wasted no time in stripping off his clothes and dropping them to the floor. The woman

followed suit and before long, they were nibbling and fondling each other like two, lively

adolescents. After a short while of passionate sex, they lay spent on top of each other.

Karl used the tips of his fingers to graze the neck of his partner. He broke the feverish

silence by clearing his throat and then said evenly, "The hospital is pushing for Sharon's

body to be autopsied."

"So what," the woman spat. "It might be just what we need. I hope you handled the

situation with a little bit of wisdom."

Karl allowed the silence to stretch too long, which prompted the woman to think that

Karl had done something stupid. She slid off his chest and then pierced him with an

inquiring gaze. "What did you say to those people?"

"I told them what I thought was the right thing."

"Which was?"

"That I don't want Sharon subjected to such a barbaric procedure."

The woman's face was covered in disappointment. "That was such a stupid move."

"How was I supposed to respond? I did not expect Sharon's death to raise any suspicion."

"She died in your arms for no obvious reason," the woman fired back

sarcastically.

“Of course they are going to ask questions. Common sense should have told you –”

“Do you know how terrified I am of being found out?” Karl said, interrupting the

woman’s rant. “What if they test her for toxic levels? Because that is exactly what would

happen if they performed an autopsy. Then what?”

The woman sat up, clearly not liking what she was hearing. “It doesn’t matter. If you

follow my instructions, you won’t have a thing to worry about. Let them run their tests; I

guarantee you that those test results will come back as inconclusive.”

“We live in a technically advanced culture. Nothing is ‘inconclusive’ these days.

These guys know their science. They’ll find a way to connect the dots. That’s why I

thought it best to have Sharon’s body cremated right away.”

“No, you should have been playing the role of the ‘cooperative’ husband. I can only

imagine the reaction your behavior has caused.”

“What do you expect me to do at this point? My daughter is torn up over me wanting

to cremate her mother. I can’t help looking her in the eyes and feeling responsible –”

“Who the hell cares what Jasmine wants?” The woman jumped out of the bed and

grabbed her designer suit from the floor. “Deal with those doctors! Call them and give

them the permission to go ahead with the autopsy. Because if you don’t, you can bet your

bottom dollar that the law will take over. Change your attitude before you give someone a

reason to investigate. You know how to reach me, if you need me.”

Karl watched as the woman got dressed and swayed out of the hotel room. He could

not believe the power that she possessed over him. It felt as if she had gone to the voodoo

priest and gotten a special potion mixed just for him. Because despite Karl’s fears, he

could not see himself walking away from the only woman he truly loved. She was an

addiction and Karl was afraid that if he did not pull his wits together, the thing that

brought him pleasure could be the thing that could destroy him for good. After a moment

of deep thought, he placed his cell phone against his ear and asked to be transferred to

Doctor Peter Abdul’s extension.

Chapter Seventeen

Olive Garden Restaurant – 7:11 p.m.

Brian found himself heading toward the same spot he had visited several days earlier.

This time he was not walking into the situation with his eyes shut. Out of the pity of his

heart, he had agreed to meet with Marcia for another date. And quite frankly, Brian did

not view their meeting as a date. He simply wanted to settle his curiosity about how a

blind woman could get around so easily. Still, there was a part of Brian that did not want

to admit that he found Marcia extremely attractive. Not particularly her outer beauty,

which was remarkably striking, but more so the warmth he felt exuding from her personality.

Brian had always thought of himself as a gentleman, so it was hard for him to resist

Marcia's pleas. It was a fact that she had deceived him, but it was also a fact that she had

begged for his forgiveness. When he walked into the restaurant Marcia was already

sitting with her back turned to him. Again, Brian was amazed at how at peace she

seemed; almost as if she had learned the art of contentment.

“Brian, is that you?”

How in the world did she sense I was here? Brian thought, but instead he said, “Yes.

You have a great way of knowing what is going on around you.”

Marcia smiled warmly and then tried to turn her head in the direction of Brian’s voice

“It is not a mystery, really. My other four senses make up for the one that is out of

commission.”

“It is impressive, nonetheless,” Brian said, as he took a seat opposite Marcia.

“But seriously,” Marcia said. “I am not as good as you think. I have a wonderful friend who helps me get around –” She paused and gave Brian another warm smile. “You

are a very honorable man. Thank you for not holding my lies against me.”

If Marcia kept smiling the way she did, Brian was afraid that he would begin to feel

something for this woman. He did not plan on letting that happen. “It was the Christian

thing to do,” he said noncommittally.

Marcia giggled. “Why do you always hide behind your faith?” she said. “You just

need to admit that you are a nice person, regardless of your belief.”

“Okay, you can stop with the accolades. You don’t even know me as well as you think you do.”

“Oh, Brian, we have talked for months –”

“About that,” Brian interrupted, “how are you able to communicate using technical

devices? Do they have special computers for blind people?”

“Oh my God, Brian, you are so funny. Has anyone ever said that to you? I so enjoy

talking with you –” Marcia swept her curly bangs behind an ear and stared in Brian’s

direction as if she could see him. “But to answer your question, yes, there are ways a

blind person can enhance their computer experience.”

Brian sensed that Marcia wanted him to prompt her to continue, but he just stared at

her instead, and took in the symmetry of her face. For a blind girl, she was really attractive.

“Don’t you want to know how?” Marcia asked.

Brian cleared his throat and said, “Yes, please continue.”

“Well, there are several software programs on the market that can simulate the human

voice, which can read the computer screen. Some even produce a hardcopy in braille. I

use it when I can. Most of the times I simply ask Phoebe to ‘ghostwrite’ my thoughts. It’s

easier.”

Ghostwrite my thoughts? Brian did not like the sound of that. It was an outright

invasion of privacy, which meant that Marcia's friend knew all of her deep, dark secrets,

including the few he had shared with Marcia over the Internet. The signs were building

and they were as clear as an October sky. Marcia was not the right fit for his life. He was

a man who cherished his privacy, and was careful about who he let enter his 'inner'

sanctum.

"So," Brian said, wanting to confirm his fears. "This Phoebe is your wonderful friend

you told me about earlier."

"Correct. Would you like to meet her? She's not sitting too far from us."

Brian's eyes began moving all over the restaurant. He stared back at Marcia as if she

had lost her mind. "How close is she sitting to us?"

Marcia giggled. She could sense the uncomfortable shift in Brian's disposition. "Oh

Brian, you must think that I am a freak. Let me ease your discomfit right now. Phoebe is

not that kind of person."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She's a woman with strong, Christian principles. Voyeurism is a big no no in her

book."

How do you know for sure? You're blind, Brian thought, but said aloud, "But you have just confessed that she ghostwrites your thoughts."

Marcia tilted her head, using expressions that were beginning to grow on Brian. "Yes,

however, I have never revealed the personal things you have shared with me. There were

times when our conversation seemed to move toward deep waters. Those are the times I

would use the computer software, while Phoebe left the room."

"You are too trusting," Brian said. "I can understand how men could have taken advantage of you in the past."

The waiter interrupted Marcia's response when he asked them what they were having

for dinner. Brian observed the change in Marcia's countenance and he could only assume

that his last words had awakened some sad experiences in her mind. Yet, within a minute

after the waiter left their table, Marcia managed to ditch the melancholy attitude by

asking Brian an unusual question.

"If I had eyes to see your face," she said guardedly, "would you then say that I'm beautiful?"

Brian's heart rate accelerated in search of an answer. There was no doubt that Marcia

was an attractive girl, however, he would never admit that she was, for fear of

his true

feelings being revealed. If he told her that she was beautiful, she would then ask him why

he did not want to date her, which was her way of getting back to what she had always

assumed. Her blindness had placed a high wall between them.

Brian tried to buy time by asking another question, “Why is this important for you to

know?”

“It’s okay,” Marcia said. “You don’t have to answer. I’m just surprised you did not

once ask me how I had become blind.”

Brian was placed on the spot and was made to see his insensitivity in bold colors.

How could he redeem himself without sounding like a jerk? Should he bring up the fact

that Marcia was the one who deceived him, and that technically, it was not his fault that

he hadn’t completely gotten over it? Brian knew he could not bring himself to do that. He

had told Marcia he’d forgiven her. Certainly, such action was not godly, and would even

make him appear more of a jerk.

“Excuse me,” Brian said quietly, as he stood to his feet.

Marcia closed her eyes in regret. “I’m sorry ... I did not mean to –”

“It’s nothing. I just need to make a quick dash to the men’s room. I’ll be right back.”

Brian was half telling the truth. He did want to use the men’s room, but he also wanted to get away to organize his thoughts. Marcia was doing something to his insides

he could not explain. She was so pleasant, but was also so naïve – a combination that

made Brian want to protect her. In his haste to get to his destination he accidentally

bumped into a woman, causing her purse to flip-flop to the carpet. Both of them stooped

to pick it up.

“I was not looking where I was going,” Brian said. “Please accept my apology.”

“No, it’s okay,” the woman said, swatting her tears as she came up from the floor. It

was obvious that she had been crying and that she was trying to hide it. “I had my head

down,” she said. “So crazy of me...”

When their eyes connected, it was as if everything in the room came to a full stop.

Brian was blown away by the serendipity of the moment and had it not been for the

woman’s familiar smile, he would not have recognized her. The years had certainly

treated her well.

“Jasmine Benton,” he declared. “It has been a long, long time.”

“Brian?” It was clear that Jasmine was the more uncertain of the two. She attempted

to put a little enthusiasm in her voice, “You have certainly grown up. And, you’ve put on

some weight.”

Brian hugged her and then stood back to look at her. “I thought I would never see you

in these parts again,” he said. “What brings you back home to Brandon, Florida?”

“Haven’t you heard?”

For the first time since running into Jasmine, Brian noticed Jasmine’s swollen eyes. It

was then that the answer slapped Brian upside the head. He had overheard his father

telling Doreen about Sharon’s death. He could not understand why he was being so

insensitive that night.

“I am so sorry,” he said warmly. “Please accept my condolence on the passing of your mother. I was so surprised to see you, I did not remember...”

“You don’t have to explain. Thanks, though, I appreciate it.”

Brian shot out the next question that came to his mind. “Should you even be out at

this time, considering what you are facing?”

“It feels as if I’m going crazy in that house, thinking about my mother,” Jasmine confessed. “I had to get out for some fresh air.”

“Well,” Brian looked behind his shoulder and peeked at Marcia. “You’re welcome to

sit with me, that is, if you don’t mind sharing a table with another woman.”

“That is so kind of you, Brian,” Jasmine said. “But three is a crowd. I will be okay.

I’ll get something to eat and then head back home.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Thanks again for the offer.” Jasmine began to back away. “Nice running into you – sorry that it had to be under these circumstances.”

Brian watched Jasmine walk away, completely overwhelmed by her transformation.

The Jasmine he knew from twelve years ago had morphed into a striking beauty. Not

even the sadness of her eyes could diminish such perfection. Brian retook his seat in front

of Marcia, but he could not stop looking at the spot where Jasmine had just left. *Wynton,*

you would never believe who’s in town...

“...how was the bathroom break,” Marcia was saying.

“Huh?”

“You said you were going to the men’s room.”

“I did and now I am back,” Brian said. “Where did we leave off?”

The conversation did not last too long after that. That brief meeting with Jasmine had

shot his mind out of focus. He let Marcia down easy, and gently explained to her the

reason he had to leave. It was hogwash, but it seemed as if Marcia believed him. She

could not read his expressions anyway, so it would be a challenge for her to discern the

truth. When Brian got to his car, he repented and asked the Lord to forgive him for the

lies he had just told.

