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Escape From Wonderland - A Novel

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ESCAPE FROM WONDERLAND

- A NOVEL -

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Dedication

To my grandmother, Annie Lois Price Pennymon
June 3, 1927 – October 29, 2015

To my aunt, Janice Maria Pennymon Morgan
March 17, 1958 – September 3, 2016

To my baby brother, Jonathan Dennard Pennymon
May 9, 1985 – July 13, 2017

ESCAPE FROM WONDERLAND

-A NOVEL-

by

CRYSTAL DENISE PENNYMON, B.S.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Liberal Arts

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of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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Acknowledgements

In remembrance of my grandmother, Annie Lois Pennymon (1927-2015), who said that I told little lies all the way from Georgia to Kentucky while sitting on the arm rest of her Oldsmobile Toronado at 3-years-old. But, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my mother, Veda L. Pennymon, who must have known all along that I had a voice in writing when she expressed that I should have gone to college and majored in English. She must have seen something that even she didn't understand until now.

And I would be just as remiss to exclude that over 20 years later my fiancé, Frederick Walker, reiterated my gift after reading something as simple as a letter to an apartment complex and 'accidentally' reading my journals. For this is where my life changed and put me on a road to where I should have been travelling all along and long ago.

I have to thank Dr. Francisco Lopez of Middle Georgia State University, where I earned my Bachelor's degree, for truly listening to my desires and putting me in contact with Dr. Amish Gosh at the University of Texas at El Paso and ultimately into a program where I could confirm or deny whether I truly had "the gift".

To my family and friends who cheered me forward. All loving my creative voice, but the few giving me the hard truths: Thank you! Thank you so much!

This novel is one that comes from my own personal pain, but it is also a reminder that I have survived and can now bask in the happiness of this written material that, hopefully, will encourage someone to go forth, be strong, hang on and be successful. To God goes all the glory!

Finally, I have to throw kisses at my children, Troise and Cammie, who have given me a purpose to keep going and to be real with myself while I re-acquaint myself with my gift. My grandson, Zion, just reiterates my continuance. Your existence is what drives me.

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Preface

Introduction

By combining the tumultuousness of real life and the genre of fantasy, I needed to reveal that the possibilities of self-discovery are measured in universal parameters. These combinations can also expose the mental capacity of one who lives in the painful, psychological world of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), paranoia, schizophrenia, mental blocks, and the such while still physically walking around in the world that caused it. To define the characteristics of the unlikely couple of real life and fantasy sounds like an oxymoron, but it also defines a life that needs definition and healing when used in the arena of mental disturbances. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, real life is defined as existing or occurring in reality: drawn from or drawing on actual events or situations. And then its total difference, fantasy, being defined in several ways. One way that Merriam-Webster Dictionary defined fantasy is hallucination. It is also defined as fantasia. Meaning that this is a journey that can be taken on through the euphoria of something artistic, i.e. music, paintings, literature and the performing arts. So how do we depict the pain of an unsettling condition effectively in literature?

The Adventures of Alice and Wonderland by Lewis Carroll is often referenced in the piece that I am presenting. Alice, who is dealing with an early transition to adulthood, seems much like the young Simone Harvey in my work. With the sundry reasons encompassing this very epic story surrounding Alice's adventures in this alternative world of Wonderland, the implications range from drugs, sex and colonization to the psychedelic age of the '60's on into the progression of life of a curious 10-year-old girl. Though I can rationalize the implications that Mr. Carroll may have experimented in his share of psychotropic drugs when he composed this story and the fact that during the 1860's the world was changing drastically with the Abolition of Slavery, with the wars

and the death of a president, Abraham Lincoln, these potential aspects could have strongly influenced his work. I can even logically embrace that the historical endurance of this story proved true in that during the 1960's the drugs could have been reiterated as to what Alice in Wonderland was about based on the actual happenings during that time. Of course to support this perception the actual story illustrated a caterpillar sitting atop a mushroom smoking from a hookah. How ironic. But I trust to believe that by the time that I partook of this story as a young girl myself, not much older than the protagonist herself and around the late 1970's, I interpreted that Alice was going through a "coming of age" saga all her own. That she was dealing with growing up in her own way and Wonderland became a fantasy place that she could escape to while going through her growing pains. How could this not be deemed as mental disturbances when growing up has been proven to be quite the difficult journey? Thus intertwining the theory of real life and fantasy that both Alice and Simone share.

In the "coming-of-age" novel that I have written, *Escape From Wonderland*, it loiters on the historical exposition of women degradation (specifically, but not limited to black women), the perpetuation of abuse where the abused becomes the abuser and the sweeping-under-the-rug syndrome that imprisons the women who have adapted to it and how the closeted skeletons rattle and fall out for *all* involved. Or, those who have plainly locked it away into the mind chest. Much of these thoughts can be signified from a psychological aspect, but literature can explain it from the combination of acute imagination and the personal pain fueled by personal experience to emote awareness and revelation. Zora Neale Hurston wrote an inspiring piece of literary fiction called *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where her character, Janie, comes into some hard realizations. In Chapter's 7 and 8 she realizes that she doesn't want to be a trophy wife and that she doesn't want to be pretentious to people who really didn't care anything about her or her position. This is evident

when her dying, second husband, Joe Sparks, started degrading her in front of their customers at their store. After Janie fights back in words of degradation he ultimately reacts as most abusive men do out of being cowardly to other men. This is evident on page 80 of the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

“Good-for-nothing’s like Dave and Lum and Jim wouldn’t change place with him. For what can excuse a man in the eyes of other men for lack of strength? Raggedy-behind squirts of sixteen and seventeen would be giving him their merciless pity out of their own eyes while their mouth said something humble. There was nothing to do in life anymore. Ambition was useless. And the cruel deceit of Janie! Making all that show of humbleness and scorning him all the time! Laughing at him, and now putting the town up to do the same. Joe Starks didn’t know the words for all this, but he knew the feeling. So he struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store.” (Hurston)

After enduring two failed marriages and promising not to give her heart away again, Janie falls in love with Tea Cake, a man who allows her to be herself without the misuse of her womanly value. Simone Harvey, the protagonist in my story, is nothing like Janie from a circumstantial standpoint. She has to come into her own hard realizations. She will also be able to find herself in the eyes of a man. One who finds redemption in the adolescent rape that he inflicted on her in their young ages. Actually she finds her way in the spirit of a ghostly man, her Grandpa Sonny. Simone

and Janie's journeys are significantly different, but their plights are quite the same. They both find that their redemption is found in the citizens of testosterone influence.

I have learned and incorporated, inside of myself, the theory that art definitely imitates life. Whether it be fantasy, sci-fi, urban fiction, horror, et cetera. I would like to assess that combining genres can only reiterate the importance of aesthetically composing all aspects into one story. I desire to allow my voice to speak for the plight of *all* women. That there is no gender of woman who can't relate to degradation, abuse or the pain of either. Pain looks like Celie, a poor and devalued Black woman who is represented in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* that was set in the early 1900's, Janie, a fairly well-off, attractive Black woman with a Caucasian history is represented in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and was set in the mid-1930's, and Simone, a bi-racial woman who is conceived from rape by a white man to her black mother in *Escape From Wonderland* and set in the late 1970's. "Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a global pandemic that has or will affect 1 in 3 women in their lifetime" (worldbank.org). All abuse is not necessarily performed in the same manner throughout the world, but the impression of its violent hand is exact. Therefore, the beauty of prose is as genuine as a story can get because it has the tone of one's own truth. What better way to express the hurt, the pain, the confusion and the wrongness surrounding the dark journey of abuse than by allowing the voice to have no standard literary structure, but to be an example of what prose is truly defined as. As well, as giving an example through story to give a voice to an otherwise hushed issue. Notably, as many of my fore-mothers have done such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gwendolyn Brooks, they have all attempted to stay away from genre stereotypes. They didn't want to be classified as one-gendered writers (African American). I, too, don't care to be defined as a section, but as an insightful writer for, once again, *all* women. It is the idea behind creating Simone Harvey,

a bi-racial woman, but providing some relatable history by it being that her Black mother was violated by a White man who didn't regard Black people as anything other than subservient laborers who were beneath him. The life of all of the women in my prose – Grandma Bonny, Vivian Lee and Simone – are all victims of a time that I can't completely relate to, based on the time of my birth, but the pain and the reality is all the same. I can see that in the fact that there is record of genital mutilation in other countries, that young girls are being stripped of their innocence by a father-figure in all countries, where lesbian women are having to live with being raped because they reject men, women being sexually taken advantage of by men who they see and encounter every day and last, but not least, being assaulted by their own male partners. Husbands and boyfriends.

Unfortunately, class and status plays a big role when thinking of what sets the stage for a novel with abuse. The Harvey's are not prominent people, but people who are grateful for their next meal. And also can be seen as the target for a perpetrator to come along and wreak havoc on the women in their family. We can also size down abuse from the specificity of women and make notes that a more successful status of women tend to only have isolated incidences of abuse, but they are not exempt. Audre Lorde touches on the foundational means of *Escape From Wonderland* in her own perception of the American way in terms of abuse. She signifies the insignificance of one type of abused woman and continues to reiterate the point that no gender of woman is excluded from being abused. "She acknowledges this, clearly identifying herself as "a forty-nine-year-old black lesbian feminist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple" (Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference, p. 114) (Lorde). This mixed identity opens her up to criticism from all sides, and because of this Lorde is able to recognize prejudice in many forms. Unlike other feminists of her time, she focuses on more than sexism, identifying

racism, sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism as simply different forms of the same societal ill.”
(Lorde)

This story is not exactly autobiographical in circumstances, however, it is autobiographical in perception. Meaning that perception is based on one’s own reality in whatever that may signify. Alice Walker is noted in the *Journal of Modern Literature*. Fall, 2004, Vol. 28 Issue 1, p107, 17 p., by Laurie McMillan, as saying that she, “implies that her personal writing may be partly folktale--a narrative to be shared on a storefront where its significance is based on what it might symbolize--what it might accomplish--rather than on how closely it follows actual events” (McMillan 107).

Concerns

How do you make such an intense subject of suicide and abuse realistic when it can already be a task to believe the events of the bona fide subject matter? And how do you incorporate that into a fictional substance that is believable in the world of literature and for the reader to feel free to live within the confines of the story? To answer these questions, we can take the advisement of Mario Vargas Llosa in *Letters to a Young Novelist*, and what he feels are the “mechanisms that bring a tale to life” (27) through the power of persuasion. He says:

“To equip a novel with *power of persuasion*, it is necessary to tell your story in such a way that it makes the most of every personal experience implicit in its plot and characters; at the same time, it must transmit to the reader an illusion of autonomy from the real world he inhabits.” (27)

Now, this excerpt tells me that the combination of real life and fantasy is possible. In the ride into the illusionary part of the autonomous novel there still lies the truth. But it has to give the reader a sense that this story was never told before. That the originality of the story is all its own. And that is what the author has to contend with. Giving the reader an account of something, such as suicide, abuse and negative behavior that the reader can also relate to – whether it is something relatable or not or something that can be lived through. But then Llosa continues on with his thoughts on the power of persuasion and says:

“When a novel gives us the impression of self-sufficiency, of being freed from real life, of containing in itself everything it requires to exist, it has reached its

maximum capacity for persuasion, successfully seducing its readers and making them believe what it tells them.” (27)

If this tidbit of sound advice is interpreted incorrectly, I believe that the god of the story creation would lose sight of their imagination and ultimately not consider their own personal experiences in order to create a piece that readers could live through. But we know that leaving out the realism along with the imagination can appear untrustworthy and the writer would be discredited. Because of the womanist fiction writers such as Walker (who actually coined the phrase womanism), Morrison, Walker, Brooks, Lorde and Hurston who are activist in their own right, we have to understand that Llosa was not saying that real life does not play a part in the writing. But that it has to be so genuine and believable that this is realism in itself and we give the reader something new to believe in as truth.

The use of the world of fantasy in describing this “coming of age” realization, as it pertains to *Escape From Wonderland*, is what drives the feminism of the antagonist and all of the protagonist who help form the life of the subject. The difficult part can lie in the structure. The part of the story that enhances believability, which is always the issue. So, we ask the same question that Alice Walker posed in her transcribed work, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*, and that is: “What do we do with the pain?”(Walker). In determining how to depict and then campaign for the attention of the reader, this question has to be entertained. This question has to be juggled in order to help it conform to reader observance. A plus is that prose becomes the writer’s best friend.

When I think of the matters addressed in my spiritual portrayal of dysfunction, potential psychosis and recuperation, more specific areas pose a threat to the difficulty in composition:

- making the work genuine
 - Example: *realistically writing how Ambien affects the body*
- allowing the work to flow
 - Example: *making sure that whatever is written promotes story progression.*

Mario Vargas Llosa gives a simple explanation for that, too. On page 33 of *Letters to a Young Novelist* he speaks the obvious, “...without coherence there is no credibility, or it is reduced almost to nil.” (Vargas Llosa)

Remedies

I don't profess to know all of how to produce a surfictional work, but with my belief of the literary duende – meaning demon - (or angel) of a writer sitting on my shoulder and the experience of being a product and recipient of the infectiousness of abuse, I have to put it to script. I prefer to call it an angel, but for literary sake I will utilize what Frederico Garcia-Lorca spoke of to make the point of writing such intense, scary and riveting material so very clear. After all, he was superstitious and one who honed in on morbidity such as death. Violent death even.

When I speak of the duende and/or the angel I am speaking of the profound symbolic figures that Edward Hirsch wrote about in *The Demon and the Angel: Searching for the Source of Artistic Inspiration*. Hirsch describes the duende as “two external figures for a power that dwells deep within us. They are the imagination's liberating agents, who unleash their primal force into words of art.” (Hirsch xv) I prefer to latch on to the idea even the more of how Hirsch later spoke of the duende from Frederico Garcia-Lorca's intense view on page 37:

“Lorca tended to find duende in the performing arts, but one can also find it in other art forms. It is like an electric current illuminating certain works of art – written poetry and fiction, for example – that have been composed.” (Hirsch)

Lorca often professed to ignite his *demon* before reciting poetry. I can often relate with how Lorca would feel that he was being exposed in his poetry recitals, but I always feel as though the angel takes over when I put a story idea together. This was especially true with

Escape From Wonderland. I had to expose my “flesh”, as Lorca calls it, in which I do consistently when I sit down to mentally outline and compose my writing. Hirsch also gave an excellent and interesting example of when the duende would take over, from the poet Frank O’Hara, who wrote a poem called *The Day Lady Died*. He spoke of the great American Jazz singer, Billie Holiday’s duende. Based on the definition, the idea of the duende is represented well with the life and times of this most troubled artist. Trouble is when it seems that the duende idea works the best. He goes on to say on page 47:

“Billie Holiday is unmistakably a great force of duende, and O’Hara avails himself of some of her tragic beauty in his poem, a quality that he doesn’t often capture elsewhere in his urbane high-spirited work. It is as if Holiday lent him her tragic measure here, her bearing.” (Hirsch)

Nevertheless, when writing *Escape From Wonderland*, the angel seemed to transpose unpredictably into the duende. It had to have. Because if we are to comply with the theory from O’Hara’s view of Billie Holiday, we have to believe that the duende not only resides in the writer, but in the words surrounding the art as well. The darkness that is inside of the story. So now, the belief is that the content of the story can dictate which external figure gives the power that dwells deep within the composer. The duende (demon) or the angel. A strong instance in my literary piece is when Simone is dreaming that she is inside her mother’s body, being raped by Mr. Whitmore and the powers that be allowing her to experience it. She could feel her mother’s absence and her own conception. I can only believe that the duende took over the pain in order to write such a devastating instance. To be able to go into my own unforgettable experiences and

present a dynamic and believable scene of understated terror and to give some understanding into why someone would not want to continue existing. And that is only one instance. For the concern that the work will not come out as authentic as it can be, there has to formulate a trust that the imagination will produce what it perceives internally through the power that helps the imagination to create it.

There is no room for concern for *who* is offended or exposed either. In *Civil Disobedience*, the poet, Sonia Sanchez, wrote in *In This Place Called America* that I believe signifies what she does with the pain and speaks volumes of what I do in order to tell the story says, “My struggle and the struggle of others for identity and liberation has influenced my imagination and the creativity of many writers” (Waldman 9). Just as powerful of a quote from the great author and poet, Zora Neale Hurston, as recorded by Donovan Ramsey in the *10 Essential Things Zora Neale Hurston Said*, says:

“If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.”
(Ramsey)

These two sayings together appear as a quest for any feminist writer such as myself. These same two sayings together speaks to the practicality and the structure of telling the truth within the fiction. Uh oh, there’s that oxymoron again. There’s that contradiction that doesn’t seem to fit a round peg into a square hole. One could wonder how truth fits into fiction. Sonia Sanchez and Zora Neale Hurston just answered it. By depicting the true aspect of one’s struggle, being vocal about the intensity of it, not giving your reader a chance to doubt or question the intent and then let your imagination take you on the journey as if it is speaking to you and your audience. At this point is where the fantasy starts to rear its whimsical head.

I chanced upon the idea of putting fantasy inside of my story to show how Simone Harvey, my protagonist, thinks through and about her life. I felt that this could only be accomplished by allowing Simone Harvey to speak for herself in first person point of view. My thoughts came from the chapter entitled the Levels of Reality in Mario Vargas Llosa's *Letters to a Young Novelist* where he states, "let's say that the point of view in terms of level of reality is the relationship between the level, or plane, or reality on which the narrator situates himself to narrate the novel and the plane of reality on which the story takes place" (Llosa 73). This incorporated flashbacks, hallucinations, Chinese Boxes or the little stories inside of the main story, time travel and visitation of alternate worlds in order to give the story the ripple of upward plateaus, downward swings and climactic flow. All from the thoughts, the actions and the interpretation of Simone Harvey. These literary devices are usually used to interrupt the flow of the evenness of a story, but in actuality it promotes keeping your reader engrossed in the story through understanding and flow. For example: when one is allowed to see the past or the deep thoughts of the character, it makes your reader want to continue on in this load of happenings surrounding the life and times of the character. The spectator is feeling an acquaintance with this character and the character becomes a real person with their life settling before their eyes. In this instance *Simone becomes that lady who...* in the mind of the reader.

Llosa goes on to proclaim about the flow of the story:

"Without getting too technical, we may say, above all when speaking of modern novels, that a story flows in time just as it does in space, since novelistic time is something that stretches, lags, freezes, or suddenly speeds precipitously ahead."

(Llosa 67)

I love the idea of floating and stretching and lagging and freezing and speeding up within a body of work. At the end of the story, I want my reader to feel as though they have been on a roller coaster of a ride that they held onto and not felt as though they were strapped in it. I want them to be vested in the flow, therefore staying on the ride until the end.

It would behoove me not to leave out the social significance in this story. When a writer writes from a social aspect, I believe that the responsibility lies heavily on the portrayal of truth and empathy in order to produce the forever mentioned awareness. In portraying this realism and empathy in fiction writing, there must be some life experience. Over my lifetime, I have read plenty of queries from writers who have pulled from their own lives, other's lives or have done research on the souls who have crept into their imaginations. I have watched authors on the Oprah Winfrey Network who have sat in the open yard of Maui and spoke of how their work came about. World renowned author, Toni Morrison and new authors, Cynthia Bond and Ayana Mathis all write from a place of historical significance, whether it is their own or what they have been dictated to about. I have often related my work to these three authors in being that their premise is saturated in the female experience – especially the black female experience and a lot of psychological mysticism. Mario Vargas Llosa, states to a young friend/writer in *Letters to a Young Novelist*, “All stories are rooted in the lives of those who write them; experience is the source from which fiction flows.” (Llosa 15) Experience blankets the concern of genuineness. It also solidifies the notion of controlling your reader. Manipulating the flow. Cynthia Bond wrote *Ruby* with the mystical elements that surrounded her own family. Toni Morrison utilizes the gift of the black female life voyage that showed in *Beloved*. Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about people who you would encounter on an everyday basis. Yes, all of these authors are African American,

but they speak of the trials and tribulations that are or can be encountered by every woman, such as I have attempted to do with *Escape From Wonderland* by incorporating different races of people. And still staying true to the historical appearance that I am accustomed to.

The aforementioned women have work that has been socially deemed as prominent literary endeavors. Toni Morrison's work has also gone to the silver screen when the story of an abused Sethe, is haunted by the poltergeist of a child she felt the need to kill in order to save her from becoming a slave in *Beloved*. But all of these women activists have been recognized as the feminist masters that they are. My mystical fictional work along with my own cause assures me that the writing can and will be accepted by a chosen audience. And please let's not exclude a reference of work that the protagonist of this story, Simone Harvey, sporadically relates to in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Simone goes to another world, a world that was created in the mind of Mr. Carroll and ultimately is made realistic in the character that I have created in my imagination. This work holds its own in the literary world, but as far as the works of women who have created their own "wonderlands" – Morrison, Bond, Mathis, Walker, Brooks - the solution to the cause of genuineness and flow have already been solidified by story structure and style from the mastered work of these women. Of course Mario Vargas Llosa adds order to this list where it is in the "organization of the story's elements. To simplify greatly, order concerns the great axes of all novelistic construction: narrative space and time" (Llosa 70). This is all in the power of persuasion which is the greatest achievement that a novel with this magnitude of vehemence should muster. I believe to be classified as the "good book" it has to have the power of persuasion to carry the genuineness and the movement of time and space through the release of the external power that creates and hypnotizes the writer and the reader. In reiterating my findings of creating this fiction I had to remember to open up and expose "my

flesh” as Lorca calls it, in which I do consistently when I sit down to mentally outline and compose my writing. Therefore allowing the duende (demon)...or the angel to surface and construct art.

Summary and Conclusion

The ideas, the spirit and the purpose behind this project has always been to expose abuse of women from the mystical standpoint. My, how I thought that that was a great platform since discovering my own feministic writing style. Fantasy and drama in a fictional setting. To add to the fact that our world still deals immensely with degradation and prejudices. I didn't always think from the view that there was a solution to the exposition of ugliness. Much less, couple it with mental escape and create a believable piece. I lived as though ugliness was something that would always be a part of the history of a person in terms of tolerance. A history that would forever be particles of pain constantly being filed away enough to cope with life. Now I can add to the purpose of properly putting this subject where it goes through writing something of this caliber. And to bring recognition to those who have encountered such unfortunateness; to give trust that there is a healing that can be sought and accomplished. That there is a higher power who will see you through it, if you hold on. To not make rash decisions that could prove fatal before healing can be achieved. My hope within the hope is that the shades of ignorance can be incinerated by knowledge and self-acceptance.

As I have pointed out throughout this platform of my thesis, there can be an interpretation of oxymoron-ness in the genre's that are represented here. As Jorge Luis Borges called the oxymoronic sentiments in his piece called *The Aleph* in his book called the *Collected Fictions*, he says that it is, "something of a graceful clumsiness" (Borges 275). How ironic that Borges mentioned this because I didn't fall into these genres, they stumbled into each other and finally atop of me. I channeled repetitively into the inner creative power that I believe all writers have

and the experiences that only I can attest to in my own personal space and gave birth to *Escape From Wonderland*.

Exposing degradation, abuse and mental illness is not an easy task as I have shown in what encompasses these titles, i.e. rape, neglect, insignificance of human rights, suicide, and the list goes on, but from a literary standpoint it does give a sense of freedom in composition. The flashbacks and the alternate world aspects distract from the present, the Chinese Boxes give the history and/or the mindset of those involved and the hallucinations shows the impact of the circumstances. Simone Harvey's Bildungsroman story covers every aspect of human misuse, but as in most "coming-of-age" novels "the novel ends with an assessment by the protagonist of himself and his new place in that society" (Hader). Only in the literary sense can emotions be elaborated upon outside of the experiences of the writer and lean heavily on the imagination and research that can create an entire new world for the reader.

I must also remember that within the learning institution of creative writing I have learned what true aestheticism is. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston has left a library of works that signify the ultimate use of creativity, paired with social awareness and the focus on the reader as the journey taker. Creative writing gives the writer the go-ahead or the permission to express the beauty of literature. Even if the subject is taut and inflexible. So, in my quest to produce a worthy piece that promotes advancement and significance, to expose hard truths and to walk in bravery, the fictional genres of fantasy, "coming-of-age" and women's fiction, along with true accounts of deplorability there lies an inspiring and entertaining story.

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Escape From Wonderland

Prologue

I want something else. No, I *need* something else. I can't go on like this. A change has to come and I realize this while standing in my bathroom, looking in this double-sized mirror. Knowing that my plans were that the morning would find me gone. The vision staring back at me only intensifies the sadness I'm feeling. I know her well and have wondered why she has been an easy target for disappointment and abuse. I'm lovable, loyal to a fault and wouldn't hurt a flea. So why am I feeling like I have to make such a drastic change?

The glass reflector reveals the mysterious woman that has often been neglected by so many for years. I've been often asked what I see when I look in the mirror. I see a very strange and odd-looking individual with the biggest brown eyes ever, thin lips and high, sunken cheek bones. My life-beaten face shares my fifty years with the scars of judgment and pain. I thought I was strong, but this lil' small frame, five-foot woman looking sadly disturbed and appearing only as a shell of who I could have been should not have had to withstand this lifelong death sentence of sadness and lack of self-worth. And now I'm doing something about it.

Why couldn't I have just cut my mid-back length hair--someone may ask--or do a makeover that would turn my Georgia clay colored skin into the bright-skinnedness of Michael Jackson's bleach gone wrong? It could have been that my daddy's a white man. Or buy a dog, a new car or a new outfit? Why, might "they" ask? Because the real issue is how insignificant the proverbial *theys* of the world have made me feel. And I will put them all out of the misery of judging me. No more concocting a story as to why my hair is so long and straight. Or why I

wasn't raised with a daddy. Or even why I settled for being alone, taking care of someone who saw no worth in me. Or constantly trying to get over events in my life that I didn't ask for. Did I need controlling, maybe? Was it too hard to give me a little consideration? I am as loyal as a Saint Bernard. Well, whatever questions anybody will have, they will just have to figure them out on their own and kiss my ass. 'Cause I'll be gone.

Yeah, my naiveté has landed me right here; wallowing in my own self-pity and questioning my own worth, while saturating my plush, sage bath rugs and marble countertops with tears. I've just grown too old and too tired to play this game of life. And being that I believe in the golden rule, I didn't get the memo that said it only applied to me. That life could do unto me any damn thing it wanted to.

Looking at the bottle of sleeping pills in my trembling hand. 30 Ambien will do the job. No pain, no suffering and no lingering around. Won't nobody else in this world mistreat me ever again.

I chase the final pill in the bottle and suffer through the last burning sensation in my throat. I can now go and lie down under my soft sheets and down comforter. I made sure that the linen was washed and bleached to a perfect whiteness so that when they find me I am resting. The white silk nightgown should at least give me the look of going to Heaven. Maybe God will be merciful and allow me to enter into those pearly gates and walk down those streets tarred in gold...all on a technicality.

I'll just leave this empty pill bottle on the bathroom countertop, but put this empty bottle of Smirnoff in the trash can. The vodka bottle could cause me to be talked about too bad so I'll just make sure it's in the garbage can; deep down under the other waste.

I go to my bed on shaky legs being careful not to bump into the dresser. I'd meant to move that damn dresser somewhere else anyway. I don't want to be found on the floor. Oh yeah, let me remove my panties. They say that when you pass on you have a bowel movement and there would be no need to mess up a perfectly good pair of cotton panties. They're pink anyway. Okay, I can lie back now, making sure that my hair is lying neatly on the pillow and that the covers are tucked tightly around my breast. I take a deep sigh, trying hard not to throw up on myself.

1976

Chapter One

“Come on, Simone. You know I love you. Let me just touch the outside of yo’ panties.”

I was scared of LeRoi. He wanted to do something I ain’t never did before. We were already somewhere Mama told me not to ever go. “Fast tailed lil’ girls always end up pregnant messin’ ‘round wit’ ‘dem mannish lil’ boys down on ‘dat railroad track,” she would preach. So I knew I was already in trouble. But LeRoi was so cute and he was fifteen years old. That meant something. He was tall, black and lanky and never combed the kucka-bug naps in his hair. I can’t quite tell you why I thought he was cute, but at twelve years old, Mama said I didn’t need to know nothing ‘bout no ‘pissy-tailed’ boys no how. All the girls in the complex liked him, but he was constantly trying to get with me. I figured he wanted me...still not sure what for, but definitely not guessing what I would soon find out. Something I wasn’t used to.

“No, Lee-Roy, I might get pregnant.” I tried to plead my case without sounding immature but the truth is that I was scared to death. I had already kissed LeRoi a week ago, and I was nervous the whole week about being pregnant then. Nothing happened, so actually touching my private part should surely make me pregnant. All I knew was that you kiss, rub, and BOOM, you got a big belly.

LeRoi was the boy who lived up on the hill of our apartment complex on Napa Street. We moved there after Mama said that my daddy had to go to Atlanta to find us somewhere to live and to get himself a job so that he could provide for us like Mama deserved. She said that we had to get out of this little small town of Macon, Georgia. However, Daddy never came back, and it

had already been all my life. I never met my daddy; he was just this young, mysterious white man on a distorted, Polaroid picture and a bed-time story of Mama's.

"Girl, you cain't get pregnant. What you talkin' 'bout, Sim-ple Simone? I just want to feel it. I ain't tryna' put my thang in."

"But you want to rub it. And we already kissed the other day. That's all it takes for me to get a big belly."

My ignorance was screaming just as loud as LeRoi was laughing. The gravel under his feet on the crosstie of the railroad track crunched lightly as he walked slowly toward me. The threatening look on his face was beginning to get me beyond just scared and was turning into pure panic. I'd only seen that look on the faces of them who meant to do bodily harm to black folks for trying to go in the front door of Woolworths, downtown. I didn't like the look then and I didn't like the look that LeRoi was wearing now.

"Simone, you are a stupid lil' bitch. And yo' mama stupid too, if she told you 'dat dumb shit."

He was now in my face and yanking on my yellow sundress with the ruffled bottom and spaghetti straps. I tried to yank away from him but my pink flip-flop got stuck under the opening of the metal railing of the track. He was considerably taller than I was, way stronger than I was and obviously meaner than I could ever be.

"Lee-Roy, stop! Whatchu doing?" I cried. "My flip-flop is stuck! And please don't get my dress dirty, then my mama will know where I've been!" The tears flowed faster and more furiously as he pushed me down to the rough grooves of the train track. I had to leave the flip-flop stuck or lose the big toe on my right foot.

“I don’t care nothing ‘bout yo’ dress or yo’ mama. You must thank you too good or somethin’?”

The snarl in his voice was as mean as a pitbull. He laid on top of me while still holding the untied strap of my sundress with his spiny left hand and burrowing his identical right hand between my legs; yanking at my panties. Releasing the strap on my dress, exposing my underdeveloped breast knots, he pulled at the drawstring of his jogging pants and released his thang. I couldn’t see it but I felt it. I had seen my cousin Tyrone’s before, but what I felt didn’t feel like the Vienna sausage wee-wee I had seen on Tyrone. I wasn’t sure what LeRoi had pulled out. It felt like it could have been a snake.

“Lee-Roy, whatchu doing? You gone mess up my hair and then I’ll get a whupping!”
The tears ran down my face like a busted faucet, and I was mad at myself for not being able to stop it.

LeRoi paused his assault of me long enough to look down in my face in disgust, “Yo’ hair? You must thank you white or something, girl?” He pulled the end of my ponytail that hung right beneath my baby breast. “What kind of hair you got down there?” He nodded toward my spread legs that he was lying uncomfortably between, the snarl mixed with a smirk. “Let’s see.”

I felt the tubular phantom press against the outside of my panties, trying to push awkwardly through the fabric that separated the head from my tight opening. LeRoi’s sinister snarl turned into a full blown, demonic cackle. The acoustical hollowness of the railroad track added to the horrific sound that instilled the fear of King Kong deep inside of my soul.

LeRoi seemed to get frustrated with not being able to get through the cotton material and attempted clumsily to thrust his erection inside the part of me that no one had ever been. His

attempt to tear my panties off while stabbing himself in me only made him more frustrated. He didn't care that the jagged rocks were digging into the back part of my body from the pressure his body was causing mine.

"Damn, girl. Can you help me out? Open yo' legs wider."

"I don't wanna do this Lee-Roy. This don't feel good. I wanna go home."

The tremble in my voice and my fits of sobs only added to LeRoi's firmness to reach his goal of mistreating me. The stabbing of his muscular organ alerted me that he had accomplished getting my panties torn off, and the pushes were almost unbearable. The pain gave birth to nausea and I felt myself leave myself.

The railroad track surroundings began to disappear, and Wonderland became my new surroundings. I was no longer wearing the yellow sundress but the blue dress that Alice wore as she ventured through the mysterious whereabouts. The many doors of all sizes were now in sight and I felt drawn to the smallest door. I could feel the pain of trying to squeeze myself through that door. There lying on a table beside the door was a bottle of pills that read "TAKE ME". I reached for the pills.

Why am I being allowed to remember that horrible experience? I was only twelve years old when LeRoi took my virginity. And why in the hell am I still alive? Oh God, why am I still alive? I look at the clock on the wall and it reads 11:05. I've only been lying here for five minutes? The pain of those times are still as raw as I remembered them to be. Why would a little girl, so innocent and sweet be treated that way? What had I ever done to deserve that? Oh God. My pillow is soaked. My tears are messing up my plan. I have got to regain my focus.

Hopefully, that was the last episode from my past that I have to relive. This pain that I'm feeling is what I need a relief from. But my subconscious is playing evil tricks on me.

My attempt to wipe the salty flow of tears away from my eyes seems to be happening in slow motion. My hand is a blur. I think death is coming my way soon. No, I *hope* death is coming my way soon.

1977

Chapter Two

The searing pain shooting through my body is the second most painful feeling I have ever experienced. The first being LeRoi's penis going up in me. But there is something that is angrily trying to come out of me this time. Lying on the lumpy mattresses didn't help my back any.

The extreme guttural throbbing is stifling my breath, but it makes me want to have a bowel movement. Mama has tied my hands in front of me with an old torn sheet, saying that she didn't want me to claw at myself. I would love to be able to just grab the colorful, handmade quilt that's under me or the dingy white pillow under my head. I don't understand why I have to be tied up. I never had to pull no boo-boo out of my butt before.

"Push, gal!" Mama's stern command brought me back to what was going on.

The picture on the wall that I'd painted when I was in the first grade is a good place to set my eyes. Anything to get through this. However, the color of the picture and the grey walls of my bedroom are beginning to merge together.

All I could do was grunt and groan as I went with the sensation to push out a turd.

"Push 'dis thang out! You made it, now push it out!" Mama was mad as I had ever seen her. Her commands coming through clinched teeth. Her medium sized afro had tightened up from the sweat that was seeping down her ebony colored face. I could see her sulky, dark brown eyes from between my legs. I wasn't sure if the dampness under her eyes was excessive sweat or tears. Only a portion of her hooked nose, where her glasses sat, was visible to me, but she kept sniffing from a runny nose.

Mama wiped her nose on the back of her hand. She placed the tips of her spiny fingers up in me pulling something out of me that was obviously larger than a turd. It wasn't coming from my butt-hole either.

"Mama, I got to go boo-boo!" The pain caused me to holler through the pushes I was bullied to do.

"Gal, you gotta do more 'dan just shit. Now shut up and push...whatever it is you think."

Mama was still busy pulling something out of me as she scolded me. The harder she pulled, the more excruciating her tone and the pain grew.

"Okay, push one more good time and we should be thru' here."

I knew that Mama was once a mid-wife who delivered baby's when Macon Hospital wouldn't let black women have babies there. But I didn't need no mid-wife. I need some of that stuff Mama gave Grandma Bonny when she was constipated. It looked like chocolate.

"Uughhhh, Mama, something's coming out," I screamed to the top of my lungs and squeezed my tear-filled eyes real tight. It felt like I was passing a cantaloupe through my female parts.

The feeble cry that I heard was confusing and unbelievable, which made me afraid to open my eyes. LeRoi had said that I couldn't have no baby. That kissing and rubbing wouldn't make my belly big. My belly is still little. I ain't even a woman yet. Mama said that a girl becomes a woman when she bleeds out of her girl parts. So how did I just hear a baby?

Only thing I can see is Mama's flowered house dress that covered her extremely round butt head for the door as if there were a fire. The crying sound left with her, but I couldn't see exactly where the noise was coming from.

"Mama, where you going? Is that a baby?" I hollered. I tried to sit up but the pain was still coming and it still felt like I had to boo-boo. With my hands still tied, I managed to prop myself up on each elbow, toward the foot of the room. I needed to see what Mama was carrying out. I can't get up fast enough and catch only the tail of the house dress. Grandma Bonny sat in the corner of the room looking horrified and jaded. I didn't even know she was there.

"Mama, something else is coming out of me. Come back! Grandma, help me please."

The pain threw me back onto the bed and something not as big but definitely just as painful came out of my raw hole...again. How much more will come out of me? I rubbed my stomach, even with my hands tied, to see if anything else could possibly come out of me. Just gushes of wetness fell from between my legs. The entire spot under me was drenched as I felt a darkness take me over. Grandma Bonny's tear flooded face was the last I saw.

My lids flapping open, I can see a shadow standing in the corner of the room. It's moving toward my bed. It appears to be floating from the closet right in front of my bed, but I can't quite focus my eyes on it yet.

“Mama, is that you?” I am perplexed. The shadow is not saying anything to me. I can make out those same sulky, wet eyes that I witnessed the day that I gave birth to that baby that I never saw again.

“Mama?” I ask again. My voice is proving hard to push out.

For some reason, I can feel it’s my mama. But, Mama is dead. I must be dead, too, if Mama is visiting me after ten years.

“Mama,” I mumble. The being appears fully and I can see that it looks like Mama. Mama’s face is young and pretty. Her skin is smooth, her eyes are vibrant and her mouth is full and pouty. Her ivory robe is full-length and she has no shoes on. But her ankles are shackled. She just floats to the side of my bed and stares down at me with a motherly look that invites tears to roll down my face. I hadn’t seen those caring eyes since I was a little girl and before I was raped.

“Oh, Mama, why did you leave me all alone in that room? Wondering what had come out of me. Not understanding *what* had come out of me. Not even understanding *how* it happened or that it *could* happen. I didn’t know anything about what was happening to me, and you got mad at me. You were mad at me until I went off to college. And then we didn’t speak again until Grandma died and you got sick.”

I can feel my voice growing weak and parts of my discussion with Mama is coming out in my thoughts. However, I can still feel the emotion. It’s so strong. Mama’s face is growing old. It’s so sunk in and sad. Her robe is turning dingy. “Mama, don’t go! Why were you so angry with me? Why are you so gloomy? I disappointed you when I was thirteen, didn’t I? Didn’t I, Mama? Please don’t go—please don’t leave me again!”

I can't control these tears. I can't even wipe them from my face. My hands can barely lift to my face. I can still feel the pain of so many things, mainly how disappointed my mama was in me. How I've punished myself for making her life miserable and for ever getting pregnant. Oh, God, let these pills kick in.

It's 11:45. I can't believe this. My stomach hurts and I am covered in something wet. I haven't been up since 11:00 and I did drink all of that vodka. I guess I'll get up.

Oh Lord, I can't move. My legs won't budge. What have I done to myself? The stabbing pain in my stomach is growing worse and worse. I can't hold on. This must be it.

1978

Chapter Three

“Grandma Bonny, do you know what Mama did with my baby?”

Mama made me go and stay at Grandma Bonny’s house not long after the baby was born. But she let me know she wasn’t happy about my incident before she dropped me off, “I be damned if you gone end up like ‘de rest of ‘dese lil’ fast assed gals ‘round here. I see now you cain’t be trusted anyway. You just mo’ trouble ‘dan you worth, gal,” she’d justified.

I never saw LeRoi again during that time and wasn’t sure if I ever wanted to after he got me in so much trouble with Mama. And I didn’t know what had happened to the baby that came out of me that day, though it never left my mind.

Sitting patiently between Grandma Bonny’s legs at the old rickety kitchen table, she did her usual duties of grooming me. It’s the first day of school. Somehow Grandma finds comfort in doing my hair, even though I’ll be fourteen come January. But I love her so I let her. The little step stool covered in old linoleum tile that I am sitting on is wedged in the grooves of the hard wood floor in the kitchen. Grandma Bonny once told me how my mama had sat on that same step stool in that same spot when Grandma did her hair as a little girl. The grooves in the floor were historical symbols created by years and hours of combing, brushing and hair greasing.

Grandpa Sonny -God rest his soul- had repainted the walls, replaced appliances with the best secondhand appliances he could find and replaced panes in the windows after the caulking wore thin over the years. But never had he replaced the wooden boards in the floor. The stool sits perfectly in those grooves as if they were a matching pair.

Grandma Bonny's hands stopped smoothing my hair down around the edges. My hair didn't require greasing, but Grandma Bonny still brushed it smooth and gathered my hair into pony tails. In her pause I could feel that she wanted to tell me something, but then her hands returned to her task. It had been five months since that unimaginable day and no words of that day had been spoken since.

The comb fell from the part of my hair that she was using to hold it back so that she could do one part without the held back part getting mixed up in it. As Grandma reached down to retrieve the comb, I noticed that her chocolate, sunbaked hand and forearm were wet. I didn't have to see her tear-stained face to know what that meant. I didn't have to know that her coarse, silver streaked hair was stuck to the moley skin of her leathery face. And I didn't have to know that the collar of her safety pinned mumu was soaked in salty emotions, so I laid my head down in her lap. Grandma Bonny had been shedding her fair share of water since the day that life came out of me.

We sat there like that for a while. Rocking from side to side and consoling each other silently.

Grandma finally spoke, "Baby, you should never speak of 'dat day again. Jus' forget it. You know yo' mama ain't right in 'de head, since..." Grandma paused and continued, "and she did what she thought was right for you, in her mind. Now get on up from here and get yo' lil' self on outta here and on to school. You got a lifetime to live and my prayer fo' my only grandbaby is fo' you to do way betta 'dan yo' old grandma coulda done."

I loved my Grandma Bonny and my Grandpa Sonny before he died in 1970 from a heart attack on a hunting trip with the manager of Woolworth's, Old Man Whitmire, who Grandpa

Sonny would say was like part of the family. They would often sit out on the large brick porch of my grandparents' shot-gun house to smoke cigars and drink Grandma's homemade peach wine. Grandma didn't like when they hung out at the house because they would hang up too late. After Grandpa Sonny died, Old Man Whitmore came around one more time that I could remember at the moment. He said that Grandpa had retirement money owed to him and that he wanted Grandma Bonny to have what she needed. Once he dropped off the check, it was the last I can recall ever seeing Old Man Whitmore.

Mama and I had moved from my grandparents' house after Mama and Grandma Bonny had a blow-up about - what I could only make out at the time - my daddy. I can only remember Mama saying something about, "he will come back to get us." And my Grandma saying "he don't care nothing about you nor 'dat baby." A whole lot of screaming and bumping happened and then Wonderland emerged. I am floating in my tears. I can't stop crying so the water is getting higher and higher. What do I do? As I try to stay afloat in my own tears, I notice that Grandpa Sonny is floating by, and what looks like a baby is also floating by. Even my little puppy, Flea Bag that stayed at my grandparents' house and eventually got hit by a car, floated by. All I wanted to know was how to stop the tears so that we could all get dry again and live.

"Oh Mama, why couldn't you be a better daughter and mother? Why did it always have to end in a huge fight?"

So this is my fate, God? To remember all of my heartless occurrences? I'm really getting scared now. I can barely move a toe. And my breathing is growing faster and faster. I can't catch my breath. I was supposed to stay propped and pretty. What will they say about me now?

“Grandpa Sonny, when did you come into my room?”

“Just now, Pip Squeak. Whatchu’ doing to yo’self?” I feel five years old again.

His frame is still as I remember it back in 1969. He is still as tall and handsome as he ever was, if not more. His white robe is shining brightly as is his perfect teeth. My Grandpa Sonny always had the most perfect, white teeth ever. And they showed up good on his dark chocolate skin.

“Grandpa Sonny, I’m tired. I’ve had a hard life. I just can’t take it anymore. Can you talk to God about letting me into Heaven? I just want the pain to stop. I wasn’t trying to miss Heaven; I just want life to stop dealing me the hand I can’t seem to make better.”

“Pip Squeak. You still my Pip Squeak, ain’tcha’?”

“Forever and for always, Grandpa.”

Am I talking to my Granddaddy? I can’t believe this. He’s been dead for forty-four years.

“Pip Squeak, life, whatchu’ you know ‘bout, *can* be a lil’ hard sometimes. But you have to play ‘de hand you dealt ‘til a change comes. ‘Dat change may not happen in life. But a change *will* come, my dear.”

I think I have officially lost my mind, but what more do I have at this point. Maybe God is having mercy on me anyway, by sending Grandpa Sonny to comfort me.

“Grandpa, my life gave me a bad hand from day one. I didn’t have a daddy growing up and then you left me. My first and only experience with a man was on a railroad track and then the baby I had, I never got to see. My beginnings were already messed up. Not to mention all the other drama that I’ve had to endure. What do I do with that?”

“Well, Sugafoot, know ‘dis much. You have to learn to fo’give. I’m not saying ‘dat what happened to my lil’ girl, yo’ mama, was right, but you have got to learn to fo’give, Honey. God takes care of his children so don’t worry ‘bout yo’ baby. And trust me. Everybody got a daddy.”

The tears are welling up in my eyes and I am so afraid to move. I can’t see Grandpa through them. I can’t see anything. I have to gain control. I can’t fail my entire plan. The wetness in my bed is already gonna be a mess. I know I have peed on myself. I can smell it.

Grandpa Sonny is gone. Tears are falling again. This time, I don’t even try to see. I’ll just cry it out through my regret and sorrow.

1982

Chapter Four

Fort Valley State College, here I come. I made it through high school, where I was called half-white, uppity bitch and any other derogatory name, so college is a welcomed transition.

“Baby, you go to ‘dat fancy college and show ‘dis here world what you made of. You are smart, pretty and well-raised. Don’t you ever forget ‘dat. You hear?”

It was obvious that my grandma couldn’t wait until the graduating class exited the gymnasium. She approached me fast with words that I should be able to live by for however long that is. We’d gotten through so much over the years. My move back with Grandma Bonny was a high point, but my mother and grandmother’s relationship continued to deteriorate and I often wondered why Grandma Bonny always took such shit off of Mama like she did.