He had not anticipated the turn of events tonight, still, he should not use that as an

excuse to toss Marcia beneath the bus. Be that as it may, Karl's job offer was beginning

to look extremely appealing.

"Well, Karl," Brian mumbled quietly. "It looks as if you have a new member on board."

Chapter Eighteen

Brandon View Baptist Church – 8:43 p.m.

Paul had never been plagued with thoughts of suicide in his life, but the way Doreen

had been acting for most of their marriage made the idea quite tempting. He'd lounged

for hours in his swivel chair – working his mind into a stupor over the more subtle ways

to end his life. A bullet through the mouth was not his style, and he was too much of a

coward to wrap a noose around his neck. The mental image was completely distressing.

He had a prevailing impression – though he wondered how a man in his position was

going to obtain it – that the mixture of alcohol and pills would provide a quiet passage

into the afterlife.

However, Paul's theological experiences had taught him better. Suicide was not

God's way to bring peace to a man's soul. He had even preached to his congregation that

suicidal thoughts always surfaced from the demonic realm, which was designed to

swallow up their God-given destinies. But Paul would be deceiving himself if he told the

world that he was happy about his future. He was badly broken on the inside –

mainly

because his efforts were taken for granted by an obnoxious wife and two sons who did

not quite understand the role of succession. Doreen was a brat from hell, and he could not

blame her for every stripe of disappointment, but he held her accountable for his restless

spirit. She was far from the wife he had married thirty years ago.

Paul struggled to understand at what point he and Doreen had gotten off course. How

had they lost the edge in their marriage? She used to spoil him with sweet words, and end

their nights with long, soft kisses. Now, all he got was a rebuke to his manhood and a

look of disdain. Granted, he had put on a few pounds over the years and had not retained

his slim, tall frame, but at least he had stuck with her and provided her the security a

husband should. She always compared him to Karl, which Paul thought was cold and

utterly insufferable. He was not Karl and he would never be Karl. Why couldn't his wife

accept him for who he was, instead of treating him as if he were a piece of rotten meat?

The comparison to Karl had not just started, but went all the way back to when they

were in their twenties; Ivy League brats who wasted money like the average American

who wasted food every day. It had always been the four of them – himself, along with

Doreen, Karl, and Sharon – an inseparable bunch of young flames. They threw expensive

parties and dined in the best restaurants around the world – all at the expense of their

parents.

Both Paul and Karl's fathers had been mid-level businessmen, having influence in the

oil and real estate industries. And being men of the same mind, Paul and Karl followed in

their fathers' footsteps. In the late seventies, Paul met Karl at a job fair. They were

helping their fathers man the booths, giving out information to college students. That

initial meeting had produced over three decades of friendship between the men.

Paul and Doreen had already been engaged and were planning their summer wedding.

Karl and Sharon had just started dating. And although Paul was older than Karl by five

years, he fit right in with their taste for the wilder side of life. Paul could remember the

first time he introduced Doreen to Karl, and he had been stunned by her response.

“Karl, this is the elegant Miss Dandridge that I have been going on about...”

With unspoken desire, Karl bathed Doreen with his eyes. When he grinned, it revealed that mischievous side of him. “Paul, I see you love your women with a little

dash of chocolate. You know what they say about black women wanting to experience the

‘other’ side – they can’t get enough of you white suckers.”

Doreen chuckled unexpectedly, which somehow took away Paul’s opportunity to respond. She whipped her delicate body in front of Karl and arrested him with a look that

said that she was not a woman to be taken lightly. “My berries might be black,” she said,

“but they are sweeter than any fruit you will ever taste in your life. Paul is lucky to have

me.”

Karl took Doreen’s hand and kissed it gently. “It’s a pleasure meeting you, Miss Dandridge.” He moved his gaze to Paul and said in a cunning tone, “You are in the

minority, my friend and I am thoroughly jealous.”

“There is certainly not another girl like Doreen,” Paul said. A big grin was on his

face, but internally, he was extremely bothered by Doreen’s statement. However, he

brushed it off and patted Karl’s back – the way a grandfather would do. “Don’t you go

getting any crazy ideas; Miss Dandridge is all mine.”

Karl bowed like a respectable gentleman and said with a tight smirk, “Of course, my

friend, of course...”

The years have gone by so quickly, Paul thought, and he could not believe that he was

now at the mature age of sixty. Had he gotten too old for Doreen? His ‘private member’

was as vibrant as it had been when he’d first taken Doreen to bed. If only his wife would

allow him to touch her, she would be thrilled to know that he could still get her juices

flowing. But the woman loathes me, Paul thought. She would prefer that I wither away

into nothingness. Where have we gone wrong, Doreen? You used to be so sweet to me.

Paul had not even realized that darkness had fallen, adding to the stillness – a deathly

eeriness that mirrored Paul’s mood. The only emission of light came from the

illumination of the moon, as it shone like a flashlight through his office window. A knock

on the door suddenly took Paul out of his glum feeling for a moment, and in response, he

clicked on the small lamp on his desk.

“Come in,” he shouted.

The door pushed open and Brian stuck his head in.

“Dad, what are you doing at the church at this hour?”

Paul cleared his throat and tried to appear busy. “I’m tempted to ask you the same

question, son,” he said. “But by the way you’re dressed I can safely assume you had a hot

date.”

“Well, kind of…” Brian knew his father was fishing for information about the women

in his life, but he was not ready to bring Marcia into the conversation – or Jasmine, for

whatever that meant. “I was passing the area when I saw your car. Is everything okay?”

Paul withheld his response and studied the concern on his son’s face. Their skin colors

were worlds apart, but Brian’s level of sensitivity matched that of his own heart. “I have

dealt with better days,” Paul finally said. “Come in and take a seat.”

“I hope I’m not disturbing you,” Brian said, as he pulled out a chair in front of his

father. “It looks as if you are preparing for a sermon.”

“In a way, it is a sermon. Karl has asked me to do the eulogy for his wife, but I am

happy for the disruption.”

“I did not realize Sharon had been that sick,” Brian said.

“Neither did I, son, neither did I. It’s just one of those moments in life that leaves one

scrapping for answers. I can only imagine how Karl feels. He and Sharon did not have the

best marriage, but he loved that woman dearly.”

“She had stopped coming to church for a while. So, I really never knew what was

going on with her.”

Paul smiled and said, “Well, you’ve only been back from college a couple of months.

Sharon was a faithful soul. She had been working new shifts, trying to secure a promotion...” Paul paused and let out a hissing sound through his teeth. “I am thoroughly

saddened by her passing.”

“Can I change the subject for a bit?”

“Sure, son, what is it?”

Brain gave his father a shielded look, which did little to ease the betrayal he felt in his

heart. “I was offered a job by a very promising firm. They have been in business for a

while and –”

Paul interrupted sharply, “Did you accept the offer?”

“No, but I did not turn it down either.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” Brian parroted, but it was an attempt to buy time. He

knew exactly what was on his father's mind when he spat out the question. Brian was

half-expecting his father to react negatively. That was why he hadn't come right out and

told his father that it was Karl who had made the offer. He knew his father wouldn't be

able to digest it. "I did not give the company an answer. I wanted to talk to you about it

before making any decision."

"You are a grown man, Brian. Why do you need my input?"

"You're upset," Brian told his father. "You know that your opinion means a lot to me."

Paul could not hide the incredulity in his voice when he lashed out bitterly, "Don't

you think I have a right to be upset? You and your brother are very ungrateful." Paul

stood and sliced the air in frustration. "I've built this church and a steel plant from scratch

and I've been trying to make you both understand that I will not be here forever."

"But Dad, don't you think I'm following in your footsteps?" Brian said in his defense.

"That's the reason why I decided to go to Bible school."

"Son, it takes more than a sermon to run an organization of this magnitude. You need

to learn how to grasp the art of administration. That is the one thing I've been

trying to

pump into you.”

“It is not that I don’t understand administration,” Brian said. “We just see it through

different perspectives. I don’t see the need for us to build an entire city, when we haven’t

even mastered what we have now.”

Paul shook his head in an exasperated manner. “You must embrace the future,” he

said. He stared Brian in the eyes, knowing his next string of words would not be received

well. “Your brother has tasted the prominence of the world. He would be in a better

position to understand what I’m trying to explain to you.”

“Between you and my mother, I don’t know who is worse,” Brian said quietly. “She

might be rude and obnoxious, but you are outright shameful in showing favoritism

between your sons. I am the one who is here with you. Wynton is on the stage grinding

his butt in front of a crowd of lustful women...”

“That does not mean that your brother would remain in that state –”

“You can’t have everything your way, Dad,” Brian interrupted. “We have many things in common, but Wynton and I are individuals with different needs and aspirations.”

Don't try to relive your life through us.”

Brian did not add another word. He simply turned around and exited his father's office. At that point, he had made up his mind. He would accept Karl's job offer without

further delay – whether his father agreed or not. It was obvious his father did not truly

want the best for him and for his life.

Chapter Nineteen

Three Days Later

“The results are in. It’s rare, but it appears to be Botulism poisoning,” the forensic

examiner announced. “Scientific name: *Clostridium botulinum*. It is found in meat, fish,

and vegetables that have either been insufficiently heated or improperly canned.”

Peter was not all that versed on the subject, but he did know that it came under the

category of household poisons. He reached out his skinny hand and grasped the documents that were fastened to a clipboard. “Are you positive?” he questioned.

“Sharon’s toxicity levels were extremely unusual.”

“Because botulism is extremely toxic, having a toxicity level of six – which by the

way, is considered to be the ‘apogee’ of lethality. Just a taste of less than 5mg could put a

human being out of commission for good.”

“To me, Sharon’s symptoms had suggested a more common ‘product’,” Peter said

with raised brows. His Eastern accent was quite pronounced. “Arsenic, perhaps? In

examining her, I noticed she had developed a flaky rash.”

“I think you are referring to exfoliative dermatitis,” the examiner said, “which could

be a symptom of arsenic poisoning. However, the autopsy shows congestion and hemorrhages in all of her vital organs. Her central nervous system had been severely affected and her kidneys had degenerated – even before she slipped into a coma.”

Peter flipped back several pages and stared at a close-up of Sharon’s corpse.

“Her

skin is completely discolored,” he said, as his gaze moved back to the examiner.

“She

doesn’t look like the Sharon I remember...”

“As I have alluded, botulism can make the corpse look extremely ill.” The examiner

suddenly released a small chuckle and said humorously, “In terms of fatality, botulism is

right up there with strychnine – a poison that Agatha Christie used to kill the lady of the

house.”

“*The Mysterious Affair of Styles*,” Peter said reflectively. “I have read the novel

about four times. The killer hid the taste of the poison by mixing it with hot chocolate.”

The examiner gave Peter a knowing look. “Don’t go dashing off on your wild

imagination, Peter. Sharon could have accidentally been poisoned by something she had

eaten. This is not new to us.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that she had been poisoned for one second,” Peter said.

“However,

I do doubt that it was an accident. The question I think we should be asking ourselves is

this: Don't you think it is a little strange that Sharon's husband called an ambulance,

rather than put her into the backseat of his car and take her to the hospital?"

"Make your point plain," the examiner prodded.

"It is as plain as day," Peter quipped with annoyance. "Don't you see? It bought him

some time. He knew that Sharon would have probably been dead by the time the ambulance arrived."