I remember Grandma and I got in her old Chevrolet pickup truck, heading back to the house for my graduation dinner, where Grandma Bonny cooked all of my favorite food: Fried chicken, collard greens with hamhocks, macaroni and cheese, cornbread and sweet tea. Not to mention the homemade banana pudding with the greatest meringue topping in the world.

Pulling up in the yard is Mama, sitting on her money green ’77 Ford Thunderbird, a Salem Lights 100’s cigarette hanging from her mouth and postured for a fight. She’s always ready to go in on somebody these days.

She started in immediately. Grandma and I could barely get out of the truck good, “I don’t know why she got to go to no college. She need to get a job and help bring some money into ‘dis house until her daddy come back,” Mama barked.

“Oh Vivian Lee, you always so negative. ‘Dis chile got an opportunity to be somebody and rise above all ‘dis. ‘Dis.” Grandma gestured as if she referred to everything around us and before she grabbed her purse from the truck seat. Grandma and I climbed the steps heading for the door while Mama followed behind us.

“Anyway, Vivian Lee, I saved all ‘dat money for Simone to go to college and she going. She been living with me for the last five years and has stayed out of trouble. She has earned ‘de chance to go make sum’ of herself.”

Standing there in my cap and gown my mama started attacking me, “Well, Ms. Simone, it will be you who will miss when your daddy comes back and he ain’t gone want to have nothing’ to do with you ‘cause you left. And he gone be mad when he finds out how you have wasted money.”

Grandma Bonny was mad now, as she stood in the middle of the rectangle shaped living room, “Vivian Lee that old white fool ain’t coming back fo’ nobody. Quit selling yo’ own fool self on ‘dat mess. It’s been eighteen years since this chile been bo’ne and how many times has he come back, called or even sent you a note? Nary time. Vivian, you need help cause you ain’t dealing in ‘de real world.”

“MaDea, you shut the hell up. I won’t let you talk about my man like ‘dat. Anyway, he is coming back. And I have heard from him. He came round when Daddy died.”

“Yo’ man? You ain’t got no man, ole’ stupid girl? And you sho’ ain’t heard from ‘dis gal daddy. I did. He can barely walk, now, much less come and be any kind of man for you.”

Mama walked up to Grandma and got as up in her mother’s face as I had ever seen.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, MaDea? Sho’ you would ‘cause you got sum’ out of it too, didn’t you, Mama? But I won’t give you ‘de benefit of knowing. Now you and ‘dat ungrateful lil’ bitch over ‘dere can just get off my back and leave me alone.”

Oh, I’m a bitch now. How can my own mother refer to me as a “lil’ bitch”? I am her own flesh and blood, conceived from a union she is defending with disrespect to the flesh and blood that brought her here.

Grandma Bonny hung her head after Mama got out of her face. Her look was defeated and I think that is when I could admit that I hated Vivian Lee.

“Leave her alone, Mama. You always so mean to your own mama. Just leave her alone. And she right. That figment of your imagination on a picture ain’t never coming back for us.”

Before I knew it, my mother’s hand slapped me so hard that my graduation cap flew off. Raising her hand one more time to strike me, Grandma Bonny caught her arm midair. Grandma’s voice boomed, “Enough Vivian Lee! We are now even! All bets are off!! Enough is enough! Now, leave ‘dis chile alone! If you are leaving, for God’s sake, leave!”

Mama jerked her hand out of Grandma’s grasp and stared her down, toe-to-toe. Then her evil gaze settled on my hurt face. The combination of evil and contriteness caused my mama’s face to become almost unrecognizable. There was obviously a war between good and evil going on. Between pain and hope. And it was all inside of my mama.

“But Vivian Lee, ‘dere is one thing you need to know. You will need ‘dis chile long before she needs you. Mark my words, gal. You cain’t stay mad at her because she reminds you of your own shawt comin’s and rejections. Enough is enough. It’s time to stop blamin’ her fo’ you being

at 'de right place at 'de wrong time. Yo' daddy would turn over in his grave if he knew how you have dishonored his memory."

For the first time in my eighteen years, I saw my mama cry. Not a right out wailing but consistent, steady streams of tears. All the while, looking dead at me. She'd finally gotten her fill of my face because she pivoted haughtily toward the front door of my grandparents' house, slammed the screen door as she exited, lit another cigarette, got in her car and sped away.

Grandma Bonny looked stronger than I had seen in a long time as she picked up my graduation cap, grazed the fabric lovingly before she laid it on the couch and continued to the kitchen. She looked at peace instead of her usual guilty demeanor. I felt that whatever barriers between her and my mama had been lifted. But my confusion why is still quite overwhelming for me. I still didn't know the issue that lies between them. This debilitating fact only burdens me with the guilt that maybe it is all about me.

1983

Chapter Five

My feet are barely touching the ground as I traipse slowly to my first class on the campus of Fort Valley State College. I am terrified out of my head, wanting to do well and not sure exactly what this means for my life.

“Is that Lee-Roy?” I said out loud before I knew it.

Everything is seemingly moving in slow motion. The figure that is walking toward me with an assured gait has a stroll that gives his thin, tall frame a sway. He’s growing closer and a film of moistness is covering my face. I can feel the beads of wetness popping out, but my feet won’t move. I can’t stop staring. Oh no, he’s noticed.

Slow motion is taking on the air again. I am absolutely sure it is LeRoi by now. And he is headed where I am planted. His same smirky smile is still a large part of his face. His hair is cut in a high-top fade and isn’t as ashy as the last time I saw him on the railroad tracks. I had done good in avoiding him over the years. I pretty much knew the places he hung out just by listening to the girls in the neighborhood who giggled every time his name came up.

“Well, well, well. If it ain’t Lil’ Simone. Except you ain’t so lil’ no more. How you been?” He asked, as he gave me a full-bodied hug.

My body tensed up as if it was reliving the train tracks all over again. I pushed away in my mind, but my body froze as he greeted me like we were old childhood friends. We were nowhere near that and I was too much of a coward to say so, or slap his face or cuss him out.

Finally, I got up the might and pushed him away. Feeling somewhat vindicated.

He seemed to look confused at my reaction to him, “Simone, what’s wrong? Are you okay?” How dare he appear unclear of why I pushed him. His tone softened with concern. “Hey, do you need help finding a class? I know its freshman week and a lot of kids are getting lost. But I can help you find where you need to go if you like. I can help you do anything you need. We go way back. We like fam.”

I shook my head and my feet took on a life of their own by running away. I couldn’t wait to reach the Pettigrew Building. The bathroom couldn’t get to me fast enough. I just need a stall to hide in. I can’t hold back the tears, but I can’t bawl, either, in case someone will hear me. I have to gain my composure. But what is he doing here? Fort Valley is the nearest college that most people in this area go to, but LeRoi is considerably older than me. What do I do now? I can’t stay here.

As I stood up from the seat of the commode, I made sure that nothing was wet and that all was intact before I left the stall. The cold water that I splashed on my face, after I stumbled to the sink, took away the evidence of me crying just in case I ran into LeRoi again. I was now in search of the nearest phone.

Thank God Macon wasn’t considered long distance, “Simone, baby, is everything okay?” I had only said hello to my grandmother.

“Listen, Grandma, I’m not gonna be able to go to this school. There is something here that may not be good for some people. Can you please come and get me? I can go back to the dorms and pack fast and as soon as you get here I will be ready. It’s really nothing that somebody else wouldn’t be able to deal with, I just think that it would not be good for me to go here. You see, Grandma...” I rambled.

“Simone, Simone! Slow down honey and give yo’ mouth a rest a minute. What is wrong wit’ ‘de school?” Grandma’s concern is bleeding through the phone receiver.

“Well,” I stopped abruptly. How do I tell my grandma that LeRoi was the thing that was terrifying the daylights out of me? She didn’t know what he had done to me when I was only twelve years old. She didn’t know who the baby’s daddy was. I didn’t even put it together until my best friend, Suzy Mae Mathis, told me how having sex and baby’s really worked. It never was brought up again at home. Mama just sent me to live with Grandma Bonny. I thought it was because she couldn’t stand to look at me anymore. But it became clear that she thought I was one of them lil’ fast-tailed girls she’d always warned me about.

Listening to myself, I knew that I was sounding a bit crazy and a whole lot unappreciative of having the opportunity to go to college. Taking a deep breath, I changed my mind, “Grandma, that’s okay. I got a little, uh, frightened by something I saw. I know you sacrificed everything to make sure that you could pay for me to go to school. I ain’t no ungrateful little brat, like my mama always says. Grandma Bonny Jean Harvey, I love you and thank you for all you have done. I’m okay. I guess I betta’ get to class. So, I’ll talk to you later, Grandma.”

Grandma is always going to get the last word in, “Simone, first of all, don’t you call here scarin’ me haf to def. You stay in school and make sum’ of yo’self. Don’t you let my money go to waste. Which I know you won’t. You a smart girl and ‘dat’s why I did what I did. You may never know all ‘dat I did, but it was fo’ a good cause...you. Now, yeah you go on to class and pile some mo’ sense in yo’ head. Stop being so scary. You aw’right. If you need anything you can always count on Elizabeth’s grandson. He down ‘dere witchu’. Look fo’ him down ‘dere. He’s a good lil’ fellow. And yall’s like family.”

“Grandma, who is Miss Elizabeth’s grandson? It’s always good to at least know somebody from home. It cain’t hurt.”

“You know Lee-Roy Harris. He stayed over ‘dere by yall when yall stayed on Napa Street. Okay den, baby. Love ya. I gotta go. Young and Restless on. Bye now.”

My mind swirled at the thought that my grandma had actually lived next door to LeRoi’s grandmama all this time and I didn’t realize it. There seemed to be no way to get away from such a horrible situation. My rapist was on Fort Valley State Campus with me. And his grandmama has always lived in my front door. And what’s all this family stuff?

I found it hard to hold onto the present. My head began to spin and all I could focus on was the clock on the wall that read six o’clock. The clock has to be wrong. I left my dorm room at ten o’clock. Six could not have arrived that fast. The hands didn’t appear to be moving. Time had stopped and Alice was taking over me again. Wonderland is trying to consume me as it had done since the day that LeRoi Harris had taken my innocence. I have to be somewhere before six, but the clock won’t change. Oh, my. What do I do? I’m dizzy and confused. This clock seems to be stuck on six o’clock. My insides are shaking and I’m full of fear...

Who is this person standing by my bed? I don’t recognize this face at all. The apparition is obviously the face of a white man that looks a lot like a young Tom Hanks. There is an aura around him of a pale yellow as if amber light bulbs are illuminating every cell of him. I can see straight through his body and I can almost make out his skeleton. The empty places where blood had once run through his veins shown white. His face is solemn, but I could feel a slight smile radiating from this unidentifiable stranger. Is it Jesus? Or God, himself, coming to get me?

“Who are you? What are you?” is all that I can muster from my dehydrated voice.

The unearthly being floated around to the side of my bed and as he got closer his eyes were the only things that I could focus on. They’re not entirely unfamiliar to me. The face is even becoming something that I felt that I had seen before.

Though he doesn’t move his mouth, I can feel his thoughts. *Hello, Simone.*

I answer back in as much of my groggy voice that I have left, “Hello. Are you Jesus?”

No, dear, I’m not Jesus.

All I can get out is, “Who?”

“I am ‘de father.”

The drugs have to be taking over me. My confusion is making it hard to understand who this visitor is.

“God!”

The figure of Tom Hanks with the disturbingly familiar eyes is now floating above my bed and hovering horizontally to my own body. Now, this really must be it. He is about to take my soul to Heaven. As he continues to hover over me, his face is now turning cold and hard. Scary. I must close my eyes out of fearful anticipation that I would soon feel my soul sifted from my body.

Still laying here in my own waste and confusion, it soon feels as though I have been waiting for my own ascension for a while and I want to open my eyes to see if God has been merciful on my soul and allowed me into Heaven anyway. To my relief, surprise and regret, I am still lying in the confines of my own misery.

Summer of 1982

Chapter Six

I guess God don't want me, either. The figure that hovered over me is gone once I could open my glazed over eyes and refocus on the room. I am still able to move my head a little and I feel the need to know the time. The clock reads twelve o'clock midnight. It will just be a matter of time before my judgment will truly be sealed. I can feel the wooziness in my head and my soul no longer wanting to be in this body that I have cast my own condemnation on. And as my breath is becoming laborious, I know it will not be long now. I can barely stay awake.

I feel a tiny hand touch mine. It isn't the physical feeling of being touched like when Grandma and Grandpa would hug me, or even when Vivian Lee slapped the taste out of my mouth a few times, but it feels like my soul has a body and a tiny hand is holding it. Opening my eyes and gasping, I am floating above the body that I have carried all these years. I can actually see myself lying still in my bed with my eyes focusing on my now suspended soul above it. It is as if my body and the essence of me are meeting for the very first time.

I finally acknowledged the tiny hand that is holding mine and see that we both are transparent. The little hand is beautiful and formed perfectly. Apprehensively, I chance to look at the body that is attached to the flawless hand. The little body is dressed in a fuzzy bunny costume with a pair of armless glasses sitting on the tip of her nose, a waistcoat and a large pocket watch hanging from the pocket. One would think that this infantile presence was born in this way. There are no clothing lines or significant places that show as a costume, but the being definitely has the most beautiful little girl face I had ever seen. She drops my hand and checks

the watch hanging from the pocket. She replaces the watch hurriedly and re-grabs my hand. As if we are late for something.

I don't dare speak or think a word as we float through the clouds of what seems like another part of Heaven. I knew that wherever we were we still had not reached the Heaven that I longed for and where I knew that my grandparents were now residents of. Eventually we dropped into a hole that I might not fit, but she led me through, coming out on the other side of the clouds.

The old house where my grandparents lived on Green Street came into focus. The tin roof that Grandpa Sonny had replaced when I was a really small child was peeling back. I knew that this had to be an adventure after my Grandpa had gone on to Heaven. I had already paid to have that old roof replaced.

The small kitchen where I'd eaten a many meals came into view as my ghostly self and the ghost of this little rabbit girl started to impose upon the area. It soon became clear to me that my Grandma was standing in the kitchen and that someone was entering through the back door into where only five people could stand tightly at one time.

"Bonny?" The figure that came into the room and approached my grandmother at the old rusty sink was Old Man Whitmore. I couldn't remember him ever coming back but once after my grandpa had died.

"What is it, Samuel?" Grandma was curt and I didn't recall her calling Mr. Whitmore by his first name.

The baby bunny moved us to the corner of the kitchen between the refrigerator and the countertop. It was where the trash can usually sat, but the baby girl bunny and I sat at a table

covered with a baroque tea set placement for two. I never realized, growing up, how this spot was a complete view of the entire room.

“I just wanted to bring you ‘dis here money for Simone. I know she ‘bout to go off to college ‘dis fall and I know ‘dat you have been mighty good to Vivian Lee’s lil’ bastard chile, so ‘dere’s extra in ‘dere.”

Grandma’s mumu swished around her abundant hips as she faced the man who I had always thought to be a friend of the family. Who I thought was the rare old white man who cared enough about my Grandpa.

“Bastard! Bastard, Samuel? You gone stand ‘dere and call my grandbaby a bastard?”

“Well...?”

“Well, my aching ass!” Grandma picked up a knife from the drain tray and walked slowly toward Mr. Whitmore. “After all ‘dat I have hidden from my Sonny to keep him from killing you. And ‘den having to hide stuff from my grandchile. And having to endure ‘de humiliation and ‘de sorrow that you imposed on my own chile. And you gone call her baby a bastard. You of all people don’t have ‘de right to.”

“Hold on now, Bonny. We made a deal. We made a deal ‘dat you would carry ‘dis to yo’ grave. And I been mighty good to ya’ll niggahs, now. What about our deal, Bonny?” Mr. Whitmore was holding up his hands in surrender as it was assured that he had no idea of what Grandma Bonny would do with that knife.

“Yeah, but what do I do about memories, Samuel? Vivian Lee ain’t fo’got. ‘Dat po’ chile is crazy as a bezzy-bug. And Simone cain’t understand why her mama so mean to her. Why she

hate her so. So you speak of deals, Mr. Whitmo'? My family has been suffering since 'de day you walked in here wit' Sonny. All skinning and grinning like 'dat ole' Tom cat 'dat was about to feast on 'de canary. Well, you got pass Sonny, but all deals is off for anybody else concerned. Including me."

Mr. Whitmore took one hand down and reached inside of his coat pocket to retrieve a large envelope. He laid it down on the dining table as he watched Grandma Bonny closely. She didn't move, but she looked as if she could pounce on him at any moment.

"Well, I 'preciate you never saying nothin' to Sonny, God rest his soul. 'Dat's why I helps you as I do. Yall good nig...people."

"Oh, you helps me 'cause I didn't mention to Sonny 'dat you raped his baby girl. 'Dat you really his beloved grandbaby's daddy. 'Dat you the reason 'dat his true love, Vivian Lee, is a nut case today. 'Dat you... well 'dat picture of you...who she be waiting fo' to come claim her an' 'dat chile in 'dere."

A smirk came across the face of this man that I was now finding out and realizing was my daddy.

"And please let's not forget 'dat had it not been fo' 'de Watkin' man, with his 3 6's, Black Draught and Castrol oil, Vivian Lee would have an older sibling walkin' 'round here lookin' like her chile. You should have been dead long time ago, sir. But because of my Godly nature, 'de love fo' my family, and my belief 'dat God will see us through 'dis, you stand. But don't take my Godliness fo' granted." Grandma held up the knife in Mr. Whitmore's face.

The terrified man ran backwards out of the back door for whence he came as fast as any bolt of lightning that I had ever seen. Grandma Bonny stuffed the overfilled envelope into the

pocket of her dress, went back to the sink and dropped the knife into the dishwasher. Her tears followed the cut of the suds, and she held onto the lip of the sink with all of her might while anger and heartache racked her aging body.

I want so badly to comfort my grieving grandmother, and I can feel the heaviness of tears well up in my own ghostly soul. It is all coming to my understanding. For just as the baby bunny pulled me up, I could see my eighteen-year-old self eavesdropping in the doorway of Grandma Bonny's kitchen. I watched the silent tears run down my face as I clutched the copy of my favorite book, *Alice in Wonderland*, and hit the floor. The ghostly me wants to comfort the eighteen-year-old me. I also knew that I had lost so much of my life and that the agony of it all landed me where I am today. I am trying to kill myself over stuff that I have not remembered. That I had escaped from in order to protect myself.

All kinds of thoughts are seeping through my head. I have just realized that I was back on my death bed again. The fact that Mr. Whitmore was my daddy made partial sense as to why my mama was so messed up. And it also explained why my Grandma took the abuse from Mama like she did. The guilt kept Grandma Bonny afloat and fighting, but the abuse is what made my mama sink into insanity. And *Wonderland* was my escape from generational rape.

The feeling of nausea is starting again and I am not sure if I want to throw the pills up or let them do their job. The realization of who my father was has pushed me back into not understanding why my life had to go in this manner.

Thoughts are clouding up in my head like an avalanche. Thoughts that Mr. Whitmore is my daddy by rape. That he raped my grandmother one time, too, and made her feel like she was

betraying my grandfather. He caused my mother to hate me and to go crazy in the meantime. It made my mother hate her own mother. And it made my sweet, sweet grandmother feel a guilt that she held onto in order to keep her husband from committing murder. Grandpa Sonny would have, for sure, killed Samuel Whitmore if he knew just half of what went down.

“Simone. I already know. And it’s okay. No wrong deed goes unpunished.” Grandpa’s voice was responding to my thoughts.

“But Grandpa, he raped Grandma and Mama. And Mama had me...from rape.”

“It’s okay, Pip Squeak. “Dere are no wrong deeds “dat go unpunished. In life or death.”

The tears are cascading down my face as I feel sorry for myself for not being as forgiving and understanding as my dead grandfather. How could he forgive Mr. Whitmore when he had done so much to his family? Maybe Grandpa Sonny disappeared into himself too. He loved reading Moby Dick. That wasn’t funny. But he did.

“Let it go, Simone. All of it. I had to.” That was Grandma Bonny’s voice. They are together.

Like a demand from an authority figure, I threw up everything but the pills, all over my white sheets and white nightgown. The smell of sickness and death overpowered with alcohol is filling my room with the mixture of my excrements. Now I would surely be looked upon in death as the failure that I was in life. I couldn’t even die with success.

“Oh God help me!

My voice sounds alone and lonely. But now I am so sleepy. I have to go to sleep.

The telephone is ringing. The clock on the wall says 12:30. Who could be calling me this time of the morning? I'm too sleepy. I can't move anyway. The pills have gotten into my bloodstream since I still can't move anything but my head and that is only barely.

I'm so sleepy...

A little hand is touching me once more. My eyes won't open, but she is taking me up above my body again. Here I am once again. Lying here, barely breathing and covered in orange vomit. Boy what a mess.

"Excuse me, little bunny. Who are you? Where are you taking me? But, who are you?" I asked her again after my translucent body was hovering.

The little girl bunny looked up at me and smiled. It was as if I could feel love radiating from her. She didn't look evil as Mama and Mr. Whitmore had. She had the face of an angel as Grandma and Grandpa had.

"Can you talk?"

"She can talk, but she prefers not to. She is a perfect chile." Grandma Bonny's voice has returned.

"Grandma," I said while I kept my eyes on the baby, "Who is this baby? Where is she taking me.?"

"Baby girl, you jus' keep up wit' what's going on so 'dat you can find yo' way. You have got to find yo' way on your own. De Good Book says dat we have to work out our own soul

rebirth. Work yo'se out whiles you still have a chance. Know what to look fo' and prayer is always in order. 'De Father is real. Talk to Him chile.'

The pretty little bunny baby girl grasped my hand with an oh so slight pressure as we gazed into each other's eyes. I could still feel the love coming from this tiny being that floated beside me and guided me through this unexplainable journey.

For the first time since I'd taken the pills I felt that maybe there was a little hope and I even felt that maybe hope and faith was something that this sweet little guide that held my hand so lovingly was transferring into my soul.

Back to 1977

Chapter Seven

The thoughts of my only baby are flooding into my thoughts, bringing me back to where I lay waiting to die, or be redeemed or...oh, I don't really know. The room is becoming bright as my eyes are adjusting to the fact that I have floated back into my old room on Napa Street, where Mama took the baby from me and my own screams and hollers of childbirth are piercing my ears: "*Mama, where you going? Is that a baby?*"

The baby bunny is guiding me through my life once again.

Mama ran from the room, the scowl on her face was so dark and disturbed that she lost any resemblance of herself. My mama's brown sugar face with the perfect jaw line and big pretty eyes now looked like the head of a skeleton; her glasses barely sat on the tip of her bony nose and covered her sunken eyes. This was not the Vivian Lee that I remembered that day, but what she had become was much more frightening as she carried the crying bundle away.

The baby bunny and I went with her. Immediately she stopped in the kitchen and ran some water. Mama jerked her hand away from the spigot with an angry jolt. The steam vaped from the basin as Mama held the whimpering package against her bosom.

"Vivian, whatchu' doin', girl? Grandma Bonny staggered into the kitchen behind her. Grandma still carried the terrified look on her face that I'd remembered she had while sitting in the corner of my room and while Mama yanked the baby from my body.

Mama didn't say a word back to Grandma. She just kept busy with what she was doing.

Grandma ran up against the back of Mama and tried to take the baby away from her. The evil in Mama's stance had taken a hold of her. She was no longer human, but a spiritual wickedness. The harder Grandma pulled at Mama, the stronger and more unyielding the demon inside of her got.

Mama began to snarl as Grandma approached her and even tried to bite her when it seemed that Grandma could possibly pull the child away from her. Grandma Bonny finally had a promising grasp on the infant in Mama's arms and pulled. But just as she did, the most black-hearted countenance took over my mama's soul and she was able to throw her mother across the linoleum floor.

I wanted to reach out to my grandma who was now trying her best to crawl back to her diabolic daughter. I also wanted to get the baby away from my mama and disappear with it all at once. The little perfect hand held me steady and it was almost as if another force was holding my head up to witness what was taking place. I didn't want to see what happened next, but there was no way that I could escape it. Wonderland was betraying me. I could feel an unseen energy holding me up. The terror and the anguish of it all were overwhelming me to tears.

My eyelids felt as though they were being pried open as my mother's most dastardly actions were playing out before me. She plodded back to the sink and turned the knobs until the water was no longer running and the sink was full. She carefully, but sinisterly placed the baby into the scalding hot water, holding it there. The heat from the water didn't seem to burn Mama, but the horrific screech from the tiny life buried itself deep into the core of my very existence.

Mama! Stop! I could only scream from my soul, for my voice had betrayed me and my mouth could not form words. This horrible dream left me mute.

I heard Grandma Bonny scream out as well, “Viv, No!” Grandma Bonny sat on her knees and supported herself on rickety arms. Tears racked her broken stance and she wailed in torment.

Mama held the baby there until there was no more noise coming from the tiny swaddle. The heated water still didn't seem to disturb Mama in any way. A slight tremor came over her torso as she let the baby go into the bowl of the sink. I watched the baby slowly sink to the porcelain bottom while the cloth that Mama had wrapped the baby in fell from the tiny form. There in the sink was the face of the child that I'd given birth to. A little girl who I never knew in life. The perfect little bunny baby with the angelic smile, perfect hands and big beautiful eyes just like my mama's, held me up for support.

I looked down at the little being holding my hand, “So you are my little girl?”

The love that I felt permeating from this little girl was stronger than the grief that I'd felt witnessing my mama taking the life of her own grandchild.

“Do I have to watch this anymore?” I asked my sweet little ghost baby. Not understanding how she could continue to witness her own treacherous death.

The baby bunny looked back toward the scene of my mother and grandmother and I followed her eyes.

Mama faced Grandma Bonny with such contempt and disdain. My grandma looked mortified, but not afraid. The rapid breathing of them both told me that there was about to be some kind of a stand-off.

Mama looked over her glasses with the contempt of Satan and walked broodingly toward her mother, "'Dis all yo' goddamn fault. 'Cause of you somebody got to her. Spoiled her for her daddy to come back to get us."

Grandma Bonny's eyes were welled up with water as she sat back on her hunches and responded to the accusation, "No, Vivian Lee. 'Dis ain't had nothin' to do with me. 'Dis one of dem' thangs 'dat jus' happen' sometime. Only thang you can do is prepare yo' chu'ren for 'de stuff 'dat come into 'deir lives an' it's up to dem' how 'dey live what dey been taught."

"So you tryna say 'dat 'dis was my fault 'den? Huh? Is 'dat what you saying, MaDea?"

Grandma was so calm. Her eyes would dart to the sink where she knew the dead baby was, and was trying carefully to pick herself up from the floor.

"Naw, Vivian Lee. I say what I meant to say. Now, it's also up to you what you do with the mistake of your chile. You still got to love her through 'dis. Jus' like I got to love you."

"Love 'dat lil' bitch? She ain't never been nothin' but trouble since 'de day her daddy put her in me."

"Maybe so, Viv. But she yo' chile. You loved 'dat chile through nine months. So what her daddy ain't nothin' but a two-bit cracker. He got his day coming, too. But, you got to see 'bout yo' own flesh and blood. We already know he don't mean no good to any a' us."

Mama's countenance softened into a sinister assurance, "Naw, MaDea. 'Dat's where you wrong. Sam loves me. He jus' didn't want no half-breed picky-ninny. He was only comin' back to get us both 'cause he loves me and she here now. But he didn't want no lil' fast-assed lil' nigga baby, either."

“Baby, you need help. ‘Dat man don’t want and never will want you nor ‘dat baby in there. And if she all ‘dem thangs you say she is, she can go with me. I’ll take her.”

“You just plain jealous, MaDea.” my Mama said through gritted teeth, “You just mad Sam didn’t want you.”

“Okay, baby,” Grandma was standing now and spoke as she held up both hands, “if you say so. But, first we need to do somethin’ ‘bout what you just done. You just ki...” Grandma couldn’t finish the words. She could only point toward the wash bowl.

Grandma Bonny slowly moved toward the sink and reached into the water to wrap the baby back up in her saturated death rag. She looked down into the lifeless face of her great-grandchild and a tear mixed in with the water that varnished the baby. From where I stood, the baby’s face did not reflect what Mama had just put her through. She was perfect in every way. The peace and calmness was Heavenly. Grandma grabbed a dish towel from the counter and wrapped the baby again. Her mouth was moving and I knew that she was praying to God and thanking Him for taking back the soul of this precious child. I could also imagine that she must have asked for forgiveness for the part that she played in this nightmare. That she obviously was covering up a murder. Vivian Lee hadn’t ever been punished; I wasn’t sure at that time what happened, so Grandma was the only one who knew what had happened to my baby girl that day.

Mama watched the ritual and when she was tired of Grandma Bonny’s prayer vigil, she snatched the baby from Grandma’s hands and ran down the back porch steps of our apartment. She avoided Napa Street itself and went out into the woods in back of the apartments. Back where the train tracks emerged from and ended up on the side of our apartment complex.

The spirit of my baby didn't take us to follow Mama, but somehow I knew that Mama buried the little body of my daughter out in the back woods, down by the railroad tracks where all this had started.

Coming to, I am covered in vomit and perspiration. However, I am so grateful that God allowed me to rest. I don't feel as overcome as I had when we went back to Napa Street. I just relived a part of my life that I placed somewhere in my brain so I didn't have to feel it.

My brain is whirling out of control as my mind is processing what had happened to my baby. "Mama, you came back."

The ghastly version of my mother is looking at me with the ever present contempt that I lived with all of her days. Her greyness is like a black and white picture.

"Mama, why?" That is all I can get out as I stare into her lifeless eyes.

The sound of her voice is not her own. It is deep and bottomless. It's loud and intimidating.

"Cause, it had to be done. I had to be 'de center of attention. Not you and shu'ly not yo' lil' brat. I had to destroy what could have caused me further problems. Cain't you understand that? Ain't 'dat what you doing right now? Destroying what could cause you further problems?"

I remember that the devil is the accuser of the people and I feel so sorry that my mama is being used to speak such evil words. Suddenly, I just feel completely remorseful for her. More than when she died. It seems that she is a lost case. But I sure am grateful for all the Sunday's that Grandma Bonny made me go to Sunday school and church. I can recall what I learned.

Never had I ever had the nerve to verbally defend myself against my mother until now, “Yeah, Mama, but maybe I have a chance. I’m still here, remember? And please don’t forget that I loved you in spite of.”

My voice is becoming stronger. And I said the words that I knew that in life and in the state that she was in, she would not be able to stand.

“Mama, I love you and I forgive you.”

“Naw, boo, fo’give yo’ damn self.”

Mama’s tortured form is disappearing through the ceiling. I can feel a gust of cold wind sweep across me as my mother’s anger seemed to lift with her. A small weight has lifted from my chest and I think that it is a good time to have a conversation with God.

“Father God, I am lost in the woes of my life. I don’t understand why I’ve had to endure such grief and pain. I don’t understand why I’m here, sometimes, if for only to have to deal with the hatred and betrayal of other people. You have to help me for as long as you keep me alive. And I am sorry for destroying the body in which you have created. I just wanted the pain to stop. Can you understand that?”

I am now so sleepy. Subconsciousness is pulling me in.

1963

Chapter Eight

The surroundings are a drowsy and wet day while I gain my bearings to figure out where I am. All I can feel is the sadness that saturates the atmosphere as I look up and see that I am standing in front of Grandma and Grandpa's house on Green Street. The house looks newly painted. The grass is green, but the sky is covered in white clouds, threatening a storm. I want to climb the clean brick steps, but as I look down a newspaper is spread at the bottom of the porch. The 1963 home bombing of A.D. King's house, the brother of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is all over the entire front page.

Oh my God, I wasn't even born yet. What is this?

"Vivian Lee, come in here, gal." That's Grandma Bonny's voice coming from in the house. My feet are moving without my permission as I find my own mouth responding to her order.

"Here I come, MaDea." Am I my mother now?

Looking down at my hands, I don't see my own hands, but my mother's. I am also looking at her feet, covered in a grungy mustard colored pair of Mary Jane's. The skinny leg pixie pants and the tight fitting striped, short sleeve sweater was definitely my mother's. I don't know if I remember seeing her in it or if it was on a picture, but it was an outfit that I'd seen her wear before.

Before I reached Grandma Bonny, who was standing in the dining room, I can see my reflection in the picture window that is right before entering the front door. Yes, I could see that I was sharing the body of Vivian Lee, my mother. She couldn't be any older than sixteen.

"Yes, MaDea?" So Mama wasn't always so mean to her own mama since she answered her so politely.

"I need you to run 'round to Polly's sto' an' get me some lard. I wanna go 'head and fry up 'dis chicken," she requested as she went into her purse," an' brang you an' my change back on here."

Grandma handed us the dollar and off we ran across the dirt road around to the little store that closed not long after I even knew that it existed. Mama was in complete control of this body that we were now intertwined in 'cause it was hers. Boy, could Mama run.

My eyes could see everything that Mama could. The old church that sat on the side of the store almost as if it were connected to it was old even then. Both yards were nothing but dirt. I can only remember the grown up foliage in the yards that crawled up the walls of both fixtures. I can also see the old beige, 1963 Chrysler New Yorker parked in front of the store that Grandpa Sonny drove when I was a little girl. It looked brand new, though. Maybe I'll get to see him.

Mama's youthful legs jumped the huge cement steps to Miss Polly's store. There at a seemingly six foot, concrete counter stood the mulatto woman I had only heard folk tales about.

"Well, hey 'dere suga. What yo' mama done sent you after?" asked the lady with the blondish wavy hair, big pink eyes of a consistent drinker and the thick mouth of sparse teeth.

"MaDea needs some lard. She 'bout to fry some chicken legs."

“Well, okay. Tell her to save me one of ‘dem legs. I’ll come ‘round ‘dere sometime later on,” Miss Polly told Mama as she bagged up the can of lard, took the money and gave her the change. “You be careful crossing back ‘cross that street, here?”

*“Oh, she ain’t got to worry ‘bout it. I’ll take her back over yonder.” Mama turned around to the voice and there stood the Tom Hanks from *The Da Vinci Code* and also the Tom Hanks on the picture that my mama always treasured. Mama and I shared a jittery feeling when we realized who was speaking. “Come on lil’ lady.”*

The dreariness and woe came on strong. Mama moved us slowly in apprehension. Miss Polly handed the bag with Grandma’s lard to us just as slow. Everything seems like it is moving in slow motion and I have no idea why.

“Aw’right, Samuel, sir,” was all Miss Polly could get out. But Samuel? As in Whitmore? This is my daddy as a younger man. Oh my God!

My anger wouldn’t let me not go with him since my mama was the one this was all happening to. She had no clue that I was sharing herself with me. But why did I have to witness this? I wish I could stop Mama’s legs from walking out the door of the store with this man. Oh no! We are getting in Grandpa’s car.

“Get on in lil’ lady,” a smirk overtaking his entire face. Mama’s, or my, heart was beating in overtime. I wonder if Mama can feel that I feel that this ain’t a good idea to go with Mr. Whitmore.

Mr. Whitmore isn’t going toward Green Street. But up to Madison Way. I can’t understand or hear anything he is saying. My mind is revolving into itself with just trying to comprehend why we are riding with Mr. Whitmore. I could discern that he was a bad man.

He has stopped the car in the alleyway off Madison Way. The little sign barely still standing that signifies the alley's name. This is right up the street from where my grandparents' house is. I recognize it from catching the bus at the corner as a child. The gravel has left the car feeling sideways and the boarded up houses on each side made it impossible to see anything or anybody and just as impossible for anybody to see us. But Mr. Whitmore didn't seem as if he was a stranger to this lone alleyway. In no time at all I could feel the disgust of him touching my mother's body. Going up into her shirt and fondling her girlie breast. Going down the sides of her pixie covered lanky legs and feeling between them as if he were searching for a hidden treasure. As if he was aware that he was stealing something. Slowly he is pushing us into the seat of the car. The puffs of seat giving way to the feeling of springs. Mama is not saying a word, emitting a feeling of fear only, but I am screaming to the top of my internal lungs. 'Stop it, Mr. Whitmore. Stop it!' But I am unable to be heard. For I don't exist yet. As he pulls Mama's pants and panties down and off of her he pins his own body between her legs with force. His manhood is already hard as a tree limb and exposed as he enters her. As he enters me. Roughly. With no concern or care. Oh my God! Mama is being raped. And there is nothing I can do to save her from this. It is so painful. Mama's face is covered in tears, but I can't hear her cry. I can only feel the stabbing sensation of this man's assault and he is hurting her. Hurting me. With his every thrust, it causes even more damage as it feels like my mama's insides are being torn from the inner side of her body, mind and soul. I could feel the demise of my mother's psyche as my existence comes in its place. Mr. Whitmore is taking everything kind about my mother from her. His release has now stolen her being and I can tell that she is going away. But where?

"Now listen to me, baby girl. If you tell anybody, I will kill you, yo' mammie and your daddy. Do you understand me?" Hatred permeating from his breath.

“Yessir.” Mama nodded through the anguish that she was feeling. I wanted to slap fire from his soul, but I couldn’t control anything.

“Oh, and by ’de way. Simone. I am ’de father.” He said these words as sadistic as any serial killer could summon. My eyes became my own as he looked not into the soul of my mama, for it was now damaged beyond repair, but into my very own. I still couldn’t answer, I just looked at him in horror that he knew that I was present.

“Get off of her Samuel Whitmo!” Grandma’s voice. “If you don’t rise up right nigh’, I’ll cut yo’ balls from out yo’ back.” The thrust of Grandma’s punch to Mr. Whitmore’s body feels like a boulder was added to mine and Mama’s body. For I was immediately conceived and could feel it through my mama. I feel my every cell forming and it feels like me. I could feel my breath. I could feel my heart circulating blood. I could feel me.

Mr. Whitmore looked down into my mother’s face and I realized that he could still see me. I am left to panic on my own since I can feel that my mama has left the scene long ago. She is absent though it is her body.

Grandma is dragging Mr. Whitmore from off of the top of me with a gun in one hand and propelling threats that I can only assume she means. Mr. Whitmore doesn’t seem fazed. He laughed with a guttural gurgle. I can feel the inhuman touch of a spiritual evilness vibrating through my mother’s body and covering my own mind. His eyes never left me. At this moment I hear his thoughts through his outward laughter. ‘Simone. My lil’ niggah spawn’. And his laughter got louder.

“Oh my God. Mama was raped by Mr. Whitmore.” I could only summon this much from my body. Covered in sweat and chilled to the bones of what I’d just experienced I also recognized that the grey figure of my mother was still in the room. But she was not alone. She is accompanied by none other than Mr. Samuel Whitmore. Their faces are silhouetted in the shape of bones with barely enough skin to cover them. Their apparent skeletons are showing as if they were almost smiling over at me and a chill of fright is overtaking me causing a bout of nausea. Never have I ever felt such fear. The only other fear that was worse than witnessing my own sardonic parents in their ghastly deaths and obvious eternal fates was the idea that God would add me to this dreadful duo. I didn’t want to hate my parents for being okay with being impish, but I hated the wicked in them and longed for the good in myself. I didn’t want what life had dealt me to be my legacy anymore. Somewhere in my abused mind, I had convinced myself that I was punishing those who had wronged me...starting with Mama and my unknown daddy, Mr. Samuel Whitmore. I knew that in the midst of my mama’s unfortunateness, Mr. Whitmore didn’t take anything from her, but that she gave her soul away to a man who used her unmercifully in the form of anger and entitlement. I now see that and I want what Grandma Bonny and Grandpa Sonny always wanted for me.

Oh, so you got all the answers now, huh, you lil’ bitch? The skeletal face of my Mama spoke in my thoughts.

“No, I don’t. I just know that I don’t want to end up like you and...him!” I flashed back at my mother’s eternal visceral with all the energy I could conjure.

Oh, but Baby Girl, you are too late. You have already started the process. The ugly faced Mr. Whitmore superimposed into the conversation.

He had a point. I *had* taken a lethal combination in hopes of ending my life immediately. I didn't think that it would take the length of time that it has taken and that I would escape into the background of my life, over and over again. Pulling up everything ugly that I had locked away.

Sometimes it's the lesson that you have to learn in order to stay on track. The voice now evident in my head is neither Mama nor Mr. Whitmore. It sounded like...

Pip Squeak, you got to finish the co'se 'dat you laid out fo' yo'self. And hopes 'dat you end at a desi'able finish line. You see, we only know in part whiles we be in our earthly vessels. But we do learn 'de truth by and by. 'Dat is one of 'de promises.

The darkened figures of my mother and father left as soon as the voice spoke in my head. And I am so glad that they left. I can hear my grandfather's voice, but he has not materialized and I'm okay with that too. For his voice was always comforting.

"Why do they leave when you come?"

Cause darkness cain't stay when light shows up.

"Okay, Grandpa. So what else do I have to go through?" I asked the one person in life that I trusted the most. Still not able to see him and wishing I could, I see the clock says one-thirty now.

I cain't answer 'dat, Suga Ball. I can only say jus' go through. Don't stop in it, don't hang 'arind it too long an' fo' God's sake, don't get used to it till you cain't pull yo'self up out of it. It's jus' 'dose quick sands of life 'dat you got to stay strong through. And 'dat's if you survive where you sunk in a bit.

“Grandpa, will I survive this that I’ve done to myself. I can only lift my head up a little bit. I’m covered in my own bowels, pee and throw-up. I know that my body is shutting down and there is nothing I can do about it.” I had to ask. But there was no answer.

The phone on my nightstand is ringing again. “Who is it? What do you want?”

It’s fading fast...

1985

Chapter Nine

“Hey, Simone, would you like to go to the dance in the gym with me tonight?”

Oh Lord, it’s Hakim, Mr. Star Quarterback. I ain’t even interested. He’s cute and all, but damn. I just wish he would go on about his business. I just want to get my lesson and finish out my junior year. I got one more year here and I just want to be left alone.

“How you doing, Hakim? No, I got a sociology test next week that I really need to dig into.”

“Girl, please. You acing that sociology class. Couldn’t you use a break from FVSC business for one night?” Begging is not becoming on this dude.

“Yeah, but how do you think I ace the class? I study.”

“Aw, come on, Simone. It’s gonna be a hella party and everybody who is somebody will be there.”

This dude never gives up. I don’t give a flying ass who will be there. Probably will be mostly jocks and saddy girls anyway. That just ain’t my scene.

“Hello? Simone?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” I blew. Hakim has been bugging me to go out with him since we started our first Spanish class together. Six foot and fine, but he been known around campus as the hit em’ and dismiss man.

“So what’s up? You going or what?” Then his voice got babyish, “If you don’t go with me I’ll be so sad. Don’t you know you ‘bout the baddest bit’ ... chick on campus?”

“Oh, Hakim. Quit lying. You done had the baddest bitches on campus. I ain’t trying to be in the running with yo’ lil’ debutantes and cheerleaders.

“Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to say that. But would you please go with me? I’ll come through the dorms and pick you up around eight o’clock and I promise if you don’t like it, we can leave and find something else to do.”

Apprehension is my first instinct, but I’m so tired of telling him ‘no’, I don’t know what to do. “Okay, man, damn! See you at eight. But if you are a minute late, you may as well call Becky and ‘dem to carry as your arm candy. Now, bye.”

Hakim is right about one thing, though. I am acing my sociology class and really don’t have to study. It just might turn out to be an okay dance.

Just as I expected. Light-skinned girls with long, processed hair, tight sweaters and skirts showing the bottom half of their butt pones. All of these fake asses crowding up on some extra buff jock from the football, basketball and baseball teams. They have no self-respect and no respect of which athlete they could put their hooks into. I knew I shouldn’t have come to this.

“Well, Baby, you having a good time yet?” Hakim spoke in my ear over the loud music as he held on tight to my waist. He held on so tight he crumpled my cotton button down collar shirt and was damn near pulling it up out of the top of my second-hand Gloria Vanderbilt jeans.

“Hakim, I ain’t trying to be a party-poopers or anything, but I don’t think this is my crowd. I mean, look at these girls.”

Hakim looked around and answered me with the dumb jock look on his face, "What you mean? Ain't nothing wrong with these girls. Hell, you fit right in."

"Well, they ain't my kind." I am getting rapidly aggravated.

Hakim loosened his grip on me. "And what kind are they?"

"You know, the fake kind. Waiting for their chance to get with any ball player in here. Look at them. Wiggling their asses all up on any dude that will feel. Damn near 'bout to kiss any boy that she can get her face close to and flinging their hair like it is a guy catcher or something. All just fake to me."

Hakim turned me completely a loose, which I am glad that he did, and took a step back as if I was some new plague inhabiting his space, "Bitch, you thank you too good or something? Look at you. You just like them. Red boned and flinging hair."

The heat from Hakim's words put me on a guard that I hadn't been on in a long while. The threat in his voice made me hunt for the door.

"Okay, Hakim. I'm leaving. I'll get a way back to the dorms." I informed him and hoped that he didn't sense my nervousness.

"Oh, no hell you ain't."

I try one more time, "Thanks very much for inviting me and I'll catch you in sociology class, okay?"

Unbeknownst to me my penny-loafed feet suddenly slid backwards. Hakim has grabbed my arm and is pulling me toward the locker rooms in the gym.

“Somebody need to bring you down a notch, Missy. I think you must think you betta’ than everybody up in here. But you ain’t nobody and you should be glad that I even want to be seen with you.”

“What?”

The pulling stopped long enough for him to get up in my face. “You heard me you lil’ uppity bitch. You need me to kill the noise on your weirdness. Always walking around campus like you some nerd or something. Want nobody deal with you ‘cause they think you ‘bout half crazy. Running to class like the police behind you or something. Why you be running anyway, huh? What’s wrong with you?”

“I want to go home, Hakim! Turn me a loose!”

The fear that Hakim is evoking in me is prompting my mind to wonder and the doors to where he is pulling me is starting to look like the doors that are illustrated in my Alice in Wonderland book. I’m trying hard not to escape in my mind, but these unsettling feelings are rising up in me like a tidal wave.

“I got something to show you. Now come on.”