The examiner placed a hand on Peter's shoulder and said with snort, "You, my friend,

are in the wrong profession. You've been ingesting too much of that Agatha Christie

drivel. I am going to sign off on the death certificate and classify it as an 'accidental

death' – brought about by congestion and hemorrhaging. I am satisfied with what the

autopsy has revealed."

"Think about it," Peter spat, in his final attempt to get the examiner to change his

mind. "Mr. Benton did not want this autopsy to begin with. What made him change his

mind in such an instant?"

"Let it go, Abdul. I agree that Sharon had been a nice woman, but you can't do any

more for her now, except to cherish the memories you have of her. We all will miss her

here at the hospital, but it is time to move on.” The examiner grabbed his jacket from the

table and then shoved his arms through the sleeves. “I am going to the canteen to grab a

bite to eat and then call it a day. I will see you in the morning.”

Peter was not willing to let it go. There were too many suspicious signs to simply

treat Sharon’s death as a silly accident. It might have been made to look that way, but

Peter was too experienced to be taken for a fool. However, there was one good thing that

came out of this ordeal. The information that had been collected from the autopsy would

be kept on record for several years. Peter was of the firm belief that truth not obtained

today, would likely be revealed tomorrow. He was a patient man and he would wait until

Mr. Benton made another dumb mistake.

Chapter Twenty

Another Three Days Later – Brandon View Baptist Church

It was supposed to be a predominately African American funeral, characterized by

much hooting, and fainting spells, but the mood was surprisingly somber, as the family

and friends of the Bentons took turns viewing Sharon's final remains. Jasmine's

sniveling, however, threatened to blow the atmosphere apart. She held on to Karl's arm

for support, fearing that her next step could send her crashing to the carpet. There seemed

to be no strength left in her legs, nevertheless, she dragged on toward what would be the

last image she would have of her mother.

Karl looked debonair in an all-black suit and tie, which attractively sharpened his

Hispanic features. The only emotion that he felt – apart from the pain that he had caused

his precious daughter – was hardcore guilt. It had never left him. From the day Sharon

died, he had never been the same man. He did not know that such shame would have

taken over his heart. With Sharon out of the way, he and his secret partner were one step

closer to having it all. *If only there had been a better way, Sugar Plum*, Karl said

to

himself. He, with Jasmine leaning firmly into him, gently touched Sharon's cold hands

and after a short while, they both took their seats in the front pew.

The congregation rose to sing *Amazing Grace*, and while they stood, Wynton, along

with his fiancée and two of his bodyguards, slipped in through the side door of the

church. He had heard that Jasmine was in town and he wanted to see her for himself. The

way Brian had been going on about her caused Wynton to experience severe nostalgia. It

was the only incentive that had dragged him out of bed at nine o'clock on a Wednesday

morning. *Who the hell had funerals on Wednesdays anyway?* Wynton thought, as he

continued down the side aisle. He and his group found empty seats behind two women

whose hats were as broad as a bus tire.

"Man, those things have got to weigh an elephant on those ladies' heads," Wynton

whispered to Tara. "I wonder how you would look in one of them. I bet you would fall

down and bust your lip."

Tara slapped her hands to her mouth to stop her giggle from coming out. She shot up

from her seat and joined the congregation in singing, *Amazing Grace*. It was her way of

ignoring Wynton's desire to make her laugh. Wynton, however, took the opportunity to

look around – to see if he could spot Jasmine amongst the crowd. He hadn't seen her

since he was sixteen, which made him all the more eager to see what she looked like. It

was not that he had an agenda to execute, because he was quite happy with Tara, whom

he was about to marry in a few short weeks. He simply wanted to settle his curiosity.

"Thank you," Paul said after taking the microphone from Brian. If his son wasn't good at anything else – he was good at stirring people with his melodious prayers. "You

may be seated. May I draw your attention to Ecclesiastes, chapter three? I will begin at

the first verse, using the New Living Translation. And it reads: For everything there is a

season; a time for every activity under the sun. A time to be born and a time to die. A

time to plant and time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal..."

A time to kill... Karl repeated the phrase in his head and wondered if Paul had read

that portion of scripture correctly. Karl was a man who did not embellish his understanding with figurative language. He called a spade, a spade, and although

he

admitted he knew very little of the Bible, he had to question if the word, 'kill' in this

instance, had been reserved for murder. Because if it had, it would provide the antidote

for the guilt that he was experiencing. Karl knew deep down in his heart that murder

ranked at the top of the sin list – the holy rollers' list, as Karl would say.

Religious zealots used the list to unleash their tempers against those who were not of

their fold. Sharon's death would be classified as premeditated murder, which, no doubt

would get him a first class ticket to the hottest part of hell. *It was the only way out*, Karl

kept repeating to himself. His partner had assured him of it. His eyes slowly moved

toward the pulpit and he noticed Paul's wife sitting in her delegated spot. Her all-black

ensemble, which included a translucent veil that fell over her face, gave her an air of

influence. Every now and then, she would gently dab the corners of her eyes with a

handkerchief, collecting her tears as if they were gold droplets.

Karl knew that Doreen's tears were a sham because Doreen could not stand being in

the same room with Sharon. They had been archrivals for years and today was a

testament to Doreen's strength. She had finally won the battle over Sharon. *But how*

could you do it, Doreen? Karl asked himself, completely stunned over Doreen's blatant

hypocrisy. *How can you just sit there and not feel one ounce of guilt about how you*

treated my wife?

Doreen turned her head in Karl's direction, seeming to have read his thoughts. But

she did not stare for long – just long enough to let Karl know that she was the one who

had survived. She dabbed her tears and then looked away as if she were in deep pain.

Karl bent his head toward his lap. He could not believe that he'd had sex with that

woman just hours before the funeral.

"...birth and death," Paul was saying, "as Solomon had so poetically described it, are

the boundaries of life. One day we all will appear before the throne of Almighty God –

who will judge both the quick and the dead. Let the church agree by saying Amen." Paul

cleared his throat and stared out into the crowd. He reverently raised his palms in the air

and then added, with much warmth in his voice, "Please stand and receive Sharon's

daughter, Ms. Jasmine Benton. She will pay tribute to the life of her mother.”

This was Wynton’s opportunity to finally get his wish – to see the woman who had

played a role in his past life. They had never gotten the chance to say good-bye before

she left for New York. And if Wynton had been truthful with Brian, he would have told

Brian that there was a need to bring closure. Maybe that was the reason why Wynton

wanted to see Jasmine so badly – to see if there was anything left between them.

But he did not want to draw attention to Tara. So, as a way of a distraction, he

wrapped an arm around her and pulled her closer to him. The moment he began stroking

her skin, he felt her body grow rigid, which told Wynton that Tara would not focus on

anything else but those long, soft strokes.

“My Mummy was a Proverbs 31 woman,” Jasmine started softly. “A wonderful mother and a wife of noble character...”

Karl stood next to Jasmine to provide physical support. He had watched his daughter

stumble a few times during the service and he knew it would even be more of a challenge

giving a speech in front of hundreds of people. He kept his head bowed the entire time.

Jasmine continued, “Proverbs 31:10 starts off by saying: Who can find a virtuous

woman? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her. So

he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil; all the days of her life.”

Karl swallowed so hard he was terrified that the audio system might have picked up

the sound. Surely, his daughter did not have any idea about what she was saying in

regards to his marriage. Jasmine had spent the last twelve years in New York. What did

she know? She was not qualified to speak on her mother’s behalf. No one really knew

Sharon like he knew her. *She does him good and not evil...*it was absolute garbage and

Jasmine knew it. Sharon was no saint – as everyone was making her out to be.

“...I can’t believe my mother did not live to see me married, and will never see what

her grandchildren would have looked like...” Jasmine was saying. At that point, her

voice withered and she was about to crumble into a choking spell. The amount of time

she had spent talking on the phone with her mother about her loneliness, brought a

feeling of hopelessness over her. Who was she going to turn to, now that her rock had

been moved out of the way? She concluded after a short while, “I loved my mother

dearly. I was not a perfect child growing up, but my mother understood me...”

With tears, Jasmine looked out over the crowd and for one nervous second, Wynton

thought her eyes caught him staring at her. He could not help but stare at such an exquisite creature. The grace in which she moved was spellbinding. The Jasmine he

remembered was hard and rough around the edges. She had always had that ability to turn

heads, but now, her beauty was just plain ridiculous. Those dark, Hispanic eyes would

keep him weak in the knees for days to come. *How could a girl like that not be married?*

What fool would pass up something like that...

“She is gorgeous, don’t you think?” Tara whispered, her gaze directed toward the pulpit. “She looks just like her father.”

Wynton did not respond to Tara’s observation. He was too overcome to say anything

at the moment. He knew if Tara had known about his past with Karl’s daughter, Wynton

believed Tara would have been singing a different tone. She would not be so gracious

with her compliments.

“I think we should go,” Wynton finally said. “I have to lay some tracks for my new

album.”

“No, babe, I’m staying.” Tara looked at Wynton with a naughty smirk in her eyes.

“I’m being tickled – just staring at your mother with that ugly veil. She looks hideous,

doesn’t she? She is the spitting image of Chucky’s bride. Why is she sitting in that pulpit

anyway? I thought devils weren’t allowed up there.”

Wynton leaned over to Tara and said seriously, “You had better keep those comments

to yourself.”

Tara bent her head and enjoyed a good chuckle. When she came back up and saw

Wynton’s expression, she went down again. Tears fell out of her eyes. For a full minute

she could not control her laughter.

“I’m sorry, babe,” Tara said, after finally catching her breath. “You have to admit that

your mother dresses like the evil woman that she is.”

Wynton could not bring himself to defend Doreen against Tara’s words, because he

knew Tara was not too far from the truth. However, it did not erase the fact that Doreen

was still his mother and he believed a man’s mother should be respected in his presence.

Moreover, he ached to get out of the building – his father’s church – the place that had

brought him much shame and disillusionment. He'd promised never to step foot back into

Brandon View for as long as he lived.

He could not believe he'd allowed a woman – whom he hadn't seen for twelve years

– to cause him to go back on that promise. It would be the last time that he would give in

to such a capricious impulse. Wynton stared at his bodyguards and they knew immediately that he was ready to leave.

“You can stay if you want,” Wynton said to his fiancée. “I'm leaving.”

“How am I going to get back to your place?”

“My point exactly,” Wynton quipped. “You had better be behind me by the time I get

to the limo.”

If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do

we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?

- William Shakespeare

Chapter Twenty-One

“We’ve been waiting ten minutes,” one of Wynton’s bodyguards said. Wynton called

the man Tiger because he was as voracious and fierce as the animal itself. “I don’t think

she is coming. Do you want me to go and get her?”

“Tara loves to play these silly games,” Wynton said. “I will go.”

“Not without me, Boss,” Tiger said. “You don’t have the privilege to walk around

like ‘normal’ people do. Don’t forget; I took a bullet for you once.”

“You wore a bullet proof vest,” Wynton said, with a small hint of a smile. “That doesn’t count.”

“Mr. Lakatos, the men in your security team put their lives on the line for you every

day.”

“But right now I want you to stop treating me like a bloody infant. I will be right back.”

“We’re coming in if you are not back here in five minutes!”

“Whatever you say, *mother...*” Wynton paused as his smile pulled his lips to the side.

He then said gravely, “In five minutes I could be dead –”

The limo doors flew open and Wynton’s bodyguards jumped out. “Well, in that case,”

one of them said, “we are not letting you out of our sight. Why you tryin’ to mess with

our minds like that?”