As I hold on to the present with everything in me, everybody at the dance has stopped dancing and is starting to stare. The looks of contempt and hatred shows on all of the girl’s faces and the guys have a look of conquer while they hold on to their human night caps dressed like ladies of the evening. It is absolutely obvious that they are not going to intervene and stop him from taking me out of the gym. I can’t believe that they are just gonna stand there and watch this.

“You lil’ country, uppity bitch!” And the pulling has started again.

“Turn her loose, Hakim Ballard. Or face expulsion.”

Hakim turned us around to face the voice of reprimand. My indignant captor doesn’t seem affected one bit, but I can’t believe whose voice it is. I am sure that I am seeing things.

“And who gonna expel me? You? You just a student-want-to-be-teacher. You ain’t got no jurisdiction up in this school.”

“You right, Hakim. Expulsion ain’t my department, though I know people who can handle that, just as you do, Mr. Star Athlete. But that ain’t what you got to worry about from me. Now turn her loose or...”

“Or what, mutherfucker? You want this ole’ half white, nerdy, uppity bitch? Well you want be having a piece of her tonight. This here is my date. And I’m the best athlete to grace the grounds of Fort Valley State College. You got it Mr. Student Teacher.”

“Lee-Roy, what you doing here?” I’m angry and it comes from all of the years of avoidance and abhorrence coming out full force. How dare LeRoi be the one to take up for me. And why? So that he can take advantage of me himself?

“Oh, yall know each other. My bad, man. This yo’ piece. I’m sorry. I didn’t know, man,” Hakim’s tone holds a taste of condescension that makes me feel like a slab of meat being fought over by wild dogs.

“Yeah, I know her, but you wrong man. The lady said that she wanted to go home. Those doors say, “Locker Room” and I’m sure that you know the spelling of at least that since this is where you spend most of your time.”

LeRoi shot back the airiness that Hakim had dealt him. I'm not so sure that I appreciate it from someone who had caused me such pain and fear. I'm too afraid to speak up for myself in confusion that I could make matters worse, but I don't feel like I am safe either way. I have to get out of this show of strengths between these two alpha males. I am not gonna be anyone's prize.

To my own shock, the blow to Hakim's stomach, missing his manhood that I was aiming for must signify my fear and defense that I developed over the years. I barely feel the punch to my jaw that knocked more of the taste from my mouth than my mother had ever done. I see stars and hear ringing in my head. I'm not gonna be conscious for long...

It's LeRoi Harris.

I'm out.

Oh my God. I had forgotten all about that dance when LeRoi came to rescue me from Hakim Ballard. As I recall, LeRoi called for an escort to help him get me back to my room and had a campus nurse look me over and stay with me for the night to make sure that I didn't have a concussion. The only emotion I can pull up is that I didn't understand why he had been there anyway and why he felt the need to defend me. I remember wondering who was going to defend me from him.

“Hakim was expelled and lost his athletic scholarship. I remember that now. Why didn't I remember that LeRoi had come to my rescue? Saying this out loud sure does make it more real.”

About a week later, I remember that it was posted all over *The Telegraph* that Hakim left school after a binge of drinking and pot smoking and ended up running into the iron gate of the front entrance to the school on State College Drive. He was killed on impact.

“I have to breathe. This is too much for me to remember at one time.”

No, it's not. You needed to remember that I existed and that all things worked together for your good.

“Hakim? Hakim? Now I'm hearing you? Oh Lord, just let me die already.”

I can't stay awake anymore. Lord help me.

1985

Chapter Ten

Exhaustion is taking over. I can't feel my breath, again. I can't feel my chest rise and fall. Numbness is starting in my feet and my vision is blurred. My head is woozy and disoriented. I have to be going crazy. I'm already regretting that I took the medicine and only wish that I had thought this out a little better.

"Pip Squeak, hold on. It's gonna be okay." Grandpa Sonny's voice is coming through, again. If he is here, I wouldn't be able to see him because my eyes are flipping somersaults.

"Grandpa, I'm so dizzy. I feel like I'm fading away."

Even my tears have disobeyed my emotions and failed to fall anymore. My eyes feel like there is dry dust covering over where moist used to be.

A mocking laughter sounds so disrespectful to me. Nothing else works, but my ears are on full volume. "Mama!"

"It is me, ma'am. See, you ain't so good after all," A dark skeletal figure hovered over me, "You going to hell jus' like ere'body else. You thank you so perfect. But, look at you. You done tried to kill yo' stupid ass self. Did MaDea tell ya 'dat people who commit suicide go to Hell, too, since she kept you so in 'de church?" The laughter resounded even louder through the room.

"Vivian Lee, leave her alone! Now!" I have never heard Grandpa get onto Mama like that. "Rest, Baby Girl."

“Simone. Simone. Are you okay?”

I sat up abruptly, “Lee-Roy. What are you doing here? You can’t be here you know?”

“You don’t remember? Hakim punched you until you passed out. And then I had an escort to bring you back to your dorm. The campus nurse checked you out and I assured her that I would stay with you until you came to. Man, if I hadn’t have caught you, I would have beat the brakes off that kid.”

“Why? Why would you beat the brakes off of anybody for my sake?” I can’t help but squinch my eyes in confused concern.

“Simone, we go a long way back. We were stupid kids together. Even though you are younger than me we grew up together. Why wouldn’t I look out for you? I mean, your grandma lives right next door to my grandma. We like family, girl.”

“But you trying to defend me from Hakim. You did ‘way worse than he could have ever did to me.”

“What are you talking about, Simone? I have never intentionally hurt you.”

“Oh no? It was intentional and boy did you hurt me. You hurt me bad on that railroad track that day. You called me names and you... You...”

“Huh? Wait a minute. Railroad tra...?” LeRoi couldn’t face me anymore.

“Yeah, that day you raped me. Remember? I was only twelve-years-old.”

“Raped?”

“Yeah raped! Don’t look so stunned that I remember! Don’t you?” Flames came from my words. “And I did get pregnant! You said I wouldn’t. And you called me and my mama all kinds of names. I didn’t understand it then, but I understand it now, you ole’ black son-of-a-bitch.”

“Oh my God, Simone!” Remembrance whacking LeRoi in the face, “I do remember. I just thought... I am so sorry, Simone.” LeRoi knelt down on the side of my dorm bed. Tears falling freely from his dark eyes and disdain washing over me with every drop of his emotion. “Simone, I am so sorry. I was just a stupid little kid. I thought that all fast girls went to the railroad track. I didn’t know no better. I did a lot of stupid stuff back in the day. I never knew. I was a dumb ass lil’ boy who was acting so stupid. Oh my God, how stupid!” LeRoi pounded his forehead, “Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!”

“Listen to me, Lee-Roy, you can’t be in my dorm room. I feel like I could kill you any minute now. Get out!” I can feel the anger rising and the flashback of that day. All the hatred that I had been carrying about that day is rising like the walls of the Red Sea.

“Okay, okay. Calm down, Simone. I can understand that you are upset. But you need to sit back down.” LeRoi was pulling himself from the floor. Probably at the fact that I was now trying to stand up and was slightly staggering. I wanted to get to him so that I could slap more than the shit out of him.

“Oh, Negro, you don’t have a clue of how upset I am right now. I am so upset...,” my head is beginning to pound. My lunch is on the verge of betraying me.

“Simone! Simone! Oh my God!”

“Hello...Nurse Willie Mae, please send an ambulance to Wildcat Commons, Dorm Room 360. It’s Simone Harvey again. She just passed out!”

“Wait, why are you calling somebody to my dorm room, Lee-Roy?” I can hear my voice.

“Hi, my sweet, grandchile.”

“Whew! Grandma? Where did you come from?” I was thinking that I was still in my dorm room back in college.

“I’ve been here ‘de whole time. I can see ‘dat whenever you thank about Elizabeth’s boy, Lee-Roy, you get so upset. Can I sit next to you?”

“Yeah Grandma. Go ahead. I’m sorry I can’t hug you. My arms have stopped working. And be careful. I’ve kind of messed up my bed.”

“It’s okay, Honey. Even if I sat right atop it, I couldn’t feel nuthin’ noway. Plus, I have changed your boo-boo diapers so much when you was a baby ‘til it don’t even matter. But, Sweet Baby, we need to talk. You have got to fo’give. Because you been carry’in yo’ feelins’ ‘bout ‘dat baby, you block ‘dat boy out yo’ system.”

“Hey Squeaky.” Grandpa materialized suddenly.

“Grandpa, you may as well sit down next to Grandma. I can see a lecture coming on. And I really wish we could have done this when you two were both alive. I’m an old foolish woman now.”

“Thank you, Pippy.” Grandpa smirked. “What yo’ grandma is tryin’ to say is ‘dat you have got to clean yo’ heart, Baby. It’s a must. We ain’t saying ‘dat Lee-Roy was right in what he done to you all ‘dem years ago. But he’s a good boy. He was young and dumb.”

“But Grandpa,” a cough is threatening my ability to speak, “he should have been punished. Just like Mr. Whitmore should have been punished.”

“Honey, don’t you dare thank one minute that Lee-Roy or Sam, for ‘dat matter, got away wit’ anythang. The difference is ‘dat Lee-Roy is still on ‘dis side wit’ you. And well, Sam, ‘dat’s a whole ‘nother sto’ry for a different book.”

“I hear you, Grandpa, but what happened so detrimental to LeRoi’s life that would equate to his taking something as precious as a young girls virginity before she was ready?”

“Thank about, Pip. He didn’t even take stock of his actions when yall met back up at ‘dat ole’ fancy college yall went to. You don’t know if he had a hard time living with himself ‘bout what he did to you. Looks like he had to go into his own place to fo’give hisself and move on. So, he pro’bly pushed it out of his mind and tried to make sense of it. An’ yall was still jus’ a bunch of kids. So, how did he pay for it, you might ask? He has had to live wit’ som’thing unthinkable for a very long time.”

“Cause ‘dat’s ‘de kind of boy he is.” Grandma added.

“Well, he ain’t the only one who has had to go into their own place in order to deal with the stuff in their life.”

“Oh, Baby. We know. We know ‘dat you had ‘dat little Wonderland ‘dat you often would hide yourself in,” Grandma admitted. “Dere was times ‘dat I would come in yo’ room and you would be curled up wit’ ‘dat book. You would hole’ onto ‘dat book so tight ‘de pages started lookin’ all curled up and ole’. I didn’t know whatchu was doing wit’ it at ‘de time. You had had ‘dat book for years. Ever since you was able to read. Nobody could have got ‘dat book away from you if they tried.”

“Well, we got to go for a time. We will see you again, soon. Listen to yo’ Grandpa Sonny. He’s always knowed best.”

Feeling my life seeping away from me, “Grandma, is there any way that you and I can have a talk? Really soon? I mean, without Grandpa? There are some things I can’t seem to put my finger on about my life.”

“Sure, Honey. You rest a moment and I’ll be back.”

“We love you, Pip.” It’s obvious my Grandpa is never far away.

There’s that phone again. It’s 1:08 in the morning. Who could be calling me? There is really no one left who cares enough to call me this time of the morning. My grandparents are angels. My parents are demons. And I don’t have any real friends. Right now, God is all I got. So who is ringing my phone? And why at this time of the morning?

The phone again.

And again.

Not again?

It’s 1:15 a.m. I know Suzy is sleep. She will let anybody know that she has to get her eight hours of beauty rest.

“Maybe she had a date and is just getting home. Well, naw, that ain’t it. She promised that she wasn’t going to talk about LeRoi with me.”

I have to admit, though, Suzy has been my one true friend. I never told her everything about my life, but what she knows she still loved me. She loved me through the craziness. She loved me through the depression. She had my back when I started my job and was being

harassed by my boss. She made sure that she kept me close when I had to bury my grandmother and take care of a mother who hated me and ultimately had to bury. She kept me from going down that rabbit hole a few times, too. Even in her wild and crazy life she never was far away. I guess that means that I do have at least *one* friend.

1986

Chapter Eleven

“Hi, Grandma Bonny.” Her presence must have waken me. For her ghostly existence was not apparent.

“Hey, Baby Cakes. You wanted to talk?” Her aura is as bright as her welcoming face.

“Yes. Grandma. Did Mama and Mr. Whitmore ever meet up, again? She was so counting on him coming back.

“Girl, yo’ mama was thrown into mental sickness after Sam Whitmo’ did what he did to her back in those days.

“*MaDea, you don’t go ‘round telling my business to this...to this...*” Mama’s voice boomed throughout the room. The walls shook, but Grandma didn’t appear intimidated at all. I’m shocked out of my mind.

“Close your eyes, Baby. Let yo’ Grandmama take you away.”

I can still hear Mama’s ranting, but it can’t compete with this euphoric peace coming from my Grandma’s voice and my fading away from the present.

“*Well, hello Bonny.*”

Grandma is standing next to me, but she is also lying in a hospital bed at The Medical Center. I can smell the disinfectant that seems to be a heavy inhabitant all its own. The mixture of Mr. Whitmore’s Old Spice cologne gave the atmosphere a smell of Clean Linen Clorox

Bleach. It's funny because I remember this day like it was yesterday. I had just graduated on the lawn of Fort Valley State College with a bachelor's degree in English on a beautiful May day. Grandma wore her flowered funeral dress with the matching hat that she'd found at the Goodwill. She was so proud of her outfit. You couldn't tell my grandmama she wasn't the sharpest thing there on that day. I could tell that she was proud as I focused my eyes on her while making my valedictory speech. She didn't let my mama's scowled face, sitting next to her, mess up her gratified demeanor of me holding the highest honor of my graduating class.

Exactly a month later, Grandma sat on her front porch, after dinner, to let her food digest, she'd said. After I'd washed the supper dishes I stepped out and found that my grandma was sitting there without rocking her normal pace. I called the ambulance after she wouldn't answer me.

This day was definitely that day because I had braided Grandma's hair and I hadn't taken her wedding band off of her finger yet. If I remember correctly, I'd stepped out of the room for a moment. The yellow and white carnations from the church are sitting on the window sill. Mr. Whitmore is holding the pink roses that I remember sitting next to them and I wondered who had brought flowers and didn't put a name on them. This day is etched in my memory with permanent ink. This is the day that Grandma Bonny died.

I didn't realize that Mr. Whitmore had come to see Grandma. There she was. Lying there with tubes down her throat to help her breath. And here he was standing over her like he was glad to see that she was in that state. He had to have been floating in gloat that my grandma was unconscious and couldn't reek any havoc on his life.

“I heard ‘dat you weren’t feeling too well and wanted to come see ‘bout you.” The condescension in his voice was wearing me thin. Not to mention the sneer on his smug face. “Oh, Bonny Jean, you know I got a soft spot for yo’ family. Especially since ole’ Sonny Boy passed away.”

How dare he mention my grandpa? I now know that he had not been very good to my grandfather, either. The only thing Mr. Whitmore ever gave Grandpa was that Chrysler he drove. And that was the car that he’d raped his daughter, my mama, in. It was all just a front, obviously.

“Well, Bonny Jean, you know I been sending money to you for Vivian Lee’s little...well, the chile’.”

I looked up at my ghostly Grandma. Of course her face was different from how she laid in that hospital bed.

“Grandma, if looks could kill and you were awake, you would have killed that man that day, wouldn’t you?

“I hate to say it, Sweet Pea, but probably. But I could hear him and he made me mad as fire.

Mr. Whitmore’s voice continued his taunting.

“Bonny, I just wanted to make sho’ ‘dat it is understood ‘dat since she is 22-years-old and done grad’ated from college, I don’t owe yall no mo’ money.” The eyes that I’d seen in my room were dancing all over Grandma’s face. “‘Dat gal should’ve been workin’ instead of

wasting time in 'dat ole' Negro school. But you insisted, Bonny Jean. I can finally be rid of yall ole' worrisome niggahs."

Mr. Whitmore would have never said those words if Grandma had been coherent. It was evident that he had something to get off his chest and he wanted to make sure that he could without any repercussions or reprimands.

"Oh, we worrisome now, Sam? And niggahs on top of that?"

I can tell that the smile on my Heavenly grandma was one that was obviously aware that my Mama would walk in just as Mr. Whitmore was disrespecting us all.

"Viv-Viv-Vivian. How you been, girl?"

The sound of pain that Mr. Whitmore screamed out when Mama jumped at him was so loud and strong I'm not even sure of what I'd just witnessed. I want to go to Wonderland, but Grandma must not be letting me go.

There's blood. There's lots of blood. Mr. Whitmore darted for the door with Mama on his track.

"Where is the blood coming from, Grandma?"

"Yo' mama done hauled off and cut 'de man, Baby. You know Vivian Lee carried 'dat box cutter. It was jus' a matter of time 'fore she used it. I jus' made sho' she didn't use it on one of us," Grandma giggled.

"What did Mr. Whitmore do after that? He just left? Did he tell a doctor or call the police?"

“He jus’ left. He didn’t want what Vivian Lee could put on him. ‘Dat’s why you never saw him. ‘Den agin’, you did pass him in the hall. You jus’ didn’t recognize him.”

“I don’t remember any man walking down the hall holding his arm like that.” I really didn’t.

“Yeah, Sweetie. I know. You were a lil’ preoccupied wit’ ‘de fact ‘dat I was sick,” Grandma’s shadowy face changed to sadness. She didn’t like to see me unhappy. I’m glad to know that she carried the love with her and that I could still feel it.

“Oh, but I do remember at your fun...”

“Yes, Baby Cakes. Sam was at my fun’ral. He sat in ‘de back of ‘de church. I watched him ‘den and I could tell ‘dat he was still a lil’ leery of letting you and Vivian Lee see him. An’ he should have. Vivian Lee never let it go. She always kept in her mind ‘dat Samuel was gonna come fo’ her. So, even in her craziness, she still waited.”

The door to my dying grandma’s room opened. Wow, it’s me and Suzy Mae.

“Si, how’s yo’ grandma doing? Is she getting any better?” Suzy Mae, the best friend I ever had, spent the night with me while I spent the last night with my grandmother.

“No, Suzy. The doctors have given up on her. They say she won’t make it through the night.” Tears rolled down my faint face as I witnessed a part of my life that I will never forget. The thoughts of how I felt that day flooded my being. I knew then that I had no clue of how I would continue life without her. How I could ever feel safe and loved again. Everybody who I could vouch for loving me and always having my best interest were now gone and the pain of

that day was still deeply rooted in my existence. I still longed for the life energy that my grandparents gave me.

I just can't watch this anymore. I can't help but feel the day that my life virtually ceased to mean much to me.

"Grandma, we are at the church," taking an inventory of my surroundings. We have left the hospital and are now present at my grandmother's homegoing service four days later. The room is just as I remembered it. Grandma's brother and sister, Aunt Mabel and Uncle Chris sat next to Vivian Lee who sat next to me on the front row. A boat load of cousins are sitting three rows behind us. Suzy Mae, LeRoi, Ms. Elizabeth and all of Grandma's friends who were still living filled the small sanctuary of First Baptist Church. I want to console myself of the emotion that I knew was racking my body, for I will never forget how broken I felt that day. Many of my professors from Fort Valley State College were in attendance while the FVSC Spiritual Choir sang a rendition of "Just As Soon As I Get There". Even Mama was showing her share of mustered emotion.

"Grandma that was a hard, hard day for me. As you can see even Mama shed her share of water weight."

"Sweet Pea, I never doubted 'de pain 'dat you was feeling and I never doubted 'dat Vivian Lee loved me in her own way. She jus' couldn't work through what happened to her. I wanted to kill Samuel fo' what he did to my baby. I didn't even care 'dat he had done 'de same thing to me. I jus' wanted Vivian Lee to be able to fo'get 'dat awful thang. But 'dat never happened."

“No, it did not. And she never forgave me for being born. I had heard that Mr. Whitmore had passed away a little while after you did and boy did she really hate me then.”

“Baby, Vivian Lee didn’t hate you. She hated Vivian Lee. You jus’ reminded her of her pain.”

“Grandma! Oh, Grandma! My grandma, gone!” LeRoi and Suzy was running toward me, now. I was heading for the casket one last time. And it was obvious that I could have possibly fell over in the coffin with Grandma. The usher handed LeRoi a Kleenex for him to wipe my face. The funeral home director closed the lid on the casket after I witnessed LeRoi caringly helping me to my seat. I could see myself crying greatly, while my mama just sat there and looked at the pink box that Grandma had picked out for herself. I was reliving the moment. I can remember being so mad at Mama and feeling like it was all her fault that the one other person in this world who loved me was gone. But I didn’t remember LeRoi tending to me like he had. I could only remember the feeling of permanent loss when that lid was lowered. My heart held on tight to the illusion of Grandma, standing next to me, and it was as if I could feel her hold me tightly back. I felt comforted.

1989

Chapter Twelve

I'm still here?

This bedroom, that I paid so much money to my best friend Suzy Mae, the self-proclaimed interior decorator, turned detective, feels like it's closing in. The white and gunmetal curtains that I carefully chose are beginning to fade. The white down comforter is beginning to feel as dingy as it is beginning to appear. Suzy thought that a Willenburg linen upholstered sleigh bed would fit my style so I went with it. The grayish brown dresser with the matching chest of drawers couldn't be a better match. But for some reason, all of my linen, the beautiful grey and white shag rug encircling my bed and all of the various and sundry ceramic vases in the room cannot change the dread that is forming over a place that I once searched for peace in.

My mind won't release reliving Grandma Bonny's funeral. The day that my life just didn't seem to matter anymore. Mama was determined to fight me for the house and when she finally realized that I wasn't budging she decided to move in. All on the premise of her squatters rights. What I truly believe is that she didn't have anywhere else to go. The apartment complex where she was living had sent several letters of non-payment of rent to Grandma's house. When told that management was wanting their rent she just answered, "Dey can kiss my ass. 'Dey can't put me out." Well, she was wrong. They *had* put her out of the little one-bedroom duplex, is what I later found out. And of course, I later became her guardian for whatever she did and wherever she went. She didn't know how to act like a respectable human being and I was always picking her up from some undesirable location.

Dr. Newberg called me and told me that Mama was suffering from Paranoid Schizophrenia. And that her health was not good. She said that Mama's smoking and excessive drinking along with the fact that she'd had high blood pressure since I was born was making her a very unhealthy person. I knew that she'd been a chain smoker, but I never heard Grandma say that she suspected that Mama had any other problems with her health outside of that nasty smokers cough. I guess that's enough.

I had to let Mama move in with me. We didn't have anybody else. And she would still find her way downtown to Grant's Lounge to drink and smoke her weekends away. Once she returned on Sunday night after being gone since Friday she'd come in like a freight train. I worked at the Cracker Barrel all day, every day with white folks looking at me like I was a disease, only to come home to a mother who made me feel like one.

The only time that we had a talk was when she would ask me for money after spending all of her disability check at the Lounge on weekends. The check wouldn't last much longer than two weekends and I would end up paying for the last two weekends of the month. God forbid if there was a fifth week in the month. Nevertheless, I would take advantage of that time because I knew that she would do just about anything to get more money. I'm just glad that Grandpa didn't leave a note on the house when he died so that my little waitress job could keep the house running.

"Oh, Mama. Your life was just a mess. What was I supposed to do with you? I was only 24-years-old, for God's sake. How was I supposed to fix what was wrong with you so that you could fix what was wrong with me?"

“Girl, there wasn’t no fixing me. And I damn sho’ what’nt worried ‘bout you being fixed.”

“Mama, you have really got to stop popping up and not showing yourself.”