With his bodyguards in tow, Wynton made his way toward the exit he’d recently vacated – despite his vow to never step foot back into his father’s church. His bodyguards

dropped back a few yards to give him a little personal space. However, when they saw

the masses begin spilling out of the exits, they quickly changed their minds and closed

the distance by fifteen feet. The last public attempt on Wynton’s life had developed out of

an innocuous crowd – like the one at the church. At this point in the game they dared not

take any chances.

Wynton waited near the entryway, but he did not see Tara among the bustle. *Maybe,*

she took another exit, he thought, and after a short while, he made a roundabout turn and

began searching the church grounds. There were only three ways to get in or out of the

building, so Tara couldn’t have gone very far. He knew the layout of his father’s church

like the back of his hand. It would have been in his best interest to forget the spot where

much of his youthful debaucheries had been carried out; however, the memories

were too

deep.

“Wynton?”

Wynton slowed his stride and looked behind his shoulders – only to discover that the

woman who had called his name was not the woman he was searching for.

Jasmine

Benton, Wynton said to himself, *you are even more beautiful up close. Those eyes of*

yours are gonna kill me...

“I wasn’t sure that it was you,” she said. If Jasmine was excited to see Wynton after

twelve long years, she did not show it. She spoke to him as if they were picking up from

where they’d left off yesterday. “You did not have to make the effort. I know you and my

mother were not on the best of terms.”

Wynton felt his mouth go dry. How did he respond to a woman with whom he’d had

so much history – which also felt as though he was meeting her for the first time? It

would be difficult trying to formulate words without sounding stupid. Jasmine had only

been standing in front of Wynton for less than a minute, but he struggled hard to keep his

lecherous thoughts at bay. Those thoughts – if he took them seriously – would

make him

feast upon Jasmine's cleavage. Wynton had a weakness for women's breasts, and he was

known to blatantly show it. The mood was too inappropriate to 'act' out his sinful

proclivities. What would Jasmine think of him then?

"Twelve years is too long to be holding a grudge," he heard himself say. "And, I

would never take pleasure in your pain, Jasmine. So, please, accept my sympathy for the

loss of your mom."

Jasmine did not know why hearing Wynton say those words touched her more deeply

than she'd expected. Her lips trembled, which prompted more tears to rush down her

smooth cheeks. Embarrassed, she turned away, but Wynton – being the affectionate man

that he was – reached out and gently rested a hand on her shoulder. Gradually, he pulled

her into him and hugged her. It did not matter that people were milling around them. It

was as if they were in their own world. Somehow, in the back of their minds they knew

that they would have to sit down and discuss some things.

Tara breathed a sigh of relief as she left the bathroom stall. The last fifteen minutes

had been a pleasurable experience with the porcelain goddess. She had no idea what she

might have eaten that upset her stomach so suddenly. Even her pride could not prevent

the inevitable: When it was time to go; it was time to go. She washed her hands and then

sprayed a copious amount of cherry freshener into the air.

It was a good thing that no one else came into the bathroom when she exited the stall

because she would have been thoroughly humiliated. If someone saw her standing at the

mirror, it could always be explained that the person before her was the one who had

swallowed a rotten cow. Scents so pungent just did not come from her. She pulled the

bathroom door open and stepped out.

Now, Tara's next order of business was to find Wynton. She knew he would not leave

her stranded at the church. More than likely, he was in the limo waiting on her. He might

be fuming, but he would get over it as soon as she snuggled up next to him. It did not take

much for Wynton to drop his defenses.

When Tara banked into the foyer she was surprised to see that it had cleared out so

quickly. *Where did all those people run off to?* she thought and then smiled

humorously.

I hope they are not that excited about going to a graveyard. Now, that would be totally

sick... Tara had not read the back of the program, where it said that Sharon's body would

be taken from the church to be cremated.

Two padded benches had been fastened to the walls in the foyer, which was Paul's

idea of creating a welcoming atmosphere. Tara took the liberty to sit and readjust the

straps of her shoes around her ankles. She had not untied the first one before hearing

snippets of conversation resonating from the corridor. She initially paid it no mind –

almost appreciating that she was not alone, as she'd originally thought. Then, something

was said that yanked her attention front and center.

"...when you leave the crematorium, meet me at our usual spot," the woman said.

"You look like you could use a bit of relaxation – if you know what I mean."

"I don't feel up to it –"

"Of course you do," the woman spat, interrupting the man. *"Today calls for a celebration and I want to show you how happy you have made me..."*

"I have plans for tonight –"

"Shhhhh..." It sounded as if the woman silenced the man with a wet, passionate

kiss.

Tara's heart was beating at the bottom of her feet. The woman's voice sounded strangely familiar, but Tara did not want to believe what her ears had heard. There had to

be an explanation. Maybe the woman and the man were practicing for a part in a movie,

or had been cast for a role in a Romeo and Juliet production. The more Tara allowed her

imagination to run wild, the more she realized that maybe she had ended up in the right

place, at the right time.

If her suspicion turned out to be what she thought, then she would consider herself the

luckiest woman alive. Eventually, her curiosity got the best of her and instead of her

continuing on the outside to 'reconnect' with her man, she tiptoed toward the other

direction.

She edged against the wall and slowly rotated her head until one of her eyes landed

squarely on her targets. At first, Tara began to focus on how wildly the couple was

kissing, but when she noticed the woman's translucent veil, which had been tossed

behind her head, Tara's heart almost gave way to a cardiac arrest. She had just made fun

of that ugly veil. How could she forget it so soon? She pulled her head back in and leaned

against the wall to catch her breath.

Doreen? What the hell are you doing with that woman's husband? Tara was tempted

to look again – just to be sure that her eyes had not deceived her. However, the weight of

the image in her mind was enough to drag her toward the main exit. She stumbled down

the steps in search of her fiancé. Tara could see the limo in plain view. It brought some

measure of relief, but it seemed as if her feet could not reach it fast enough.

“Tara!”

She froze in her tracks. She closed her eyes in thanks to God that it was Wynton's

voice, because for a moment she had the crazy idea that Doreen had found her out. When

Wynton drew close and placed an arm around her shoulder, she gave into her panic-

driven emotions.

“I thought something happened to you, girl. Did you know how long I was looking –”

Tara spun around at Wynton so swiftly she almost knocked him off his feet. She

gripped both of his arms and said in a fit of giggles, “I am going to the Bahamas with

your mother!”

“What?”

“You heard me, Wynton,” Tara said. “I will go and spend those four days with Doreen. We will have a lot to discuss.”

Wynton cocked his head in disbelief and said suspiciously, “What did you drink while you were missing for those thirty minutes?”

“Babe, I know this is important to you,” Tara babbled on. “Let’s just say that I had

time to think about it and I realized how much of a drag I have been.” She nervously

jammed strands of hair behind an ear, and then stared Wynton dead in the eye. “When do

we leave? Because I’m ready to pack my bags right now.”

“The reservations are for Saturday afternoon...” Wynton paused, completely stumped

by his fiancée’s bizarre behavior. “Could I ask you, baby, what brought this on?”

Tara let out a huge sigh and smiled – almost listlessly. She turned away from Wynton

and continued her journey toward the limo. Wynton stood there for a moment and tried to

take it all in. His woman had lost her mind – he was sure of it, but what surprised him

more was the fact that she had strode past Jasmine – as if Jasmine had been an apparition.

The Tara he knew would have never done that. He looked back and questionably studied

the church. Something had definitely caused Tara to trip.

Wynton started for the limo, his gait showing proof of his confusion. If his bodyguard

had not shut the door of the limo, he would have left it swinging open. He turned to face

his fiancée one last time before the limo sped out of the parking lot. She had ditched the

dread he had seen in her eyes and had replaced it with a look of confidence.

“Are you okay,” he asked guardedly.

Tara squeezed his arm warmly and said, “Why wouldn’t I be, babe? I consider myself

the luckiest woman alive. I have you and that is all I need.”

Tara brushed her lips against Wynton’s and then sat back in her seat and closed her

eyes. Wynton, on the other hand, turned his gaze to the window and watched as the city

zipped by in one, big blur. His life was becoming strangely interesting.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Marcia woke with a severe pain in her head, which was the result of all the crying she

had done the previous night. Brian was ignoring her again. With the help of her friend

Phoebe, she had sent him half a dozen texts, but he hadn't the compassion to respond to

at least one of them. And, for a while, she went back to thinking her blindness was the

reason for the distance she felt from Brian.

She remembered the last time they were together at the restaurant. He had told her he

wanted to use the bathroom. When he returned to their table, his mood had changed

drastically. He short-answered her questions and within five minutes he stood up and told

her that he had to leave. She wished she could have seen what made him so uncomfortable all of a sudden.

Lord, I know this is the man of my dreams, Marcia prayed silently. You have placed

me in his life to care for him – but how sad that he doesn't even know it as yet. I feel so

connected to Brian and I believe, Lord, that it is Your doing. I have never pined this way

for a man in my life. The connection is not even sexual... Marcia's prayer was cut

short by

the ring of her cell phone. She began groping in the spot where she usually kept it, which

was on one of the shelves built into the headboard of her bed.

“Hello?” she answered expectantly.

“Marcia Gippings?”

“Yes...”

“How are you? This is Clyde Barr – the Eye Specialist you inquired about recently.”

“Oh, yes...” Marcia sat up, feeling a bit disappointed that the call was not from Brian.

She perked up nonetheless and continued with a steady pace. “I have heard wonderful

testimonies about how you’ve helped dozens of blind people receive their sight. Are you

really calling from the Sussex Eye Clinic in Brighton?”

Clyde gave a big, hearty laugh. “I have lived near the south-coast of England for most

of my life. My family migrated here while I was yet a young lad. You are certainly

receiving a call from Brighton. Can’t you tell by my accent?”

The warmth in Clyde’s voice made Marcia feel at ease almost immediately. She

smiled and said bashfully, “Of course, Doctor Barr. I’m just so excited to finally speak

with you.”

“My pleasure,” Clyde said and then he jumped right into Marcia’s motive for the call.

“So, what can I do for you? Do you mind if I presume that you are experiencing a loss of vision?”

“Yes, and I believe there is a chance that I can get my sight back.”

Clyde gave another big laugh and said, “You are quite the confident one, aren’t you?”

I can tell that you are the sort that makes my job a lot easier. Tell me a bit of your background and maybe I will be able to advise if Sussex is the right decision for you.

And, please confirm, you are in Brandon, Florida?”

“Yes...”

Marcia paused and wondered briefly if she should have come right out and told Clyde

where she had really grown up – the place where she lost her sight in a horrible incident.

She did not like rehashing the memories of that day, because each time she did, it fortified feelings of hatred for her father. However, she could not let the past hinder the

progress of her future. The cause of her blindness would eventually come up anyway, she

decided. So, she bit the bullet and took Clyde fourteen years back to her father’s scrapyard in Longview, Texas.

Marcia did not leave out any detail – sordid as it had been – she relayed the

tragedy

with amazing composure. She had Clyde's full attention – especially when she told him

how she and her sisters had suffered under the brutality of their father's sick mind. The

conversation lasted for more than twenty minutes and when Marcia was through, she

could hear Clyde's painful sighs coming through the receiver.

"My dear girl," he said finally. "I have heard of many tragedies, but your story has

touched me in a way I cannot explain. How soon can you get to Brighton? I want to do

everything I possibly can to help you."

The bashfulness returned to Marcia's voice. She did not want to tell him that money

was a huge issue for her. She had recently lost her job as a social worker and the little that

the government provided was only enough to meet her basic needs. How did she explain

to Doctor Barr that she was hoping that the hospital would consider her condition a

special case? She had heard that several blind persons had been selected to undergo 'new'

procedures performed by well-trained specialists. Some of the patients were not required

to come up with a dime. If there was any place she would choose to be

‘experimented’

upon – it would be the Sussex Eye Clinic.

“England is pretty far away from Florida,” Marcia said. “I’m not sure I can make it

there before the month is out.”

“I understand,” Clyde said, but he was so overwhelmed by Marcia’s story that he did

not want to give space to procrastination. “But in the interim, I want to send you some

information about a procedure that I believe will have a respectable chance of success.

Do you have software installed that allows you to check your email? Or, if you prefer, I

can have the audio version arranged.”

“Yes, I will be able to check it. I also have a friend who helps me a lot. So, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Okay, Miss Gippings,” Clyde concluded, “I will stay in contact with you over the

coming days.”

Marcia placed a hand over her bosom, as a level of peace began to settle over her.

“Thank you, Doctor Barr,” she said. “I am more hopeful than I have been in years.”

“My pleasure, my dear girl, my pleasure.”

Marcia ended the call and sat still for a few minutes. She tried to imagine what it

would be like to have her sight restored after fourteen years. The world as she had known

it at the age of thirteen had definitely changed, especially from the last image she had

seen of it before going blind. Actually, the last image she had seen was nothing beautiful

at all, but the ugly stretch of her father's grin. It would taunt her soul sore, but one thought

of Brian or just the thought of sitting in his presence would quiet those restless demons.

She had never experienced such peace with any other man – that was how she knew that

Brian had been tailored-made for her life.

Marcia reached behind her and grabbed her tactile watch from the shelf, which helped

her keep track of Brian's mornings. She impatiently brushed her fingers against the dots

and got a feel for which dot the hour hand was pointing to. She then did the same with the

minute hand. Marcia had opted against purchasing a talking watch – simply because she

wanted to utilize her remaining senses as much as possible. She could not imagine being

both deaf and blind at the same time. It was hard enough getting around without her sight.

She found pleasure in doing things that people said were impossible to do. A prime

example would be that one day she would be able to see again, despite the grim prognosis

of her previous assessments.

Marcia's tactile watch told her that it was 8:43 a.m. – about fifteen minutes left of

Brian's morning devotions. He had told her of his routine when they first started talking,

which included two vital things: Prayer and Bible study – anywhere between the hours of

6 a.m. and 9 a.m. Doctor Barr's call had been unexpected, but necessary.

Brian's mornings had become exceedingly important to her, in that she believed that a

wife should join her husband during such spiritual impartation. Well, she wasn't Brian's

wife – yet, but nonetheless, she slid to her knees and began to offer words of thanks to

God for the man of her destiny.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Saturday 11:15 a.m.

Brian drew his crimson-colored tie snugly between the flaps of his white shirt. He

stepped back and admired how his choice of apparel complimented his agenda. The

mirror did not lie. With a face and a body built with good genes, it did not take much

effort for him to pull off the 'presidential' look. The look was important if he wanted to

impress Karl Benton. It would show that he was ready to step into the realm of greatness

and perhaps at the same time, he hoped to smash Karl's negative opinion of his work

ethics. A preacher, Brian had once argued with Karl, labored just as hard as many white

or blue collar workers.

Karl did not factor in the late nights that preachers stayed up in prayer, studying and

preparing for their sermons. In addition, preachers counseled scores of people with

various degrees of needs and psychological problems, all of which could be quite

tiresome. Karl had dismissed Brian with a wave of the hand, and told him that preachers

were nothing but a bunch of money-loving phonies in his book.

Of course, that conversation did not end well between them. Now, as Brian looked

back in retrospect, he realized that Karl simply did not have a clue about what being a

Christian was all about. He could not entirely blame Karl for his twisted mind. The fact

remained that some Christians did not walk worthy of their vocation, which gave sinners

the 'right' to mock and complain.

Brian's bedroom had been ravished by the scent of his favorite cologne – Black Soul,

another one of Ted Lapidus' musky concoctions. It was added ammunition in his mission

to adjust Karl's limited view of his potential. A man's fragrance said a lot about his taste

and style. The scent, Brian hoped, would convince Karl that he was serious and ready to

take the real estate world by storm. Although, he knew he would have to put up with

Karl's sarcastic remarks about his faith, Brian felt that this shift in his life was the right

one. Obviously, his father, Paul would not agree, but in time, all would be healed. His

father would have to understand that he was a man with a desire to execute his own

vision.

Without fail, Brian soon heard the obnoxious pitch of Doreen's voice and was sharply

reminded that he would have to drop her at the airport before continuing on to Karl's

office. Well, Karl's office would be his final destination, as he had made plans, along

with two other groomsmen, to meet Wynton at his apartment. Wynton's wedding was in

about three weeks and he wanted to make sure that everyone was on the same page. With

the wedding so close, Brian had mixed emotions about sending Wynton's fiancée to the

Bahamas with Doreen, but it was too late in the game to nurse any feelings of regret. His

mother was adamant about going and surprisingly, so was Tara.

However, Brian was not convinced that the women were willing to spend time together just because they had a change of heart. There was something brewing beneath

the surface and Brian was certain that it had been shrewdly inspired by the devil himself.

The only thing he could do now was to pray for the blood of Jesus to cover them while

they were on the island of the Bahamas. He drew his bedroom door open and stepped out

into the middle of what seemed to be an intense disagreement between his

parents.

“...Oh no, you are not coming along with me on this trip! Get that senseless idea out

of your head!”

“You don’t have the power to stop me, Doreen,” Paul said. He plunged in the sofa

and began shoving his feet into his brown loafers. “I am going, whether you like it not!

Tara does not know what she’s getting herself into.”

Doreen slashed her hands in the air and gave Paul a full dose of her wrath. “This is a

bloody women’s retreat! No place for boring, old men! You will ruin it for everyone.”

“I don’t care what you say; I am going...”

“No, you are not! You devil of a man!” Doreen’s head shot up in disgust. She noticed

Brian making his way toward them, and with one final scowl at her husband, she

violently swiped her handbag from the table. Before Brian even opened his mouth to

speak, Doreen fired off a string of instructions. “My luggage is in the hallway; bring it

and follow me. Don’t dally around because I want to get a good seat on the aircraft!” She

pointed her finger at Paul. “If this old man makes one step behind you, you had better

stand up to him and be the man I taught you to be! You are stronger and certainly

much

quicker. He cannot overpower you. He's nothing but an old, weak white fool."

Doreen disappeared like a wind, leaving the two men in silence. Brian could not take

his eyes off his father, who was slouched in the sofa with his head hung. The

embarrassment of the moment was evident in his posture. It was a pathetic scene that

Brian had seen one time too many. He did not like it when his mother browbeat his

father, but he detested the way his father responded with such attitude of defeat. He could

not believe that his father did not have the courage to follow through with his intentions.

His father's shoes were on his feet, his attire was appropriate, but his father refused to

break out of the cocoon that Doreen had placed him in.

All Paul needed to do was pick up his overnight bag and follow Brian to the car.

What could Doreen do but throw a tantrum? She would get over it and eventually learn to

respect her husband's authority, but Paul needed to show Doreen that he wasn't afraid of

her. That was the way Brian saw it, but who was he to sit and counsel his father about his

marriage?

"Do as your mother says," Paul told his son. "She wants to have her way, so let it be."

“You can still catch a later flight,” Brian tried.

“I pray God’s covering over my wife. You know well enough not to keep your mother waiting.”

Slowly, Brian began to walk away, but he paused and turned toward his father. He

could not suppress the ball of anger he felt burning in his chest. He asked quietly, “Why

do you let her talk to you like that?”

Paul kept his head hung, refusing to add another word to his humiliation. Brian, however, could think of a dozen ways to tell his father how to ‘rule’ a woman. But what

did he know? The only woman ready to obey every word of his command was a blind

woman he had met over the Internet.

“Anyway, I will be out for a while,” Brian said as he turned to leave again. “You know how to reach me – if you need me.”

Tampa International Airport

Wynton drew Tara in for another kiss. He did not mind that they were standing in the

loading zone, blocking traffic. He just needed some Tara before she left for the Bahamas.

He could not imagine not being able to caress her chocolate mounds for four, whole days.

It felt like torture just thinking about it. The blaring car horns behind them let Tara know

that they were becoming a nuisance.

She pulled away from Wynton's lips and giggled, "Babe, I have to go. We are creating a scene."

"Please, just a little longer," Wynton begged. "All we did last night was talk. My body needs this."

"No, your body needs to cool off until I get back," Tara said. "Channel all of this energy into your music. So, by the time I'm in your arms again, your album will be complete."

"Whose crazy idea was this anyway?"

"Yours..."

"Well, actually it was Brian's –"

"And it turned out to be a good one," Tara concluded. She began walking backward

toward the terminal, blowing kisses at Wynton as if she would never see him again.

"Trust me, your mother and I will be the best of friends when we return from the Bahamas."

The horns were really blasting now as Wynton watched his woman vanish through

the automatic doors. He meditated on the words that he had just spoken – not more than a

minute ago, *what am I going to do without you for four days, Tara? My bed is going to be*

so cold...

“Boss,” Tiger shouted. “Get in! She’s gone.”

Wynton slowly climbed back into the limo and then relaxed his head against the seat.

Rod Temperton’s, *Always and Forever* began to play softly from the speakers above him.

Wynton’s emotions began to embarrass him. The more the song went on, the more he felt

his heart giving in to his tears. As the lids of his eyes closed, his thoughts dragged him

back into a conversation he’d had when he was sixteen. Scattered images began to

formulate and before Wynton knew it, he was in Karl and Sharon Benton’s bedroom.

“I would be stupid to believe that I was the first girl that you had ever been with.”

“Would that bug you if I had been with someone else?”

“Not in the least,” Jasmine said. “I won’t care if it is your first time or not. I just need to know that I’m the only one that you’re sleeping with now.”

“My Daddy didn’t raise me to be no player. Now if you gonna waste the next ten minutes trying to check out my stats, let me warn you, I’m losing interest already...”

Jasmine smacked Wynton’s chest playfully. “You obnoxious white boy!”

“It’s one of the reasons you chased after me,” Wynton quipped. “I’m something that

you’ve never had...”

The limo jerked forward and knocked Wynton back to the present. He sat up and peered out at the line of traffic crawling toward I-75. It was congested and Wynton was

afraid that he would not get back to his apartment in time for his appointment, where he

planned to join his groomsmen in a brief meeting. Including Brian, there were only three

men that Wynton had chosen to stand with him, and he was sure that the boys would

understand him being a little late. However, when Wynton set a time to do something, he

tried his best to stick to it.

“Sorry about that, Boss,” Tiger said through a small window up front. “That silly car

cut across me into the other lane.”

Wynton nodded and rested his head against the seat once more. His eyes were closed,

but his thoughts were tripping over the invasion of Jasmine Benton. Why on earth was he

thinking about her now? His fiancée’s plane hadn’t even lifted into the air and this was

how he was going to disrespect her? By focusing on another woman? Wynton wanted to

tell Tiger to turn the limo around and head back to the airport. He felt deeply that he did

not need this separation from Tara. He did not trust being around other females while

Tara was gone, because Wynton realized a long time ago that love sometimes wasn't

enough to tame his fleshly desires. He pulled out his HTC Incredible and punched in

Tara's cell number.