“Bitch, I can do whateva’ the hell I want to do. I always could.”

“Mama, what is your issue? All I can remember is trying so hard to please you and do what you asked me to do. Why was that never good enough?” I am growing steadily hot with my mama’s excuses for being so nasty.

The sudden image of Mama is so beautiful. The Vivian Lee Harvey that would have been, “So you want to know what my issues are with you, huh?”

The tears that streamed down her face looks like lava from an erupted volcano. Where they ran, the skin seemed to open up. Mama is almost appearing at ease. Her silence is unnerving, but I just suspect that she is finding a way to blow up again.

“Simone, ‘dere was a time when I had a grip on myself,” she started, calmly. I also don’t remember a time she ever called my name. “Daddy, MaDea and I lived aw’right in ‘dose days. An’ ‘den Samuel Whitmo’ came into ‘de picture. MaDea used to work fo’ him down at Whitmo’ Hardware Store. ‘Den Daddy started working fo’ him and MaDea stayed home. But he was always ‘round. I noticed ‘dat he paid a lil’ mo’ attention to MaDea ‘dan he should...when Daddy what’nt around. At one point, MaDea started ‘voiding him an’ I didn’t quite understand why an’ Daddy didn’t seem to care. ‘Den one summer day, Mr. Whitmo’ caught me going ‘round Ms. Polly’s sto’ and...and...” It’s a shame that only in death Mama can tell her truth. I could hear the pain and disappointment in her voice and I want to ask God to change His mind about where Mama’s soul is residing.

“And then you came along. You...you...you lil’ bitch.”

Never mind, God.

My mind is screaming because I can’t push out the force of words that I really want to blow Mama away with, “Mama, you are going to stop calling me names and I mean now. Okay, I was born. I was born of no fault of my own. Samuel Whitmore raped you just like he did Grandma Bonny. Did you know that?”

“Of course I knew. That’s why MaDea hated me so much. She knew he was a good catch. But he wanted me and not her.”

“Mama, you are still crazy as all get out. I would suspect that you know exactly what happened and you just couldn’t handle it. What you have failed to realize all of these years is that it was no bodies fault but Mr. Whitmore’s. Mama, it was Mr. Whitmore’s fault. He hurt you both.” Tears are pooling in my ears. My chest hurts from the emotion that is coming from my stifled cry and I can feel myself wanting to fade off into a haze. I can see the top of the rabbit hole and I want out of it. I haven’t faded into Wonderland in a while. And I don’t want to revisit that place again. I had to grow up.

A tightening around my neck; I can’t breathe. Oh God, I must be dying for sure now. This burning heaviness in my chest feels like my chest is about to cave in. I can’t move. Oh God.

“Ma-ma.” The shadowy face of my mother is staring down at me with only her teeth gritted. I feel an icy fear of this monstrous version of my mother. Her ghostly hands are around my throat. A loud, deafening cackle rises from the throat of this evil entity while she throws her

head back and all I can see is a web of saliva covering her throat. A flat, wing-backed crowning is surrounding her head much like a playing card. And in each corner of her crowning are stamped hearts.

“You must die! Off with your head!”

“Mama! No! Get away from me. I will not let you take me back to Wonderland! I love you and as hard as it is for me to say this I have to. Mama, go back to Hell where you came from!”

I'm back in my room again. I fought...Mama?

*But I'm still here. I will forever be here. Even when you can only hear my voice.
Remember 'dat.*

Mama is in my thoughts again. It's almost as if she is creating them so that she can have a reason for showing up. I think it's me giving her life.

You think you know so much. You thought you was so special. And look at you. You ain't no betta' than me and Sam. You came into the world as a mistake. You brought a baby into the world as a mistake. You lived yo' life on the skirt-tail of MaDea and 'den when you had to do it on your own you did 'dis. And now, you will leave this world as a mistake.”

Maybe she's right. I have been just a huge mistake.

“Vivian Lee,” Grandpa's voice, “you shut up. You shut up now, and quit tellin' this chile' this craziness. Simone, don't you dare listen to 'dis mess Vivian Lee telling you. You was meant to be in 'de world. Yes, 'dere was some bad stuff in getting you 'dere, but you were never

a mistake. Forgive, Pip Squeak. See the good in your life instead of focusin' on 'de bad all 'de time."

"All these voices in my head. Mama, Grandma, Grandpa. I am even seeing them. Lord, what are you trying to tell me?"

"Pip Squeak, 'dere are always lessons in life. You have to get yo' heart right so 'dat 'de lessons don't miss you. 'Dat's what 'de Lord is tryna tell you."

"I know, Grandpa. Look at what I did to myself. I don't understand why I couldn't have decided to learn my lesson before I made such a drastic decision."

"Baby Girl, you been dealing wit' some stuff for a long time. You decided to end it all on a heart decision instead of a head decision."

"Funny. I have always been an emotional wreck going to happen, haven't I?"

"Naw, Baby Girl, you just got a big heart. An' I think dis is a good time to protek 'dat heart. De way to do 'dat is to focus on 'de good. If you always focus on 'de bad, thangs won't neva' get no betta'."

Grandma chimed in. Their love must have kept them close, "An' Sweetie, jus' know 'dis. I know 'dat yo' mama was broken. She was broken as soon as Sam did what he did to her. She didn't really love dat man. She didn't know where to put her love. She lost yo' granddaddy. And when 'dat thang happened wit' Sam, she didn't know what to do. He did 'de same thing to me. But I knew 'dat I had to keep my Sonny from killin' him and going to jail. I needed Sonny to be free to be wit' us. Seems like to me 'dere was no right or wrong thang to do from where we all stood. It was 'de only thang."

They are tag teaming the conversation. I know it is in an attempt to help me understand my own life through theirs, “’Dat’s why we been tryna get you to see somethin’ a lil’ dif’rent wit’ ‘dat Lee-Roy boy you keep holding yo’ life up fo’. I know it’s hard, Pretty Girl, but it ain’t doin’ you no good to relish on it. It’s kinda hard to know if you will ever get too many mo’ chances in life to fix some stuff. But it ain’t up to Vivian Lee to fix you. She made her decisions, here and in ‘de after. Yours is up to you.”

With the inability to hold my eyes open, I contemplate my grandparents’ words. Thinking and feeling completely out of control now, I find that my current situation is less important than healing myself of my woes. I can’t go on hating my mother or LeRoi. Did I just admit hating my mother? I *do* really love her, but I have to learn to love me, first. Whatever that means. And for however long I have.

1990

Chapter Thirteen

So what does it mean to love me...first? How do I start doing that? God, you have to show me how to appreciate me. Even with the fact that I may not live through this.

“Remember, it’s thru’ yo’ thoughts, Sweetie. The Good Book speaks ‘bout ‘de renewing of yo’ mind. Now, it says to not be ‘formed to ‘dis world so I would only think ‘dat it means to not be ‘formed by ‘de stuff all around you. But to new yo’ mind. ‘Dat means, Baby, think about ‘dose thangs ‘dat make you one. ‘Dat sho’se you bein’ taken care of.

“Okay, Grandma. I hear you. When was the last time I was being taken care of? Outside of when you did. I can’t think of a time. Oh, no. How sad. I can’t think of a time I was taken care of.

Well, maybe once...

Work was long and hard this day. It was a nice summer day and the Cracker Barrel was packed. The patrons were demanding and the flow of tips were steady and rewarding. I wasn’t unfamiliar with hard work, but it was so busy that I felt a little out of sorts.

Hoping that I could one day be blessed enough to get a job in my degreed field, I knew that I could only bid my time. I had to take care of Grandma Bonny’s house and Grandma’s daughter. My mama. Thank God the household bills were all I had to contend with. Even though Mama was a different story. So, I accepted my current situation.

My feet hurt. My back ached. I was feeling a little devalued with having to wait on tables to make ends meet instead of finding a satisfying job that fit all of the schooling that my Grandma had spent her money on. And there had been no man in my life to make me feel wanted, that I could speak of. Some came and all went.

“Simone, your food is in the window, girl,” Clarence, the cook, leaned into the window that separated the cooking bay from the prep area.

Clarence was the dark chocolate version of the actor, Cress Williams. Only Clarence had a dry Jheri Curl at the time. Always the gentleman with a welcoming smile and the slightest yet sincere touch on the arm as he passed by.

“I got it Clarence! Thanks!” I yelled back in the middle of rush hour.

The day continued on in that manner and I was so thankful that Clarence thought enough of me to make sure that my food didn't stay in the window too long. It was as if he could feel that my work vibe was off.

During clean up time, I found myself moving a bit slow. Clarence grabbed a broom and swept around my station while I filled the salt and pepper shakers on the table. He even grabbed a rag and wiped out the chairs after the bus boys cleaned the tables. I wasn't quite sure why he was being so nice to me, but I had to admit that it was well appreciated.

“Hey, Simone, what you doing after work? You got any plans?”

“Not really. Why?”

“Just wondering if you would like to come over and have some dinner with me. Seems like you could use a good friend right round and now.”

I don't know how he could tell. He was dead on it. Between loneliness, exhaustion from work and home and depression about all of the above, I hesitantly accepted his offer. I knew that Mama would be spending the weekend at the hole in the wall, so I didn't have to rush home if I didn't want to.

"Okay, Clarence. Sure. I can do that."

I followed Clarence to his nicely yet scarcely decorated bachelors pad after riding behind him through the drive-thru of the Kentucky Fried Chicken. He helped me get out of my car with his arms full of the food that he stopped to get. And even made sure that I climbed the steps to his apartment without any trouble.

We sat on the floor around his mahogany coffee table. I was a little quiet while I ate and Clarence watched me carefully. I could tell that he was preoccupied with what was going on with me to eat his own food. I only ate my food because I knew that I hadn't eaten anything all day and was beginning to feel like my blood sugar was getting low and causing me to feel loopy.

"Simone, I have to ask, because I'm so worried about you, girl. What's going on?"
Clarence's eyes squinted in concern.

I immediately started to cry in my attempt to disclose to him my life and those things that made it virtually impossible to live. Clarence carefully scooted around to my side of the table and placed me skillfully in his arms. Being that I'm only five feet two inches tall and he was every bit of six feet four inches tall, I couldn't help but feel safe and cuddled.

Lifting my head from his adequate chest, I tried again, "Clarence, you won't believe the things that I have dealt with and still deal with even up to now. I have a mother who is mentally ill and is not well both mentally or physically. She binge party's on the weekends and then

spends her week giving me all the hell she can muster. My grandmother passed away four years ago and I inherited her house. Well, my mother decides that she has just as much right to live in the house as I do. So she practically refuses to leave. The way that she treats me is a story for another day and why is even the more another story for another day. On top of all of that, I wait on tables and don't have time to find a job in my field. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm grateful to be working at the Cracker Barrel, but it sure would be nice if I could find the time to find me something that I'm more satisfied with."

I went on in a ramble, to tell him about being raped when I was twelve-years-old and how LeRoi kept popping up when I was in college as if nothing happened. I also shared about my mother and grandmother fighting before my grandmother died and how my mother never respected me. I even told him about being the product of rape by a white man that my grandfather trusted.

"Simone, if you don't mind me asking, where yo' man at, girl?" Clarence showed those super white teeth. With his darkness, his pearly chompers shown even the brighter. Just like my Grandpa Sonny's. I think he smiled in order not to offend me, which I wasn't offended at all. Embarrassed maybe, but never offended.

"I don't have a man, Clarence. I don't allow myself to have a consistent steady. Relationships just don't seem to be in the works for me."

"Why would you say that? You are an attractive girl. Absolutely beautiful."

I blushed. Clarence must have felt my discomfort, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so forward. I'm just speaking what would be obvious to anyone. I just want to know who takes care of you in your down times. Or at any time, for that matter?"

Not knowing what to say to that, I pulled from my embarrassment, “Maybe I should go.”

“Oh, no, Simone. You don’t have to go. I promise. You’re safe.”

I’m not sure how we ended up in Clarence’s bed, but we did. He gave me one of his t-shirts and even helped me get out of my clothes and into the shirt. Whenever he touched me, I could feel a twinge of electricity, but I was such a rookie to sensuality and wouldn’t dare give him any sign that I could possibly be willing to share intimacy with him.

I was left vulnerable with Clarence’s oversized t-shirt and only my black nylon panties. He affectionately placed me in his bed, put a sheet over me and left the room. I felt intoxicated with confusion and defenselessness. But I couldn’t leave at this point. I didn’t want Clarence to think that I was an immature person.

Clarence soon returned to the bedroom after I watched the lights go off as he closed his house down for the night. By now, it had to be around midnight. He came back into the room wearing a black wife-beater t-shirt and grey cotton shorts. He climbed into bed and turned me softly on my side. Unexpectedly, he spooned my body with his. I could tell that he would have liked to have had sex with me. His man part was evident between us. But he stayed a gentleman. He didn’t force himself or hunch or anything. He just laid very still. Our conversation continued.

“Are you okay, Simone?”

I didn’t know what to expect, but I answered, “Yes. I’m a little cold, though.”

Clarence jumped up immediately, not really trying to hide his erection, and got another blanket from the closet. He placed it on top of me and tucked it making sure that every inch of

the cover was touching me. He climbed back into the bed and got under the covers with me just as he had left me.

“Is that betta’?”

“Yes.”

Clarence laid his head in the crook of my neck and was soon snoring. I laid in Clarence’s arms not able to go to sleep for a long time. My mind just wouldn’t shut down. I didn’t want to disturb Clarence. He had worked hard and been nothing but a gentleman all day.

Finally, I looked over at the alarm clock on the chest of drawers, the only other piece of furniture in the room besides the queen sized bed that we shared and saw that it was 3:03 in the morning. I willed myself to sleep and finally dozed off.

I don’t remember dreaming. I only remember waking up, still in Clarence’s arms. It was around 9:00 am when Clarence stirred and we both had to work.

“Good morning, pretty.”

“Good morning.”

“How you feeling?”

“I’m feeling okay.”

“I’m sorry I fell asleep on you. Did you get any sleep?”

“I did get some sleep. And don’t you dare apologize for being tired. Yesterday was an intense day. Just, thank you for keeping me company.”

Clarence unfolded himself from our slumber position and came around the bed to stand in front of me. His Jheri Curl was flattened on the side that he'd lain on all night and he had a speck of sleep in the corners of his eyes, but he said something that I swore I would never forget.

“Simone, I just wanted to take care of you last night.”

Oh my, I'd almost forgotten about Clarence. I'm so glad Grandma reminded me to think of good things. Nothing was more rewarding than that very intimate and comforting night that I spent with Clarence. Never feeling violated and actually feeling sorry for the discomfort that Clarence must've been in lying next to me with a hard-on and doing nothing about it. He was a perfect gentleman and one that I would think that I could trust.

A job came through with the State Department and I never saw Clarence again. It was as if he was an angel who served the purpose of showing me the care that I desperately needed. I only wished that I had relaxed and allowed him to fully be the gentleman that he proved to be.

“Thank you, God, for sending Clarence back then and on that day. I hope that he is doing well and I hope that his life has been rewarding. People like him don't not have good lives even when they have hard times.”

1995

Chapter Fourteen

“Grandma, as much as I can think on those times when I got a relief from life, I still don’t quite understand why I feel as though I was the international outcast of the world.”

Grandma is once again sitting on my bed. Her hollow eyes, though they are transparent, hold the emotion of concern. Her presence is of support, not just in a physical aspect, but also in a spiritual sense as well. It just flows all over me.

“Baby, ‘de good times are ‘dose times ‘dat lift yo’ heart. ‘Den and truly ‘den can you see God. But you have to also see yo’ worth. Good times have a way of doing ‘dat. Don’t you think?”

I can feel what appears to be my grandma touching me. It’s almost as if her hand is resting on my chest, lovingly. That she is speaking not only to my ears, but also to my heart. The feeling that I used to get when she would take her time combing my hair. When she would give me a kiss on the forehead and her breath would smell of peanut butter on wheat toast and coffee. If I couldn’t trust anyone else, I knew that I could trust my grandmother.

“Yes, Grandma. I have to agree with you on that. I just don’t have many of those times.”

“Well, when you got pain, you can miss it sometimes. Pain can cloud or even cover yo’ heart so ‘dat goodness has a hard time reaching it.”

“I have missed it a lot. What happened to me as a child was the worse, but not much changed from how I’ve felt used and abused since then.”

“I know, baby.”

I want to tell my Grandma a lot of things that happened to me after she was gone, but something strikes me that she already knows. Like when I got the job at the State Department as a Program Manager, I could tell that there was some opposition to coming in as a kid straight out of college. Opposition on my part, that is. My eventual boss came into the situation being a thorn in my side. And I still took the job. I felt that this was the best I could do.

“Hello. Simone Harvey, is it? Have a seat, please.” I took a seat and a very handsome man in his early 40’s took a seat behind the desk where papers with my name on them were strewn all over it. “My name is Thomas McWilliams. I am head of the department that you will be managing if hired. First, let me say that I am very impressed with your grades. However, do you have any work experience outside of The Cracker Barrel? Or any community service since college?”

Oh, no. I can see that my experience was not what they would find as beneficial to the job at hand. But as I recall, you can sell yourself if you know how.

“Well, no, Mr. McWilliams. What you see on my resume is what I have done since college. However, in the food and beverage business there is a high level of customer service, problem resolution and time management. In collaboration with my grades, you can have all faith that I will apply those same skills to being the best program manager that you could ever have. I am an expedient learner so becoming acquainted with your company policy will be an educational and enjoyable experience, I’m sure. You will also see that dedication is a huge focus for me. And I look forward to joining your diverse team here at the State Department of Georgia.

“Okay, Ms. Harvey,” a pursed lip smack followed those words, “you have studied well on how to deliver in an interview. I’m impressed. But how bad do you want this job?”

What the hell? I wasn't expecting him to ask me that. How inappropriate.

"I believe that I gave you an adequate dissertation of what I am confident in doing. Yes, college does teach you how to interview, answer emails and conduct yourself in meetings, but they can't teach you what to infuse into those skills based on your own personal experience and personality. As far as how bad I want this job, I must say that building my career is what I am most interested in and I feel that this company has the profile that fits where I'm going and would be a great start to a fine relationship, if I may say so."

"Exactly, Ms. Harvey. Relations is what I'm talking about."

Did he just twist my words?

"Yes, a professional and non-hostile environment is always important in keeping the business area conducive to productivity. Don't you think, Mr. McWilliams?"

"What I think is that you are hired. And since I have been so gracious as to give you this great start, how about meeting me later for drinks so that we can further talk about 'relations'. What man wouldn't want to be seen with such a fine sister as you? Has anyone ever told you that you favor Halle Berry?"

As alluring as his deep, dark eyes, his fine hair with the precise cut, his shiny milk chocolate skin and his thin, Italian lips with snow white perfect teeth in between, he is still giving me the creeps.

"Mr. McWilliams, I do have to pass on the drink invitation." I watched him watch me like the Big Bad Wolf trying to get to the Three Little Pigs. "But thank you so much for giving me the

opportunity to work for such a prestigious establishment. Where should I report to finish the paperwork?"

"You can report right here." He pointed to what I would assume is his lap behind that desk.

"Oh, Mr. McWilliams, I do believe that I have to be somewhere soon," looking at my invisible watch. "I will find Human Resource and make sure that all of my information is accounted for." Getting to my feet couldn't happen fast enough. Getting to and closing the door behind me seemed like a tremendous effort.

I'm out, thank God.

As of Friday and before the ingestion of Ambien and vodka, I was still an employee of the State Department of Georgia and have had to avoid Mr. Thomas McWilliams' inappropriate advances on a constant basis for nineteen years. I have had to brush off 'accidental' ass tickles. I have had to hear and swallow unjust statements about the shape of my breast and I have had to see and go blind on winks and air kisses. All to keep my job.

"Grandma, I just couldn't stand to be called the names that I never grew accustomed to all of my life. Mama thought it was such a shame to have a mixed daughter, but she never asked what I had to go through being the one who is mixed. She didn't make life much easier for me either in how she treated me. No one knew or cared how I had to fight off the stares and the mean words that anyone could think of. All because I was different? Much less the degrading feelings evoked by my boss. But I had to be able to maintain your house. I refused to let this house get away from me."

“That’s quite hona’rable, Baby. I too can remember a time ‘dat wasn’t easy for at least ‘de black half of yo’ people. An’ I also know ‘dat it wasn’t a real good thang to be a product of both races. But I always wanted you to be sure of yo’self enough to rise above ‘de ig’nance. ‘De struggle was dif’reent fo’ me ‘dan it was fo’ you, but it was still a struggle.”

“Yes,” Phlegm is sticking in my throat again. “It was a difference in the struggles. And yes struggling is struggling. I just couldn’t deal with them like you did, Grandma. You had to deal with Mr. Whitmore raping you and then later on raping your daughter and having me. Why wouldn’t I feel like I’m the cause of everything that has gone wrong in my life and yall’s for that matter?”

“Oh, Baby, no. You are not ‘de cause of other fokes’ actin’ a fool. Samuel Whitmo’ was a fool well befo’ you was bo’ne. All you did was be bo’ne and ‘dat ain’t no body’s fault.

“Grandma, there are a whole lot of ways to tell people to not allow the words of other’s bother you, but there ain’t not one way to tell you how to do it.”

“I know, Suga. ‘Dat’s where God comes in. ‘Dat’s where thinking on dose’ thangs dat are good and hona’rable have to rise and fight ‘dem ole’ negative demons. You have to brainwash yo’self. I done told you ‘dis so many times.”

“Yeah, I know. Now, I’m at a place where I don’t have a choice but to either let my past send me to Heaven or Hell. I figured that I lived worrying about something and now I’m dying worrying about something.”

“You don’t have to, ‘dough. You can change ‘de way ‘dat you feel about yo’self in ‘de livin’ and do ‘de same before you go into ‘de after, but you sho’ cain’t harbor unfo’givenness in either world. You will be ‘de one to suffa’.”

“Why do you think that I had to be the one who has had to endure such hardship? I have seen people who don’t live their lives like nothin’, win the lottery and live the life that one would only dream of.”

Thinking about how I got my job and how I dared to think that I couldn’t do any better reminded me of the hardest part of my life. The times when I had to take care of Mama. When I had to go to work every day and come home to her harsh words. Times just kept dealing me a raw hand. It’s a wonder that I didn’t kill Mama at some point.

“Baby, yo’ heart is ‘way too good to think of killing yo’ mama.”

“Grandma, what good does it do for me to think or say a word when you can hear my every word or thought?”

“It does a lot of good, Sweet pea. I can keep you honest.” There’s that all-knowing chuckle my Grandma is famous for.

“Well, obviously that is necessary in this situation. I have held on to so much of my past that I’m not even sure that honesty was considered as much as it needed to be. There are so many areas that needed honesty in it. And I wish I could have addressed those areas throughout my life rather than have the truth hit me in the proverbial face in a time like this.”

“Simone,” Grandma never called me by my name, “Enough! I thank it may be a good thang ‘dat you findin’ ‘de truth now. When it really means somethin’. An’ honest, you always was. ‘Cuz you lived what you knew. I only wish you could have known a lil’ mo’ ‘bout yo’ gettin’ here so ‘dat you wouldn’t have had such a hard time being here.”

I think I just got chastised, but Grandma Bonny is right. I had put away embracing the good in my life and hoarded the bad. Constantly looking for and embellishing blame even for my own self-inflicted crap. Hakim was a menace to society, but he was always LeRoi in my mind. Mr. McWilliams is a jerk, but he was also LeRoi in my mind. I was so busy being a victim to the memory of my abuse that I couldn't see past it. I refused to seek help because that just ain't what black folks do. And what would people think of me. They would think I was lying, or a complete basket case or I would end up with a worse reputation than being a half-white, uppity bitch.

“Baby, you shawtchanged yo’self a lot by worryin’ ‘bout what fokes thought ‘bout you. An’ I know Vivian Lee didn’t help none, but I only wish I could have made things betta’ fo’ you.”

“I know, Grandma. You did all you could do and because of you I’m sure I would have ended up in a worse place if you hadn’t have done anything.

Her face glowed.

“Grandma? I know I am about to sound really childish, but I think I am gonna take a nap. Will you promise to be here when I wake? ”

“I promise. I will be here fo’ you for ‘de rest of yo’ life.”

2000

Chapter Fifteen

Sleep is coming on top of me like a feather, but on top of that feather is the brick of my mama. What is going on?

“Simone, get yo’ ass in here, gal.” Mama’s voice is booming like thunder and it has been a constant storm since she moved in with me five years ago.

“Coming, Mama,” I sure don’t feel like dealing with her. “What is it?”

“I need some money. I’m going down to Grant’s tonight.”

“Mama, it’s just the fifth of the month. Where is all of your money?”

“Don’t ask me where the hell my money is. You jus’ give me some of my mama’s money, bitch.”

She can still provoke a level of fear in me. Making me feel like I owe her something. I don’t know why she thought Grandma would have so much money left on her insurance policy after her funeral, but she always threw that up in my face.

“Look, Mama, there ain’t all that much money from the life insurance policy.”

“You a fucking lie. And who cares anyway. You got your lil’ uppity job. You got money, so stop playing, heifer.”

Anything to get Mama out of my face. I learned a long time ago that you can talk to Vivian Lee until you’re blue in the face, but if she wants something she is relentless. Even if she doesn’t

win, she is still gonna fight. So I went to my room that was always locked. My mama would steal the paint off of the wall if she had access to my room, and I knew it. Inside the old roll-top desk that was Grandma's and that I kept locked with all of my valuables, I pulled out forty-dollars.

Mama is sitting on the floor, blocking the door, pulling a string from the shagged rug that I'd had replaced from Grandma's old tattered Persian one, "Thought I'd make sho' you didn't try 'n run out the do' wit' my money, gal."

"First of all, this is my money. The money that I make from that job, remember. Second of all, I ain't got to escape from my own house. And the front door ain't the only door there is if I wanted to."

Mama's eyes could always bore a whole through me. But I am not gonna take down.

"Here's forty-dollars," I dropped down onto her lap, "You can get down to that Lounge if you want to, but this is all the money I will be giving you for the rest of this week."

Mama's sudden jump from the floor made me stumble back toward the cherry wood coffee table sitting in the center of the floor. It appeared that every muscle in her face was rearranged in order to give me the scowl of a life time. "Look here, you lil' bitch, you will give me money when I ast' fo' it. You got it?"

The slam of the door is always a welcomed sound 'cause I knew that my mama wouldn't be back tonight. Her money would surely run out, but she would find some unsuspecting fool to foot a few more shots from the bar. From what I hear, Mr. Grant would let those too drunk find them a place on the floor to sleep off their buzz. This must be where Mama spends most of her Friday and Saturday nights. On the cigarette ash floor of Grant's Lounge. And finally, I can get a good night's sleep without worrying about if she lifting everything out of my house or not.

“Simone! Simone!” a loud rap on the door has my heart skipping a beat.

*“It’s 3:00 am. Who in the world is this at my door?” I can’t get my fuzzy pink robe tied.
And where in the world is my other fuzzy house shoe?*

“Hold on a minute. Here I come.”

“Simone! Hurry up! It’s Miss Viv Lee!”

*“Mama?” I can see its Mr. Chilly Mike and Mr. Amos standing at the door. They have
always been my mama’s partners in crime. “Come on in, yall. What’s going on?”*

*“It’s yo’ mama, girl. ‘Dey done took her to Macon Hospital. She done messed ‘round and
had too much to drank,” Chilly Mike, explained. “‘Den she jest passed out and we couldn’t get
her to wake up.”*

*“I told her to stop. That she had had enuff,” Mr. Amos chimed in while looking around
like he was suspecting the cops to come out of the back of the house.*

*“Okay, thank yall for coming. I need to get dressed. How long has it been since she been
taken to the hospital?”*

*Amos can’t stop fidgeting, “The ambulam’ took her a few minutes ago. We ain’t had time
to do nuthin’ but run up here to get you.” Then Amos’s concern turned into recognition, “It’s been
a long, long time since I been in ‘dis house. Your Grandpa Sonny used to sit rat ‘dere in ‘dat big
ole’ lounge chair an’ Miss. Bonny had gave Viv Lee a lil’ birthday party. She had balloons an’...”*

*“Amos shut ‘de hell up. ‘Dis gul got to go see ‘bout her mama.” Chilly Mike was always
the more level headed out of the threesome of my mama, him and Mr. Amos.*

“Thank you, Mr. Chilly Mike,” I said, as I ushered them out of the door. “I’m sure I’ll see yall at the hospital.

I can barely get the door closed and locked when I hear Mr. Amos say, “Chilly, Viv Lee got ‘dat gul all wrong. She a sweet person. She pretty too. But she ain’t no uppity half-white bitch. Viv Lee alt’s to be shamed of herself, talking ‘bout her own daughter like ‘dat. ‘Dat gul ‘bout to go see ‘bout her ma. She a pretty gul tho’.”

“Amos, shut the hell up.”

Now if I was a bad person, I wouldn’t go see about my mama. I would let Mr. Chilly Mike and Mr. Amos go see about her. She better be glad I ain’t holding nothing against her enough to leave her in the hospital. But I’ll go on.

By the time I had parked my car in the ER parking lot, I received a call that Mama was on the third floor. She was admitted.

The disinfectant smell of the hospital hit me like a herd of buffalo. I didn’t so much as mind it, I just always wondered why they used so much of it. It’s like they just poured it on the floor and allowed it to evaporate.

Mama is in room IC314. Ironically, it is the same room that Grandma died in.

Mama laid there with an oxygen mask on her face. She appears asleep.

“Hello, may I help you?”

“Yes, nurse. I am Miss Harvey’s daughter, Simone.”

“Yes, Miss Harvey. I will get the doctor so that he can talk with you about what is happening with your mother. Her treating physician is Dr. Mulligan.”

Nothing else to say, I guess. Looking back at my mama, she looks really sick. There is no telling what Dr. Mulligan is about to tell me. It must be bad since the nurse was very short and has run out of here to get the doctor.

“Miss Harvey? I’m Dr. Mulligan.” The doctor extended a long mocha hand. Dr. Mulligan was very tall. About six feet at the least. His caring, chiseled face told me that he was not long out of finishing his residency because he looked so young and still had a comforting approach that a lot of doctors lose once they’ve been practicing for a long time.

“Hello, Dr. Mulligan.” I looked over at my Mama’s still body, “What’s happened to her?”

“Your mother has suffered what is known as a hemorrhagic stroke. She basically sprung a leak on the left side of her brain. The good news is that it’s probably not life threatening, but it will have its damages and complications. The bad news is that with it being on the left side of her brain, her speech will be added to her complications. She could possibly have some effects on her entire right side according to the damage. We just won’t know completely until she is up and about.”

The doctor placed his instrument on Mama’s chest and listened.

“Miss Harvey, if I may ask, what are your mother’s habits?”

“Her habits?”

“Yes. What does she like to do?”

“Doctor, if you are asking me if she indulges in recreational drugs or substances, I would have to say yes. She spends her weekends in Grants Lounge and she smokes cigarettes like a loaded train. Can this have had anything to do with what has happened? Will she survive this?”

“To answer your first question, absolutely. Lifestyle has a lot to do with it. And let me say this. The first two days are the most crucial. She could not survive the extent of her bleeding and it could show up within this 48 hour time period. She could also last up to thirty days. And this is when we will need you to help us monitor her. Of course a nurse would need to be utilized. And then she could last beyond that, hopefully not experiencing another one that could risk being worse. It’s really hard to determine life expectancy with strokes. It has a lot to do with Mrs. Harvey, too.”

“Of course. So she will be here for at least another 48 hours, then?”

“Yes. Will your father be joining her? I can speak with him if you don’t feel comfortable trying to explain what I just told you.”

“There is no Mr. Harvey.” That’s not a lie. “It’s just me and her at this point.”

“Oh, I see. Well, me and my staff will do all that we can to help you care for your mother. I also wish you the best and I hope for a complete recovery for your mother. I’ll check back on her in a few hours. Take care, Miss Harvey.” The beautiful hand with the clean fingernails and the perfect shape extended to me again. I was drawn to it.

I know that my journey with Mama is now going to change drastically. I’m not sure of how we are going to do this, but she will at least have to allow me to take care of her without any protest.

My how I thought that Mama would appreciate me for caring for her. She just didn’t have it in her anywhere that I would be there for her.

“Baby, Vivian Lee didn’t love herself. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“I know, Grandma. I get it now. It’s just that all of these memories still sting a little bit. And they are teaching me how to let go. Not necessarily let go the memory, but to let go of the sting.

“Baby Girl, you did all you was sposed’ to do and ‘den some. It what’nt yo’ fault if yo’ mama didn’t get it or receive it. Her h’art shut down and ‘dere what’nt nuthin’ ‘dat could open it back up ag’in.”

“I know, but it was still hard to deal with.”

“Of co’s e it was. Nuthin’ hurts worse ‘dan when foke mistreat you an’ you done nuthin’ but tried to be ‘dere fo’ em, Baby. It’s jus’ how ‘dis world works sometimes.”

2002

Chapter Sixteen

My thoughts are keeping up now. It's obvious to me that I have sentenced myself to death and that my mind is being altered by the drug and alcohol I took, but I can remember as clear as if it were just yesterday.

Mama survived her two days. She survived the thirty days. And she also survived four years. The nurse continuously came to see about her while I was at work. This was all courtesy of Dr. Carson Mulligan. He even started stopping by, from time-to-time in the first two years. He said it was to check on Mama, but I kind of felt that he was checking on me too. He made me feel so comfortable with him that I eventually told him my life story. At least from when I started living with my grandparents up until my mother's stroke. I even found out that he had gone to Fort Valley. I was 38-years-old and he had just turned 40 during my mother's recovery and when Dr. Mulligan, who insisted that I call him Carson, was stopping by quite often.

I was quite attracted to Dr. Mulligan. And he could handle Mama like no other. I even hoped at the time that we could have been more.

He would often bring lunch when he stopped by. We would meet up on my lunch break while Nurse Kate would leave to grab herself a bite to eat. I had made arrangements with my boss from Hell and I worked my butt off to make sure that he didn't try to find a reason for firing me if I got back from lunch a minute late.

Carson would often come back after his short shifts in the evening with dinner and sit with me for hours talking about practically nothing and everything. I loved hearing about his

home life. He told me about his failed marriage that didn't survive his tedious schedule, his four kids and how much he loved his career. He just seemed like a dream come true. I just couldn't figure out how we could ever be more with me having to take care of Mama. So he became my drop-in boyfriend, so to speak.

I also remember that I eventually sabotaged the one time that a man could have potentially given me the time of day because I couldn't seem to get past my pain.

"I am so surprised that I'd never bumped into you on campus in your undergrad years, before going on to Georgia Tech and beyond to get your M.D." I also remember that I was not a very sociable person during those days.

"Yeah, well, I am two years your senior."

"Carson, can I offer you some coffee or something?"

"No, but a glass of iced water would be great."

"Sure thing." Carson seemed to like my tan faux suede couch. He had been rubbing on it all evening and still was, as I got his iced water.

"Shi-mone! Git yo'ash in here!" Mama's voice with a slur. Her s's came out in an sh sound and she still feels the need to curse me.

"Simone, you go ahead," Carson yelled from the living room. "I can see about her."

"Naw, want Shi-mone! Don' wan' Doc."

“Well, you are gonna get me, Mrs. Harvey.” I never told Carson that Mama’s maiden name is Harvey and that she never married, so he still refers to her as Mrs. However, he stepped into her room to see what she needed. We put Mama in her recliner earlier and sometimes she just wants to bug me. Especially when she knows that Carson is in the house.

“Carson, I have your water.” I think I need to save him from Mama now.

“Thank you for the water, Simone,” coming back into the living room and gulping down the water. “I was so thirsty and I was also so grateful that you finally extended an offer for something to drink.”

“Oh, Carson, you could have been asked me for something to drink. You and Nurse Kate been coming to this house to care for my mother since she came home two years ago. You are like family now.”

“Well thank you.”

“Oh, what did Mama want?”

“She just wanted the channel changed and had dropped the remote.”

Carson’s second round gulps were even louder than the first. He must have really been thirsty.

“Simone, how long have you been here? I would think that you have done a lot of work on this house.”

“Yes, I have. I have pretty much been here all of my life. Like I told you, I came to live with my grandparents when I was around 13-years-old. But even before I lived here

permanently, I was over here all the time. Mama liked hanging out and Grandma didn't mind keeping me so that Mama could do her thang."

"Simone, you know something. I have been on your street so many times. I used to have a friend who visited his relatives on this street. I had a car back then and when we were in senior high school I would drop him by the house. I haven't seen him since I went off to do my residency in Atlanta. It would be great to see my boy again. He was a little rough around the edges back in those days. But after we became close friends he wanted more out of life. He got his lesson, went on to college and ended up doing well for himself."

"Oh, yeah? Sounds like a great guy." I took a quick sip of my tea. I am intrigued as to who his friend is. "Who's your friend? What's his name?"

"LeRoi Harris. You know him?"

I can't stop choking. My throat is closing off and I can't contain myself. The tea is not only draining from my mouth, but my nose, too. Carson had run to Mama's room and come back with a towel.

"Simone, are you okay?"

"Shi-mone, what hell wron' wit'you?" Mama's choppy voice.

I can't answer anybody quite yet. My airway is still clearing from the liquid I just swallowed. Carson looking at me with concern.

Finally able to answer and completely embarrassed, "I'm sorry. But you have to leave.

"I'm sorry, now? Did I say something wrong?" Concern falling from his voice and his facial expression.

How do I explain this to him? This is the one area that I stayed away from when I told him of how me and Mama got to this point after her stroke. I never had any intentions whatsoever of telling Carson about my background with LeRoi.

Anger is taking over where I was attempting to catch my breath, “Lee-Roy Harris raped me.”

“What?” Carson’s face showed that he was now in complete shock.

“Yeah. Yo’ homeboy raped me and I got pregnant. And then he had the nerve to go on with his life and become somebody? I have tried my best to get over this, but everytime I hear or see how he has turned his life around it makes me sick.”

As I’m talking, Carson looks toward the front door, obviously in deep thought.

“Hey...he mentioned something about this to me.”

“Oh yeah. What did the golden child have to say?”

“He told me that he was deeply sorry for hurting somebody when he was younger and that he hadn’t realized just how it had affected that person until...until...college. Oh, my God. He was talking about you!”

“Shi-mone, com’ here, gul.”

I’m going to ignore Mama. Curiosity is keeping me glued to my seat at this moment.

Moving closer to the edge of the couch and looking into my eyes, Carson continues, “Simone, I don’t think that he knew that you got pregnant. Have you ever had that conversation with him about what happened to you after the rape?”

“We met back up at Fort Valley State and I told him why I was so mean towards him. He acted as though he didn’t remember anything and that pissed me off. And yes, he even apologized. I thought, all those years, that an apology was what would make my life better, but I held on to the pain of it so long that I still wanted to blame him for why my life was so messed up.” Why am I telling Carson all of this? He is a stroke specialist, not a psychiatrist. “Carson, I think I have shared enough with you and you are more than welcome to leave now.”

“If that is what you want. But let me say this. LeRoi spoke highly of the person he hurt. He said that she was smart. That she was beautiful. But that she was broken. And that he was extremely sorry if he had anything to do with that brokenness. We talked about this a lot when he was doing student teaching at Fort Valley. I just didn’t know that you were right there on campus. He vowed to himself that he would make it up to you somehow. But I can see that you have not allowed anything to break this pain that you are willingly carrying. And that tells me that some of your pain is self-inflicted.”

“How dare you! He raped me when I was only 12-years-old and now it’s my own self-inflicted pain that I carry? You got a nerve.”

“No, that’s not what I said. The self-inflicted part is that you didn’t take care of yourself and have enough self-love to seek help, Simone. What LeRoi did all those years ago is an act that cannot be justified. But it can be forgiven. Especially if it is draped in Godly sorrow. And I believe that LeRoi has lived with Godly sorrow for just as long as you have lived with your pain.”

“So, Mr. Psychiatrist, what do you propose I do about my basket load of pain?”

I know that Carson's slight chuckle signified that he caught my sarcasm, "It's never too late, Simone, to get some help. If you don't, the self-mutilation will continue. And unforgiveness will eat you alive. I would hate to see that happen to you."

That evil laugh that Mama had been doing since the stroke sounded throughout my grandparent's house like a laugh from the devil himself, "Shi-mone stupi' as hell, Doc. She a lil' shlut. Shuld'a died wit' 'dat baby." Laughter even harder, "Now she gotta wipe my ash."

Carson's eyes searched for his keys as his breath is quickening. I know that I will never see him again, which is the story of my life, but I have to admit that it was really nice to have some male attention for the last two years.

"It's never too late, Simone."

He walked out. Gone.

2004

Chapter Seventeen

“Pip Squeak? Pip Squeak.” It’s good to see Grandpa.

“Hi, Grandpa. Did I doze off? I’m just so sleepy. The last thing I remember was when I met Dr. Mulligan and he would come by the house to see Mama and me.”

“Yeah, Sweetie. I think ‘dat ole’ Doc had a flame for ya’. You jus’ wouldn’t give yo’self a chance to be happy with a fella’.

“Yes, I know, Grandpa. I just couldn’t release LeRoi enough to feel worthy of any man loving me. The only man I ever allowed myself to love was you. I knew that you wouldn’t hurt me. I kept you alive in my heart after the rape and the baby. I guess I only allowed Grandma to love me, too, in order to hold on to you.”

“And ‘dat ain’t always a bad thang, Squeaky. At least you hel’on to somethin’ good in yo’ life. You had to with my Vivian Lee treatin’ you ‘de way ‘dat she did.”

“Boy, if that ain’t the truth.” Sleep is taking over.

“Dat’s why you should be pride of yo’self.”

“Shi-Shi-mone,” Mama’s voice is so weak. The new doctor, Doctor Steven Smith, said that she’d suffered another stroke. I had to tell him about the cigarette butts I found under the bed along with the bottles of whiskey nips. Mama never left the house unless Nurse Kate or

myself took her to the doctor. So those butts and nips had to have been left by Mr. Amos and Mr. Chilly Mike when they'd come by.

"Yes, Mama?"

"Ain't gone be rind mush' longa'."

"Mama, don't talk like that. You gonna be around for as long as the good Lord keeps you around." I straightened her sheets around her frail body.

"You alts' to be happy."

"Why would I be happy? You ain't going nowhere. You got to stick around to make my life a little more miserable." I tried to be perky and lighten the air.

"Naw. Tied' now."

"Well, why don't you take a nap? You have had a busy day. Nurse Kate took you to the doctor and you know how that can wear you out. Just take a nap."

"Shi-mone, you a pretty gul. Always was a pretty gul."

That's about the nicest thing Mama has ever said to me, "Well thank you, Mama."

"But hate you. Hate you jus' as mush' as you is pretty. And 'dat's a lot of hate."

Just when I thought we were having a moment.

"Mama, hate ain't something you should be focusing on right now. You should be focusing on all the things that you love. And if that ain't me, then find those things that are."

"Cain't. Hate you too mush'."

Mama's mouth is still in the shape of the last word she said. A long burst of air is expelling from her mouth as her chest sinks. The smell of death is in the air.

"Mama? Mama?" Her eyes are set in a stare. I don't see her chest rise anymore and I know that she is gone. My mama is dead. The tears are falling freely from my eyes and just as fast as they drop, I don't quite understand why. This is the one woman who has treated me worse than I have treated myself and the tears are uncontrollable. She has truly been one of the constants in my life and I can only guess that my sorrow is all about losing that one thing that I can always count on. Her hate for me.

For the first time in my entire life, I feel alone. Mama was the last evidence of my existence. Now she is lying in a casket waiting to be put in the ground and I'm feeling lost.

As I sit here among my distant family and friends, I wait until they call me to load into the big black limousine. I don't really feel anything though I see Suzy Mae's hand resting on mine. LeRoi is standing next to the couch with his hand on Suzy Mae's shoulder. Even Carson is here. But I am as numb as if I had been injected with some type of anesthesia.

"Simone," The funeral home director is helping me up to exit the house. "Do you have someone to stay in the house while we attend the services?"

"My cousin is just next door. She is willing to watch the house." LeRoi said.

I don't care who watches the house. I really don't care about much right now. My one and only child is dead, my insignificant daddy been left, my grandparents are dead and now my

forever heartache has died. That's all of who I am. And now they are all gone. So, no I don't care nothing about this house.

The church is surprisingly full. I don't see a face. I can only see the casket sitting at the front of the First Baptist Church.

Looking down at my mother, I see the face of beauty in death. The violet dress that I chose from her wardrobe is one that I always loved to see her in. I insisted that her hair be curled like the picture that I'd found of her when Grandpa Sonny had died. Her face appeared more relaxed and more radiant than I'd ever seen her. How amazing that she looked better in death than she had in life. Life had taken its toll on her and it could be seen when she walked around with it. But now her face looked at peace. Her insides could no longer influence her outside.

"Good-bye, Mama. It's been a long trip and this is it. I hope you can find love and rest now."

Suzy is sitting on one side of me and my cousins, Tyrone and his sister, Lil' Mama are sitting on the other. The lid of the casket is being closed. The choir is singing, but I don't know what they are singing. Reverend Pistons is preaching, but I don't know what he is saying. The funeral director is speaking, but I don't know what he is saying. I just know that Suzy and Tyrone are pulling me up and we are walking out after Mama's casket.

The rain is falling in a stream. It always seems to rain whenever I go to a funeral. It's a great thing that they have a tent over the grave so that no one gets wet. But people will still stand in the rain to say their final good-byes to the deceased. Reverend Pistons is speaking again and now they are handing me the roses from atop of the casket. The funeral director is thanking

everyone for coming on behalf of the family and the funeral home. And back to the big black limousine I am being led.

“Simone, Baby, you want something to eat?” When did Aunt Mabel get here? The church fellowship hall is full of my family and friends.

“No ma’am.”

“Yes you do. You need to eat chile’.”

“No, Aunt Mabel!” I don’t mean to yell, but I can’t help it, “I don’t want to eat. I don’t want to drink. I don’t want...”

The tears are flowing faster than they ever have and I can feel my body shaking with a chill that has nothing to do with being cold. My body is dropping and I don’t even care that I could end up on the floor. I just want this weight to leave me. I have never felt such emotion as this. And I can’t explain it to anybody.