"Hi, Babe, your mother and I are about to board the plane," she answered.

"What's

up?"

"I miss you already," Wynton said quietly. "You don't have to get on that plane if you don't want to."

"Too late. I've already made up my mind. I'm doing this for us..."

"Come on, Tara, you really believe four days in the Bahamas is gonna change anything between you and my mother?"

"I don't know, Babe, but I'm willing to try anything. And besides, your mother has

not said one mean word to me since arriving at the airport. Maybe there is hope. Who

knows?"

"You be careful –"

"Babe, I really have to hang up now. I'm handing my ticket to the agent. I'll call you

as soon as I land in the Bahamas...and don't forget to check out the wedding location.

Sabrina will be there waiting on you.”

“I love you –”

Wynton's words were cut. He did not tell Tara that he loved her enough, but he hoped

that she knew that he did and that he would never do anything silly to jeopardize their

relationship. Wynton wanted to believe that, and he really did. Even now, as he tried to

relax in the traffic congestion, he could not get Jasmine's face out of his mind. Maybe it

was because she was home in Brandon, Florida. She had been gone so long that he

honestly thought that he had seen the last of her. As far as he was concerned, they both

had moved on with their lives. After all, he had only used Jasmine's body to ease his

sexual pangs. Why should he care anything about her now? She meant nothing to him.

Maybe he should not have worked himself up to attend that funeral, because all it did was

open up a new can of worms.

“Boss, I will take the I-275 exit,” Tiger said. “We'll be in Brandon under thirty minutes.”

“Take it easy,” Wynton said. “We can't do anything much about the traffic. This

is

August and a lot of people are heading to the theme parks.”

“I hear you, sir, but I’m working it.”

Wynton turned his attention back to his thoughts. He realized the only way for him to

maintain the life that he had built with Tara was to keep a healthy distance from his past,

which included the ‘new’ and transformed Jasmine Benton – especially while Tara was

out of town.

Let us be grateful to people who make us happy, they are the charming gardeners

who make our souls blossom.

- Marcel Proust

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jasmine checked her voicemail and was surprised to discover that there weren't as

many messages as she had anticipated. Quite a change of pace from what she had grown

accustomed to in New York. Her office in Battery Park City overlooked the Hudson

River, but she barely enjoyed the scenic view because she was always on the phone

negotiating contracts with her clients. The Hudson River was the one feature she truly

missed, which she could have also seen from the balcony of her high-rise apartment. The

calmness of the water was therapeutic, and before long, her melancholy was placated.

Jasmine decided to return a call to her New York office after listening to her voicemail.

"Julie, how have things been since I've been gone?"

"Jas, I have it covered. Don't hurt your little head about a thing. Take as long as you

need."

"I've been in Florida for over two weeks," Jasmine said. "I know it must be difficult

on you."

"Listen to me Jas, you've just lost your mother. She was the dearest thing to you,

so I

don't expect you to be back to your old self in two weeks..."

"Maybe that is what I need, Julie – to be my 'old' self. I can't sit around crying all the

time." Jasmine puckered her lips reflectively. "I'm thinking of flying back to New York

in a few days."

"I'm sure that Mr. Benton does not agree with your decision."

"My father will understand – he's hardly home anyway. Besides, Brandon reminds

me too much of my past. I miss New York."

"Well," Julie paused in defeat. "I know enough not to press you. You will do what

you want anyway."

"And it is not because I don't appreciate your concern," Jasmine told her real estate

partner. "I feel like I'm going nuts in this house. My mother is gone and I need to start

accepting that."

Julie responded by throwing a curve ball at Jasmine. "By the way, hon, how did your

mother die? I had no idea that she was sick."

How intrusive, Jasmine thought. But the truth was she could not come up with a

satisfying answer to give Julie, because as far as Jasmine knew, her mother had not been

sick – well, at least not to the point of death. Her mother had called her complaining

about a stomach virus – which appeared to be in line with what the autopsy report had

revealed of her death.

Who would have thought it would have been food poisoning? Her father seemed content to accept that her mother died from food poisoning, but Jasmine still had questions. She rarely heard of people dying from food poisoning these days. Jasmine was

quick to agree with Doctor Peter Abdul when he had said that Sharon’s death was quite

sudden and unusual. However, botulism was actually not all that uncommon. Dozens of

babies died from it.

“...Jas, it seemed as if you took a coffee break,” Julie was saying. “Are you still on

the phone?”

“I’m here, Julie. Your question made me think. That’s all. I was wondering if –”

Julie interrupted, “Could you call me back in an hour? Two clients just stepped into

my office.”

“That’s okay. I will try again tomorrow. Take care, Julie.”

“Please – and I’m saying this as gently as I possibly can – heed your own advice.

Don’t rush to get back to New York. I’m handling things here. I will be fine for another

three weeks.”

Julie disconnected from the line and left Jasmine to drink in the silence surrounding

her. There was a 22-inch flat screen TV mounted on the wall in the kitchen, which had

been tuned to the Weather Channel by Karl before he left that morning. Jasmine’s eyes

fluttered to the screen for a moment. She was a bit taken aback to see that a tropical storm

was gaining strength in the Atlantic Ocean.

Jasmine knew the hurricane season was not over until after November, but she had

been praying that God would spare the people for another year. How terrible it would be

to get caught up in a storm next week, just when she decided to leave for New York. She

turned up the volume and listened closely to assess whether she needed to make arrangements to leave sooner than she’d anticipated.

“...*there are currently three areas of interest in the Atlantic,*” the newscaster

bellowed intelligently. “*Our eyes are on Tropical Storm Cindy, which is located some*

550 miles North West of the Bahamas. Cindy has maximum sustained winds of 67mph,

and a minimum central pressure of 994mb. We will keep our eyes on this storm over the

next 3 to 4 days, as the conditions could appear unfavorable. And, by that, I

mean

Tropical Storm Cindy could develop into a Category One hurricane by the middle of next

week. A storm watch has been put into effect for the Bahamas and the Florida Cays –”

The sudden tap on the front door caused Jasmine’s gaze to snap away from the flat

screen. She did not move until she heard the tap for the second time. She wanted to be

certain that her mind wasn’t playing tricks on her, because she was not expecting anyone

to visit at this hour of the day. However, her curiosity was short-lived after peering

through the peephole. Brian Lakatos was standing on her porch, looking as dapper as the

Prince of Wales. She wasted no time in pulling the door open. She could use a little bit of

his company right now.

“Well, hello, Brian. I see you remembered where we live.”

Brian smirked so hard that his jaws hurt. “It’s only been twelve years,” he said. “How

could I forget? It’s good to see you again Ms. Jasmine Benton.”

“And you, too, Mr. Lakatos. You are all grown up, but some things never change.

You are still quick with your tongue.”

“It’s my only redeeming quality,” Brian confessed jokingly. “That’s why I never

did

away with it – that, along with my respect for your family. And on that note, I want to say

on behalf of my family and our church that we are truly sorry for the loss of your mother.

Mrs. Benton was a good woman.”

A look of admiration came to life in Jasmine’s eyes, but it faded just as quickly as it

had appeared. The memory of her mother’s death kept her emotions vacillating. But she

was not so completely out of it that it prevented her from being hospitable to Brian. “Do

you want to come in?” she said. “I was just about to make some Espresso.”

Brian had been dying for Jasmine to extend the invitation. He mentally calmed

himself and said a simple, “Thank you,” but added, “I’m sure Mr. Benton won’t mind the

brief delay before our meeting.”

“Meeting?” Jasmine turned to face Brian. “So, you do have a ‘real’ reason to be here?”

“Yes, your father invited me –” Brian paused, not appreciating the context in which

Jasmine had asked her question. He asked a question of his own that did not come out the

way he had intended. “So, you thought that I came here to see you?”

Jasmine was quite direct and succinct with her response, “Yes.”

“I’m sorry, I did not mean for it to sound the way it did...”

“Too late,” Jasmine said. “You did not come here to see me. And, that is absolutely

fine.”

Why do you think I’m dressed up like this? Brian wanted to scream, but instead, he

responded nervously, “I came here to see both of you, I mean, your dad first and then

you...well, I wanted to ask if you felt like grabbing a bite to eat...”

“I would like that,” Jasmine said. “I’ve been locked up in this house since my mother’s funeral. I will change my shoes; just give me a minute.”

“Wait...” Brian was so stunned by Jasmine’s candor his mind did not know how to

embrace it. But Jasmine had always been that way from the time he knew her. Of course,

her personality had never been a challenge for Wynton, who never got nervous around

such women. That was probably why they had ended up together. Wynton knew how to

handle her and Jasmine loved the fact that a boy of sixteen had such skills. But why at

this awkward moment was he thinking about his brother and Jasmine’s sordid past?

“Shouldn’t you tell your dad that I am here? I’m scheduled to meet with him right now.”

Jasmine stared at Brian with a bit of humor and said pointedly, “My father is not

here,

Brian. He left the house this morning and I haven't heard from him since. It looks as if

my father set both of us up for this moment. But I'm not surprised. He talks about you all

of the time."

"Really?"

"Yes, my father is pretty fond of you," Jasmine said. "And, I can see why. You seem

to have matured into a very fine, young man."

Brian had a smooth caramel complexion, but he felt his cheeks turning beet red with

embarrassment. How did he control his nervousness when a gorgeous woman like

Jasmine kept tossing compliments at him like that? He reminded himself that he was not

eighteen and was not living in Wynton's shadow.

He cleared his throat, which had suddenly gone dry. "Thank you," he said quietly. He

managed to hold her bewitching stare. "There is something definitely different about you

and I noticed it when I ran into you at the restaurant last week."

Jasmine looked away as she fought off another wave of depression. Her mother had

said relatively the same words to her last Christmas in New York. They had been sitting

by the fireplace, discussing the changes that life had brought about. Her mother loved to

dwell on what the Lord had done for the Benton family. Because of God's bountiful

blessings – as her mother would put it – they had never experienced a day of lack.

Jasmine reconnected her gaze with Brian, not ashamed to hide her tears. There were no

words in the vocabulary to capture the vacancy she felt in her heart.

“There is something different about me,” she said reflectively. “Several years ago, I

committed my life to God, which I really never did when I was sixteen. I believe,

however, that it had been my mother's prayers that helped make me who I am today.”

“Wow, I never would have thought that you had it in you...” Brian paused and

reevaluated what he was about to say. As an up and coming pastor he did his best to see

people through the eyes of Christ – which included the ability to look beyond a person's

sins and be able to identify the need of spiritual regeneration.

He had learned through reading stories about Christ's mission that ‘attacking’ a

sinner's lifestyle may not be the wisest method to introduce salvation. But through much

love and prayer, many resistances to the Christian faith could be won. “I would love to

hear about this awesome transformation in your life, Jasmine. Please excuse me; I am just

a bit overwhelmed by what the power of God can do to a person's life."

Jasmine used the back of her hand to dab the corners of her eyes. The more she tried

to do away with her tears, the more they fell. She gave Brian a tight smile and said as

wittily as she could muster, "Well, then, Mr. Lakatos, I shall not keep you waiting. I

promise to leave these silly tears right here in this living room."

"Your tears are not silly, Jasmine," Brian said. "I'm actually impressed that you are

willing to go out with me, considering what you are facing right now."

"Are you kidding? I would be crazy to pass up this opportunity. I haven't seen you

for twelve years. I have thought of you and Wynton often and have always asked my

mother –" Jasmine stopped when she noticed Brian's wilted expression, which looked as

if something distasteful had crossed his mind. It was then Jasmine realized that the brunt

of her past had not been pleasant at all for those involved. She said bashfully, "There is

so much that *needs* to be said. All three of us used to be such good friends..."

Brian watched Jasmine saunter on a pair of legs that made his eyes pop. If he hadn't

turned away when he did, he would have become an easy target of lust. He placed a

nervous hand over his mouth and silently asked his heavenly Father a very peculiar

question, *Lord, could she be the one for me? I promise You that I won't waste time asking*

her to take my hand in marriage.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Ladies, this way please! There are two buses to your right. Let’s get them filled up

as quickly as humanly possible.”

The commanding voice belonged to fifty-seven-year-old Susan Cargill – Founder of

the *Daughters of Fellowship Foundation*. Fifteen years of strong leadership had produced

thousands of well-rounded women who had been educated in the ‘art’ of relationship

building. The organization had won numerous awards and had been featured in

magazines around the world. Although it was headquartered in Texas, Susan had made an

early decision as founder to convene in a different city each year.

It was part of Susan’s belief system that experiencing different cultures generated an

appreciation for diversity – as she had enforced in one of her many power-packed

meetings. *“One should learn to ‘respect’ the variances in human temperaments. There*

were no two people exactly alike. And, if that was understood, then there was a strong

chance that people would get along much better.” Of course, in theory that was one

story, in practicality it was another.

No matter what Susan came up with to bring peace and harmony between the women,

there were always a few who made no effort in working along with the program. As with

the two who were lingering behind Susan. They had quarreled from the aircraft all the

way through Bahamas Customs. The noise level was embarrassing and Susan was

tempted to disown them, but she had been through situations as such and she was not

about to let things spiral completely out of control. However, Susan could not help giving

in to a tad of her exasperation. She whirled around and shouted at them again, but her

commands had no effect.

“Doreen, what is the matter with you?” Tara spat. “Get off that stupid phone so we

can find a seat in one of those buses.”

Doreen turned away from Tara and continued with her rebuke. She had just

discovered that the health department was ransacking her Tea House. In less than two

weeks, they had returned, just when Doreen was out of town. Was that a coincidence?

Doreen did not think so for one minute. The huge knots in her forehead, and the nasty

bark in her voice, clearly showed that she was exceptionally livid. The invectives

that

flew out of Doreen's mouth felt like daggers landing in Tara's back.

She flung her phone at Tara and growled viciously, "You did this, you foul-looking

creature!"

Tara, who had narrowly escaped having her head perforated by the flying object, stood erect from her bending position. She struggled against giving in to her fear. She

stared Doreen down and said as calmly as she could, "If that phone had hit me, you better

believe these men would have had to pull me off your miserable behind."

Doreen mentally stomped Tara's threat beneath her feet. She knew the 'child' was no

match for her. It was easy to capitalize on her intimidation. "Don't you back down from

the truth, because it's branded all over that atrocious forehead of yours!" Doreen did not

stop walking until she stood six inches from Tara's face. "I've had that Tea House for

three doggone years and never had one problem keeping it spick and span! How is it in

two weeks, two jerks from the health department suddenly show up and declare that my

establishment is infested with rats?"

"Doreen, I don't have the slightest idea what you are talking about. I did not even

know that you owned –”

“Be the bloody whore that you are and admit it!” Doreen thundered. “You knew because my son told you!”

“I am not a whore, Doreen!”

“Of course you are!”

Tara took a step back and said incredulously, “Is that all you’re good for? To call people names? You need to take a look in the mirror at yourself!”

Doreen continued as if she had not been interrupted. “You’ve spread your legs for a

dozen other men before you met my son. I’ve had your background checked out. I have

folders of information on you. But how could you help it ... when your bed-hopping

skills came directly from your mother...”

Tara drew back and landed a left uppercut against Doreen’s chin. It was an automatic

reaction. Tara’s next blow never came because Doreen reacted just as quickly – with her

own right jab, which sent Tara stumbling over the sidewalk. The two women managed to

get in a few ‘combos’ before they were pulled apart by two Bahamian porters. By the

time Susan was able to get to them, a small crowd had gathered and the onlookers

seemed eager for the fight to continue. However, Susan was red with humiliation

and was

not in the mood for entertainment. She attempted to reach for Doreen's hand, but she was

sharply insulted.

"Get away from me," Doreen snapped. "I have two legs to walk on my own."

"Please know, Mrs. Lakatos," Susan said with firmness. "Another outbreak like this

will not be tolerated on this trip. This is my first and last warning."

Doreen held her head high and with her bag dangling from her wrist, she sauntered

gracefully toward the bus.

"That woman has no shame at all," Susan mumbled, as she stooped and picked up a

small black book. She handed it to Tara and asked, "Does this belong to you?"

Still shaken by the experience, Tara took the black book from Susan. Maybe it had

fallen out of one of their bags during the scuffle. She wiped the sweat from her brow with

the back of her hand and then gave Susan a dubious glare. "Is it too late to change my

mind?" she questioned.

"Too late for what?"

"To skip attending this event. I want to go back home to Florida," Tara confessed. "I

don't know if I can do this."

Susan managed a wry smile. “You have come this far; why give up now? Let’s get

you on one of those buses and we will discuss our plan of action tonight.”

“I don’t want to ride on the same bus with her,” Tara told Susan. “I need time to cool

down.”

“Of course.”

Tara found the only available seat near the front, next to a lady who looked to be in

her late seventies. And, for a split second, Tara wavered in her decision to take the seat

because the elderly woman had a very unfriendly expression glued to her face.

Regardless, Tara sat because she was eager to get to the hotel, where she would call

Wynton to complain. She was surprised when the elderly woman decided to offer her

unwanted comments.

“What a shame,” the elderly woman said. “You younger generation will suffer for

your disrespect. How dare you raise your hand to your mother?”

“She is not my mother –” Tara paused, realizing there was no use in trying to defend

her point. Apparently, mama was blind and did not see that Doreen had provoked the

situation. The witch had flung a cell phone at her, which nearly severed her head in the

process. How could mama not see that? Tara pushed her lips into a pout and turned away

from the elderly woman.

Ten minutes into the drive, Tara was starting to relax and had actually started to enjoy

the scenery. She had never visited the Bahamas before. So, she wanted to take in as much

as she could while she was there. The first thing that had impressed Tara was the airport.

She had read that it had recently undergone a massive renovation and expansion. The

roads seemed freshly paved, and for a moment, as the beautiful palm trees whisked by in

a blur, she got lost in thinking of what it would have been like if Wynton had

accompanied her on the trip. For sure, they would have been making preparations to

spend their first night in each other's arms.

Soon, Tara let her head fall back on the headrest and tried to block out Doreen and

her crazy antics. However, the black book that was still wedged between her fingers drew

her curiosity from its hiding place. She sat up and casually began to thumb through the

pages. She suddenly realized that it belonged to Doreen. A portfolio of some sort, Tara

assumed. The writing was horrible, scribbled in a way that almost seemed

intentional.

Tara continued flipping through several pages and began reading whatever she found

legible. Within a short while, Doreen's secret thoughts began to roar to life.

Another two pages over and Tara's heart rate began to excel. She felt as if all of the

oxygen had been sucked out of the bus. She needed water. She needed air. She needed

her man to confirm that she was not losing her mind. Her fingers trembled violently,

which immediately got the attention of the elderly woman sitting next to her. She made a

sarcastic remark, but Tara ignored the elderly woman. Rudeness had nothing to do with

it. Tara could not come to grips with what her eyes had just stumbled upon. The mysterious heading read:

My plan to get rid of Sharon Benton, once and for all...

Now things were beginning to make sense, Tara thought wildly. She slapped the book

closed and wedged it tightly against her bosom. This trip was going to be one hell of an

encounter.

CHECK OUT A SNEAK PREVIEW OF BOOK TWO AT THE END OF THIS BOOK.

In the meanwhile, if you want to get an automatic email when Fowler releases a

new

[book, sign up here.](#) Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at

any time.

FROM THE DESK OF H.H.FOWLER

My wonderful readers, I am sorry to leave you hanging, but those of you who have

read the Church Boyz' series know my style. I love cliffhangers. Please, if you dare, join

me in Church Gurlz II, [In the Presence of my Enemy](#) for the continuation. I promise you that it will be an adventuresome ride! Please visit my blogsite: www.churchboyz.org and

leave your comments about my story. Huge appreciation to all for your support and

encouraging words. Without you, the reader, we writers could not be successful.

In Church Gurlz II...

- What do you think will happen when Doreen finds out that Tara knows her secrets?

Will Doreen allow her to get away with such sensitive information, or will Tara get the

upper hand?

- Brian is excited about exploring his 'feelings' for Jasmine. And, it appears as if

Jasmine is fond of Brian as well. Do you think they will end up together?

- Karl and Paul have been best friends for over thirty years. How do you think Paul

will react when he discovers that Karl has not only stolen his wife, but also his son?

- With Wynton's voracious sexual appetite in full swing, will he be able to remain

faithful to Tara while she is in the Bahamas?

- Do you think Marcia's sight will be restored? Will she receive the man that she is

fervently praying for?

Other Books by H.H. Fowler

The Church Boyz' Series

[Rod of the Wicked](#) – Book 1 – Synopsis

Imagine sharing the spotlight with a ruthless blackmailer, whose only intention, is to take

all of which you've worked hard to achieve – your wealth, your fame, and your church of

seven thousand members. For Pastor Leroy Paxton of Mount Moriah Baptist Church, this

is no imagination. Five years ago, he committed a toxic sin and almost lost his life trying

to cover it up. He now comes face to face with his past, which haunts him from the pulpit

to his bedroom. And the only way out of this nightmare is to make a decision that could

cost him everything.

[When Things Go Wrong](#) – Book 2 - Synopsis

The drama continues to unfold. Leroy Paxton, pastor of Mount Moriah Baptist Church,

thought he had found a way to get rid of Shaniece once and for all, but had underestimated the power she uses through blackmail. With new secrets surfacing about

his past, Leroy sadly discovers that Shaniece isn't going anywhere, anytime soon. She is

determined to bury everything that he cherishes, including his marriage of twenty-six

years.

[*My Last Cry*](#) – Book 3 - Synopsis

In My Last Cry, the race to the finish line is paved with suspense and intrigue.

Determination is everything. Which side will win the battle between good and evil?

The Church Gurlz' Series

Mother's Black Book – Book 1

In the Presence of my Enemy – Book 2

Stand Alone Titles

[*Javier*](#) (*urban crime/romance*) - Synopsis

Three boys who can't stay out of trouble on the streets of New York - Pedro, Caleb

and the manipulative Javier, put Rachael Raymonds' faith to the test, as she tries to save

them from the unscrupulous Detective Macino and from themselves. She must resist the

seductive charm of the sensual 17-year-old Javier, who could easily corrupt the household.

The opposing worlds of the Safe House Sistahs and the Gangsta kids collide under the

one roof and sparks fly. Can the caring women at the safe-house bring their last-chance

residents back to sanity? In Putnam County, the laws and codes of the rival gangs, Vipers

and the Cobras, reach deep into young men's hearts; the struggle for power that finally

explodes in death and vengeance will leave Putnam County staggering.

CHURCH GURLZ – Book 2

In The Presence of my Enemy

A Novel

H. H. Fowler

Chapter One

Brandon View Baptist Church – Sunday Morning

“What is love? Could that word even be understood in such an obstinate generation as

ours?”

Brian stepped down from the pulpit and paced until he was standing in the center aisle. The congregation admired his harmonious inflection, but they were more interested

in hearing the answers to the questions he had just posed. Today, he had decided to ditch

his cassock for a charcoal, single-breasted suit. A hot pink tie rested beautifully between

the folds of his white shirt. The change in attire had little to do with boredom, but had

everything to do with Jasmine Benton, who was sitting in the second row to his right.

They had spent all of last evening together talking about the adjustments that life had

produced.

When Brian mentioned his stint at Bible College, and that he'd graduated with distinction for having the best-prepared sermons, Jasmine was a bit dubious. The Brian

Lakatos she had known back in the day was not excited about standing in front of

crowds. Brian challenged her to attend Sunday morning service, where he happened to be

the designated speaker. He would leave it up to her to decide whether or not he was as

good as his talk.

“Is it just a mere emotion?” he continued sonorously. “A butterfly in the stomach? A

force of nature? Hollywood presents us with a picture of lust, pleasure, and an unrestrained gratification for sex, which is often confused with love. But I believe that

love is much more than we can ever explain. I believe that you cannot dictate the expressions of real love. It can strike at any time, anywhere, and with anyone. Love is

unpredictable and it is independent of our ‘preferred’ taste. Love cannot be bought or

sold. It knows no boundary and it cannot be quantified.

“What is love to you? Parents, think of your children. Children, think of your parents.

Wives, think of your husbands, and likewise, the husbands think of your wives. What do

you feel on the inside? Can you describe it? What memory comes to mind? Would you

give your life for them? Think about it seriously. How much are you willing to sacrifice

just to demonstrate how much you love someone?”

Jasmine began shifting in her seat as Brian’s questions tugged on her emotions .

Love

was complicated, she thought. Brian was asking all of the right questions, but Jasmine

wondered how much of what he said came from personal experience. He wanted to know

what memory came to mind when one thought about love. Well, Jasmine could dredge up

a thousand memories that she'd accumulated over the years. But the one that had stayed

with her throughout her twelve years in New York was the period when she had a

miscarriage at eleven weeks.

It would have been her and Wynton's 'lovechild' that they'd created at the age of sixteen. Would she have given her life to save the life of her child? Her response would

have been a resounding yes. Even now, she could hear the voices of her past, climbing

through the rafters of her mind. She loved her mother dearly, but they had shared some

heated discussions – about Wynton, about the pregnancy, about everything that Jasmine

felt that her mother was against. However, her mother was no match for Jasmine's sharp

tongue, which would have sliced anyone down to size...

“Mummy, it's my choice if I want to be with Wynton! I don't care what those people

*have to say at that stupid church! Half of them are doing worse than what
Wynton and I*

*did. You people are always preaching about fornication and adultery and all of
the 'big'*

*sins. What about hypocrisy? And gossiping? And being downright nasty to those
who*

happen to fall away from the grace of God?"

*"Don't you dare blaspheme against the Holy Ghost!" her mother thundered.
"You*

told me that you had been raped! That boy took your virginity –"

*"Mummy, please!" Jasmine spat in disgust. "I'm no saint and you know that!
Why*

*are you afraid to accept me for who I am? I never once told you that I had ever
been*

*raped! You took it that way because you have a negative perception of Wynton.
Don't*

*blame me for you running your mouth to the whole congregation. Now everyone
thinks*

that I was attacked and raped by the pastor's son."

*Sharon wagged two chubby fingers at Jasmine and yelled, "You shouldn't have
let*

*that boy within twenty feet of this house! You know his reputation. Why the heck
you had*

*to lower your standards for the filth he has been spreading around that church?
What is*

wrong with Brian? Such a decent boy who is following in his father's footsteps.

He is

nothing like his brother. All Wynton wants is your body and you are too naïve to see that

_”

“Mummy, you are being judgmental, just like the rest of them,” Jasmine explained.

“You don’t know Wynton and you’re not even trying to know him.”

“I know he is not good for you!”

“Well, the hell with what you or Daddy says. I will be holding his baby in my arms

within seven months...”

Jasmine could never forget the look on her mother’s face when she announced that

she was pregnant with Wynton’s baby. But back then, it did not matter how her words

flew out of her mouth. She wanted her cake to be baked the way she wanted it. Her

parents would see firsthand that she was ‘mature’ enough to handle her own stress.

However, things did not exactly work out as Jasmine had so foolishly imagined. Her life

was fast-tracked from that point on. Within a week, her father had packed up her belongings and shipped her to an all-girls boarding school in New York.

Now, as Jasmine listened to Brian conclude his dissertation on the word, ‘love’, she

wondered if she had given her mother's suggestion some thought, maybe Brian would

have turned out to be an excellent husband.

"...however, no one can really show us what love is except the One who had created

it," Brian said, as he walked briskly back to the podium. "1st Corinthians, chapter thirteen

reads: Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy, love does not parade itself, it is

not puffed up. It does not behave rudely, it does not seek its own, it is not provoked, it

thinks no evil...love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all

things. Love never fails. And now abide faith, hope, love, but the greatest of these is

love."

The scent of hazelnut coffee was present in Paul's office, which he had recently

brewed for his friend Karl. The guilt that Karl had been experiencing since the loss of his

wife made him want to drink something stronger. A bottle of Hennessy went a long way

to numb the spikes of regret, but he would not allow Paul to see such variation in his

character. Paul knew him as a man who had learned how to master his emotions.

If Karl began acting differently, from the image he had built over the years, there

would be an immediate inquiry into his personal life. And, at this fragile stage in the

game, Karl could not give Paul any reason to become suspicious. There were enough

questions being raised about the death of his wife as it was. Paul digging for answers

would be a nightmare, because it would only lead to more lies that Karl could not keep up

with. If Karl and Doreen were to get away with Sharon's murder, ignorance among the

people around them was necessary – the less they knew, the less chance their secret had

of ever coming to light.

“I've decided to sell the steel plant,” Paul announced suddenly. He moved his eyes

away from the flat screen TV and stared at Karl for his response. “I cannot keep up with

both the company and this church. My strength won't allow me to do it.”

Karl, who had been quietly nursing his mug of hazelnut coffee, took his eyes away

from the flat screen TV as well. They had both been watching Brian put the finishing

touches on his sermon. The flat screen TV had been connected in Paul's office for that

very reason – to monitor the order of the service when Paul was not in the sanctuary.

Brian's sermon on love was so good that Karl wondered if he had been too critical about

the young man's 'calling'.

The questions Brian had asked about love had struck home, forcing Karl to face the

issues that he wanted to bury for the rest of his life: *Did he love his wife? And, if he had*

loved her, why didn't it stop him from sending her to an early grave? Did he love his

daughter, whom he had shipped to New York against her will and had kept her from the

only man she truly cared about? Did he love Doreen, Paul's wife, with whom he had

been sleeping right beneath Paul's, big white nose? Karl's thoughts had become

convoluted. To him, love was evasive – an impractical notion reserved for fools. The real

question to ask was: Had he been a fool all these years?

"What is your response?" Paul prodded. "I've just confessed to a truth you've been

trying to point out to me for years. Now, you're not enthused."

"I will do whatever you want of me, Paul," Karl finally said to his friend. "Put your

offer on the table – whatever it is – I will not give you a hard time about it."

Paul's grey eyes pierced Karl suspiciously. "You're not going to gloat over who had

been right?"

“No,” Karl said succinctly and then released a tired smile. “My wife’s death has reminded me that life is too short. We are growing older, Paul, and I wish to focus on the things that matter.”

Karl was five years younger than Paul, but Paul decided against making a comment

about it. Doreen, however, would keep Paul burdened over the fact that Karl was more

youthful-looking and more robust of the two men. She harped continuously over Paul’s

lack of desire to shed the pounds around his ‘unattractive’ gut. Paul often wondered at his

wife’s unreasonable demands: How could he compete with a man like Karl – who

seemed to be blessed with the healthiest genes given to man? Karl ate what he wanted

and did not spend hours in the gym, but he was as fit as a bison.

“...I agree with you – the load is too heavy to man both the church and the business,”

Karl was saying. “However, for the sake of your sons, I don’t think you should hand over

the controlling interest of your company. As partner, I will take the active role.”

“For the sake of my sons?” Paul chuckled bitterly. “My sons don’t have the slightest

appreciation for what I have built.”

Karl brushed Paul’s irritation aside with a smile. “You’re impatient,” he said.

“Give

them some time to come to their senses. This generation of young people doesn't want to

be bogged down with too many responsibilities.”

“I wish that was the case,” Paul said. “My sons' perspectives are entirely different

from my own. Just look at the direction of their lives.”

“Paul, I will admit for the first time that I had enjoyed Brian's sermon today. It was

better than most of what you come up with.” Karl stood to stretch his legs and then

pinned Paul with a direct gaze. “You must accept, my friend, that Brian and Wynton are

not you, and they will never be. Let them discover their worth to this ugly world. Is this

not what you preachers spit out to your seeds?”

Paul suddenly slammed the desk with his fist and yelled, “I don't want my sons to be

like me, doggone it! I want their appreciation! They owe me that much!”

Karl raised a brow in surprise. Paul's unexpected outburst brought on a deafening

silence. It was almost surreal that a man of such strong character was now showing signs

of degeneration. The silence, however, was short-lived, as Karl's cell began ringing. He

had left it on Paul's desk while they were going over the new architectural plans

for

Brandon View Baptist Church.

“Just let it ring,” Karl said quietly, sensing that his friend needed his undivided attention.

The ringing stopped, but soon it began blaring again, without a second of rest. Paul,

already annoyed, snatched the phone to silence it. His eyes ‘inadvertently’ studied the

telephone number of the person who was calling. When Karl saw the change in Paul’s

expression, he knew immediately that it was not something good he wanted to hear.

“My wife is in the Bahamas,” Paul said to his friend. “Why on earth is she trying to

reach *you* on a Sunday afternoon?”

Karl, who had already honed his acting skills for such uncomfortable moments, stared

blankly at Paul and said, “Who cares who she’s trying to reach. Doreen never calls

anyone except when she is in some kind of trouble. You have even said so yourself.”

Paul spat viciously, “Well, if that is the case, let the phone ring until it cracks.”

“You can’t mean that, Paul.”

“I mean every word of it! I’m tired of that woman’s disgusting capers!”

It took every nerve in Karl to lock his composure in place, because he knew

from

experience that Doreen should not be ignored. He could imagine the expletives flying

from her mouth. *But what could I do, Doreen?* Karl thought. *Your crazy husband has my*

blithering phone clenched between his fingers. There has to be another way...

“Excuse me,” Karl said. “I will be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Paul inquired.

“Do you wish to share a urinal with me? I told you that I will be right back. Just keep

in mind: Doreen is your wife and her safety should be of your utmost concern. Don’t live

to regret it, like I have.”

Karl strutted normally out of Paul’s office, but the second that door had closed behind

him; he sprinted out of the exit, toward the parking lot. There was a phone in his Audi A4

that he kept attached to his Bluetooth Interface, which he primarily used as a backup. He

should be thankful that he had found a way to reach Doreen, but his insides quivered in

fear. It was a familiar feeling that told him that there was trouble in the camp and that he

had better prepare for the impact.