LeRoi grabbed me up while Carson pulled a chair for me to sit in. My Aunt Mabel holds me and rocks me with that grandmotherly feel that her ample bosoms must have been attached to her body for. And I needed it. I needed it like I needed to breath.

“Cry, Baby. You just cry as much as you need to. Yeah, Baby. Yeah, Baby.”

I could feel that she has grabbed one of those old church fans to help me not to get so hot that I pass out. Her bosom is cradling me and for the first time today I feel like I can move on. And I am getting hungry.

“Aunt Mabel, I think I can eat now.”

“Okay, Baby. Yall get this chile’ somethin’ to eat. That’s a good sign. Hurry up and fix her plate.”

Suzy had gone. I saw when she left on the command of my aunt’s very stern voice. However, I didn’t think that she would bring me back a plate fit for a king.

“Girl, now you eat all of this food. You done got skinny as a straw.”

“Yeah, but I ain’t got to gain the weight all in one day, Suzy Q.”

“Well, it’s a start. Si, I’m sure glad to see you coming back to yourself. You had me worried for a minute.”

Suzy decided to sit down next to me and I can now share with her as much as I can. She is my best friend. “I can’t explain what I been feeling. As soon as my mama took her final breath, I started feeling alone. Like everything that was me had left with her. Not to mention that the last words that she spoke was that she hated me.”

“Oh my God, Si. The last words she said to you was that she hated you?”

“Yes. What do you do with that? She died with her mouth still pursed with the last syllable she spoke. And that was ‘much’. She said that she couldn’t love ‘cause she hated me too much.”

“Simone, I’m so sorry. But you know that Miss Vivian Lee always had this thing about you. Why did it bother you so this time?”

“I guess because they were her last words and I kind of had always hoped that deep down inside she really did love me and would tell me on her death bed. But she didn’t.”

“Well, I love you, Simone Trellis Harvey.”

“Thank you, Suzy Q. I really needed to hear that.”

“Well, don’t just hear it, Honty. Believe it and know it.” My sassy mouth friend always created her own words. And to laugh was great.

“Oh, LeRoi loves you too. He told me just this morning when we were getting ready to come to your house for the funeral.

“Lee-Roy Harris? Loves me?” I didn’t know what to do with that. “Wait a minute,” after I’d realized what she said, “When yall were getting ready to come to my house?”

“Simone, Lee-Roy and I are dating. And it’s serious.”

If I could sit up I would. I remember that I wasn’t very nice to Suzy Mae and LeRoi when I found out they were dating.

“Grandpa, you’re still here?”

“Yes. Pip Squeak, why did you treat yo’ best friend so mean after you found out ‘dat she was datin’ ‘dat Harris boy?”

“Grandpa, you know the answer to that question. I had a hard time forgiving Lee-Roy and I didn’t want him to be happy. Especially with my best friend. I couldn’t see past that. I still sometimes have a hard time.”

“Dis is what I mean by you have to fo’give. It’s very impo’tant ‘dat you do. No, it’s nec’sary ‘dat you do.”

“I know.”

2005

Chapter Eighteen

Forgiveness ain't never been my strong suit. Hell, how do I forgive other folks when I have a hard time forgiving my own self?

I could take care of my Mama like she hadn't killed my baby or treated me like crap. I could almost forgive Mr. Whitmore 'cause my mama thought she loved him. I could probably forgive Hakim for putting me through that horrible night when LeRoi saved me. He's dead now and never had a chance to do anything else to anybody. But I can't forgive LeRoi for something that he did so many years ago and have apologized every chance he has gotten. Especially since he is dating my best friend. I just wanted to make sure that Suzy Mae knew the whole story. I just didn't think that LeRoi had told her. Grandpa is right, though. I had been very mean when I found out that they were dating. I avoided them both at the repast after the funeral and ultimately for an entire year until I finally felt that I had some right to expose LeRoi for the rapist that I'd lived with all these years. Boy was I a mess:

It wasn't until a year later that I decided that I would finally speak to Suzy Mae. She'd called and left messages because I refused to answer her calls. The unfortunate part was that she didn't know why I was being so mean to her. Even if she did know what LeRoi had done when he was fifteen, she obviously didn't intend to disclose it.

On the anniversary of my mama's death, I finally decided to call to see if Suzy Mae would come over for tea...and some tea. I'd been avoiding her phone calls for a complete year, so it

was also a chance that she'd stopped seeing LeRoi and there would be no need to talk about him or that they were going hot and heavy and I would have to burst her bubble about him. I just didn't completely know what to expect.

"Hey Suzy Q. What you up to these days?" I didn't know how to talk to her. How dare I talk like I'd been keeping in touch all the while? If it was not received, she'd let me know. That's just how she is.

The phone clicked. Okay, she's mad. And she is letting me know that she is. I called back.

"Suzy Mae don't hang up I'm sorry I just wanted to invite you over for tea so that I can clear up some things." I was talking a mile a minute.

I can remember a silence hit the phone and I was worried if she was still there, "Hello?"

"Yeah, Si, I'm still here."

She called me by the nickname that she'd given me. That's a good sign that she still loves me. She's just pissed to the highest piss-tivity. And she has a right to be.

"Suzy Mae, can you come over, please? How about in about an hour?"

"An hour?"

"Yeah."

"No!"

I don't quite know what to say so I'm quiet.

"Oh, girl, give me an hour and ten minutes. I can't just let you have your whole way."

Suzy could probably tell that I had an exaggerated but true smile in my voice, “Okay. Good. Whatever you say. I’ll see you in an hour and ten minutes.”

Suzy arrived in an hour like I’d said in the beginning. She just couldn’t let me tell her what to do. In her mind, I’m sure she still felt that she didn’t let me have my way.

“Hey Suzy.”

“Si-mone.” Oh, she laying it on thick.

“Would you like a cup of Ginger-Lemon tea?”

“As long as it’s the Lipton kind.”

She knows that’s all I buy. Now she’s really being extra and I answered, “Absolutely.”

I returned with the tea and some slices of pound cake. Trying to sweeten the deal a little bit.

“Listen, I just wanted to clear the air about something.”

“I gathered.”

“Right. Well, I won’t beat around the bush. Almost 30 years ago I was raped on a railroad track when me and Mama lived on Napa Street. It was absolutely terrible. During the rape, I’d started having these episodes of going into ‘Wonderland’.”

“Wonderland? As in Alice’s Adventures in...?” This was the first time since we’d sat down that she’d shown some interest in what I was saying.

“Yes. Anyway. I had never had a period yet and based on what Mama told me, I couldn’t get pregnant. But, Suzy, I did.”

“Oh my, Si. That is so awful. You were pregnant at 12-years-old.” She stated. Not in a question, but in a statement.

“Yes. Well. I had the baby. I spent my life avoiding the memories, but Mama took my baby away. All I remember is Grandma screaming at her to stop. So, I know she did something really bad to the baby cause I don’t know what happened and Grandma didn’t allow me to talk about it.”

Suzy Mae’s hands flew to her lips. A tear escaped from her eye, but no words came from her mouth. So I continued.

“I never held the baby or really saw the baby. As time went on, Mama started blaming me for being such a disappointment and that my daddy wouldn’t come home because of my fast-tailedness. I couldn’t tell her that I had been on that railroad track like I wasn’t supposed to be and ended up getting my virginity taken and getting pregnant. So my mind conjured ‘Wonderland’.”

“Is that why you ended up living with Miss Bonny?”

“Yes. But that ain’t the kicker.”

“The kicker? There’s more to this story? It’s already a nightmare.”

“The kicker is that the fifteen-year-old boy was Lee-Roy Harris. That’s why I’ve been so distant from you since you told me that you been dating him.”

Silence was a blanket over the room. I didn’t know if she was thinking about what I was saying or if she was searching her mind for a fit to the guy that she was now involved with. I just didn’t know.

“Suzy, what is it?”

“Now, it’s time for me to spill the tea on you.”

“And what’s that?”

“LeRoi told me all about it. He told me about his life when he lived on Napa Street. He told me that he’d been a very out of control boy at fifteen. His mama turning tricks and an absent daddy. It was hard, but he told me that he forced himself on you on the railroad tracks. The baby was mentioned because he said that you told him about the baby when yall were down at Fort Valley State College. However, he never told me what happened to the baby. He never told me that your mama took the baby away.”

“Cause he didn’t know about that part. I guess I never gave him a chance to ask.”

“Wow. I knew that Miss Vivian Lee was a trip, but she is a real piece of work.” Suzy bit into a piece of cake and I joined her in taking a sip of tea before she continued, “But, yes. I knew about everything that he knew about. I also realized that he was a young and dumb little knuckle-headed boy. His home life wasn’t the greatest. He was an only child whose mother used him in the place of a husband. But she couldn’t make no money off of him, so she tricked as well.”

“What? In place of a husband?”

“Yeah, Miss Barbara Ann used to make LeRoi sleep with her when her husband would get missing. He became her makeshift husband. The johns was her job.”

“I remember Miss Barbara Ann. She used to be over to Miss Elizabeth’s all the time. That’s horrible. Where was his dad?”

“Daddy had gone away long before the times when his mom started making him sleep in the bed with her.”

“That explains a lot of things. I’ve been harboring feelings for a boy who was just as broken as I was. I’ve been holding a man hostage on his own horrible past.”

“Simone, I understand why, though. You didn’t know, but in the same breath, you were violated against your will. Yes, LeRoi was from a messed up situation, but it doesn’t make it okay to go out and force yourself on somebody. I get that.”

“So, how did you agree to be a couple with him then? After learning all of these nasty things about him?”

“I think what helped was that he was straight up about his past. The detrimental parts of his past, that is. I didn’t have to ask him. He volunteered the information. He knew you were my best friend ever since Miss Bonny’s funeral. We didn’t start dating then, but he did express interest. And I in him. When he told me, out the gate, about the situation when you’all were young we still held off. But I like him, Si. I really like him. It may even be love.”

“Obviously you do. But I have been carrying around this mess all of my life. Doesn’t that count for something?”

Absolutely, it does. But you can’t condemn a repentant man all of his life. He deserves forgiveness just like everybody else.”

I gave it a maybe so. But I wasn’t willing just yet. Pain was a part of my familiar.

“Well, I just wanted you to know in case you didn’t, that you could have very well been dealing with a serial rapist.”

“Simone, you know damn well LeRoi ain’t no serial rapist.”

“Well, he could have been.”

“No, he couldn’t have. That man has apologized and apologized to you. If anything, you are a serial unforgiver.”

“Okay, wait a minute, Suzy. This is getting ridiculous.”

“I’m glad you said it. Maybe it’s just time to tell your truth, Si.”

“The truth, Suzy, is that LeRoi raped me. And now he is dating my best friend. I didn’t know if he had admitted it to you or not and I thought that it would only be right for him to tell you. If he hadn’t have told you that would have said a lot about him, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely, it would have told a lot about him. But, Simone, he did tell me. So now, Sweetie, I’m concerned about you. You’ve been carrying this almost thirty years. It’s time to heal and let it go.”

“I just don’t know what to feel about yall dating.”

“And you wouldn’t. You haven’t dealt with this issue, Si.”

I agreed with her on that one. I hadn’t dealt with the issue. But I would be damned if I was going to be okay with them being together. That meant that I would have to face him at every cookout or party we went to. I felt that I didn’t have to do any of that. And I almost felt betrayed by Suzy. That she would dare date a guy who raped me.

“Suzy, I guess you have chosen Lee-Roy over me then.”

“How you figure that? And don’t you dare make this about me. Obviously you don’t want to listen to reason. Simone, you have got to get help for this. I mean, what do you want? Do you want the man to go to jail?”

That was the first time that jail had come into the equation. Was that what I wanted? Did I want LeRoi to pay somehow? Could there be any payment that would suffice?

I think I left Suzy Mae no choice but to leave me with my feelings and date LeRoi away from me. She got her things and left that day, but she left me with her sentiments, “Si, I will help you through this if you want me to, but you have to start the process. I will forever be your best friend and I will forever love you and be there for you. For your sake I won’t bring LeRoi around you. However, I don’t have any control over where he goes since yall seem to periodically be in the same places. I believe in where he stands today and I really wish that you could understand it too and heal through this together. He has given you so many opportunities to cuss him out, slap his face or just to talk about your feelings. Take him up on some of that. It’s for your own good that you get this mess off your chest. But I will not let your mess dictate my life and I will not let this affect whether I continue to see an extremely warm man who has had to live with his own demons about something he made a dumb decision about when he was a boy and has more than attempted to rectify the situation. I just want let it.”

After that speech, I wanted to heal. I wanted to forgive LeRoi, but I didn’t know how. The only thing I’d done for almost 30 years was hate. And it was tearing me apart. Look at me. All alone worrying about what others must think of me and putting a loaded gun to my own head. Suzy Mae called to check on me here and there, but she kept her distance as she’d promised.

The Present

Chapter Nineteen

I can't stay awake for anything. The clock is ticking, the phone is ringing and my heart is beating faster than the tempo of African drums. The sound of all are competing in my head and I just can't seem to tune them out.

"Baby Girl, how you doing?" I don't even have to open my eyes to know that Grandma is in the room again.

My deep breath is a struggle, but I answer her as well as I can muster, "I'm ready for this to be over. Either I'm gonna die or I'm gonna live. But I'm ready for something to happen."

"Are you? Are you sho' 'bout dat?"

"No." Reasoning with myself is out of the question. But my initial reaction is quite negative. "Grandma, is it possible that I go to Hell? I haven't been very good in my life. What do you think?"

"Oh no, Baby Girl. We ain't tryna do 'dat."

"Maybe it won't be so bad."

"Hush chile'. You don't want nary day of Hell. Not nary."

If she want to see Hell, I can show it to her.

"Naw, Sam. You ain't 'bout to take my baby to no Hell."

She 'bout on her way to Hell anyway.

“Shut up, Vivian Lee. You ain’t gone condem’ my baby to Hell either. You chose Hell for yo’self.”

“Grandma, if they take me to see Hell, will I come back?” I can hear them too even though it’s not audible. It’s more internal.

“That’ll be up to you.”

“Well, since they are so wanting me to see Hell, then we can go. But I bet you I’m coming back.”

“I knows you comin’ back ‘cause I’m going witcha’.”

Oh, good. ‘Den Hell a have both of yall. Simone, you betta’ hope you don’t die whiles you visiting.

There’s Mama’s earth-shattering laugh again. But I refuse to be scared. Especially if my Grandma will be with me.

The darkness is so black except for the flickers of light from the fires. It’s what I would imagine the inside of a volcano would look like. The brimstone walls appear to be covered in lava. I could almost guess that if I threw a sandstone into the fire it would burn it to a crisp. Though the darkness is all around, the fire that emits gives enough light to know that the air itself is nothing but fire cinders. They blow around like firefly’s waiting to land. Most would think that the cinders would be red as fire is usually thought of, but this fire is blue. Its heat is hotter than I have ever felt, but I am able to withstand it for some reason. I just know that this heat, by itself, would usually deteriorate me.

The moans and groans of suffering sounded like a loud speaker. The wailing echoed as agony from the brimstone walls. Skeletal as well as fleshy bodies are hanging from flaming cages. All eyes are on me as I stand taking in the smells of sulfur and arsenic. Hate, jealousy, strife, perversion, murder, lying – all sin – emits into the atmosphere. I can't help but feel afraid. It's like something out of a horror movie and the smell is like decaying flesh ready to erupt.

The floor under my feet is rotating in colors of red, yellow and orange. Feet that truly had to withstand this flame would not. The flaming structures hanging from the caved ceiling drip fire drops constantly and the thorns sticking up out of the floor shoot out the same flames until they cause mini explosions. The heat is intensifying as the outburst crackles and falls to make the fiery floor I now stand on.

Where's Grandma. She's not here.

"Grandma. Where are you?"

A skeletal figure is approaching me. I'm so scared. It's moving quickly with purpose towards me.

"Yo' grandma ain't here. You wanted to see what Hell was like. Well here it is. I would love for you to stay. Exactly where half-nigga fokes alt to be."

The flaming light that surrounded the skeletal figure lit just enough for me to see that Tom Hanks-looking shadow that I had learned was my daddy, Mr. Whitmore. It was like a perverted version of a full-figured halo on a Heavenly angel, but in this case it is fire that is surrounding him to fill in for his human face.

"Mr. Whitmore?" I gasped.

“Yeah, it’s me. Why youse wanted to come down ‘dis way. Jus’ to see yo’ ole’ pappy, huh?” His laughing face is barely touching mine. He’s so close I can feel the warmth from his heated breath. His saliva, when he grinned wide, dripped embers that fell at my feet.

Gathering my composure is a task, but I wanted to talk to him, “This is a horrible place.”

“Yes, it is ain’t it? Hey there you lil’ bitch. Welcome home.”

“Mama, is that you?”

I didn’t see the floating smoke until it turned into a skeletal figure with the golden hue of my mama. The difference was that she still had strips of flesh hanging from her bones. Claps of thunder sounded as her burning feet touched the blazing ledge we were standing on. They both had chains around their bony wrists and ankles. They also both had scowls of pain on their faces that mixed with a sadistic smile. The smell of roasting flesh was almost unbearable.

Fear made me have to ask again, “Where is my grandma. She’s supposed to be here with me.”

Mama’s frowning face glowed in anger and she answered me, “You want to see where yo’ grandma is. Fine.”

Mama’s emaciated pointer fingers reached for my face and pressed to both sides of my temples. All I can see in my mind is my grandmother held to one of the cages by chains, on fire and crying for mercy. Flesh oozing off of her bones.

“No, Vivian Lee, that’s not my grandma. It’s all a lie. You lie.”

While taking her fingers away from the side of my head, she pressed her hot nose to mine. The metallic smell of gunpowder emanated from her webby mouth.

“MaDea didn’t come witchu’. Yo’ daddy brought you and now you stuck here. I can hold you here ‘till you die on earth and then you will spend yo’ eternity here wit’ me and yo’ daddy. We can be one big happy family.”

“No, we can’t, Mama. Grandma would never leave me. What have you done with her?”

“I ain’t had to do nuthin’ wit’ her. She decided on her own. You don’t see her do you?”

I can’t contain myself, “NO! I ain’t staying in Hell with you and Mr. Whitmore. I know what I was promised if I came here and I also know that Grandma wouldn’t leave me! You see, Mama,” Now I am in the face of iniquity, though it’s my mother, “I want Jesus Christ to come into my heart. I believe that He died and rose again for all of my wrong doings and I confess this right here on the floors of Hell that he is my Lord and Savior.”

“Dat’s right, Baby. You listened all dem’ Sunday’s I kept you in church. ‘De Lawd will neva’ leave you and I won’t nether’. Vivian Lee, I have said it once and I will say it again, you alt to be shame of yo’self. You still tryna to sell this chile’ some mess.”

“MaDea, you have once again got in my bizness. This my chile’. Mine and Sam Whitmo’ chile’. You got no rights to her mind, body or soul. We do.”

“Wait a minute, now Mama. You don’t have any rights to my mind, body nor soul, either. I am 50-years-old. I can make up my own mind. Even when I make the wrong decisions, they are still mine. I am the product of rape by this monster standing here burning with you. And by God’s grace, your mama took me when you couldn’t see about yourself. And then I had to care for you until your death, which during that time you treated me like crap. I made that decision. I could have put you away. But I took care of you and gave you a nice funeral. You looked better in death than you did in life because you were so messed up for so long. But today I make a

decision that I will not spend another second with you, dead or alive. That is no one's decision but mine.

"You always was an ungrateful lil bitch. Following behind MaDea's dress tail. You think you betta' 'dan everyone else, don't you? But you done forgot 'dat you laying on your death bed right now. Dying from something 'dat you did to yo'self."

"Mama, don't you dare judge me. You are partially the reason that I lived a life of misery and self-destruction."

"Baby Girl, you have to 'member that Vivian Lee can't understand judgement. Judgement comes nat'rul. Her father is the father of lies. You cain't reason wit' 'dat kind of tormented soul. Me and yo' granddaddy done been had to let Vivian Lee go. And now you need to."

"Yeah, Baby Girl, it's time for you to move on." Mama mocks. "MaDea giveth and MaDea taketh away."

"What you talkin' 'bout Vivian Lee. I gave you everythin'."

"Everythin' but protect me. Then you took my chile'."

"Grandma, you just told me not to reason with this tormented soul. How about you do the same. I know you were there for her. I've seen it."

"You did see when I made your mama a nasty little girl, didn't you. Now, I only wished that I had gotten holt to you too."

“Mr. Whitmore, may you burn in Hell’s fire for the rest of your existence. Not because I am mad at you, but because your soul is bad. I only wish that Mama could have gotten past what you did to her. And it’s sad that she couldn’t. But thank God there is a place for souls like you.”

“Well, I guess yo’ lil’ uppity half-breed ass jus’ told me. Don’t be so sho’ ‘dat you in ‘de clear, my dear. You still in Hell, too.”

“But she got me, Sam. She got me. An’ she just made amends wit’ the Lawd.”

“An’ while yall down here tryna’ to reason wit’ these two, enuff is enuff.” Grandpa must’ve been listening all along.

“Well, well, well. If it ain’t ‘de ‘hole entire Harvey tribe. Sonny, long time ain’t seen.”

How ironic that Mama and Mr. Whitmore are on one side, on a fiery ledge and Grandma and Grandpa are on another side where clouds are lifting them up. I’m in the middle where the floor is clear. A smooth, clean breeze is taking away the heat and the stench of rotting flesh. What appears as smoke is consuming the platform that I am standing on, moving the fiery ledge away from me. I am joined with my grandparents.

The ignited walls are closing in. Mama and Mr. Whitmore are standing there, together, not being able to do anything but stand and burn. Mama’s flesh is steadily falling away. The walls are closing at a steady pace, but not before Grandpa positions himself to voice his final sentiment, “Sam, it has been a long time. But I don’t think we will chance upon each other ever agin’. Vivian Lee, my baby girl, I love you an’ always will. All is fo’given and fo’gotten.” Mama’s wail is followed by Mr. Whitmore’s. The continued cries of all of them that are hanging from the bars of their cages are many and soon drown out into a final howl.

2014

Chapter Twenty-One

“Simone! Simone!”

What? There’s someone knocking on my door. I can’t open my eyes, but it has to be well after 3:00 am.

“Simone! Simone!”

Who’s knocking on the window? I wish I could say something. My mouth feels stuck. My heart is beating profusely and there is nothing that I can do to let the voice know that I’m in here.

“Simone, it’s me! LeRoi!”

Lee-Roy? What in the world is he doing here? The last person that I think I want to see is him.

The doorbell and the phone are ringing, “Simooone! Open the door! It’s me LeRoi!”

“Simone, Honey, open the door! It’s me, Suzy!”

Suzy?

“Sweetie, open the door! You’re scaring me!”

The door is opening. Who would know where my spare key is? A key that has been kept under the ceramic plant stand on the porch for years. But nobody knew that.

“Simone! Honey? Where are you? Oh, crap, it smells shitty in here.”

“Oh Simone... Suzy, she’s in here!”

That’s LeRoi’s voice, but I can’t look at him. My head feels like nails are wedging in on each side of my neck. I feel trapped in my drugged body. What have I done to myself?

“Simone, what’s going on? It smells horrible in here.”

“You,” Is all I can muster. I really want to cry.

“Yes, it’s me. Why can’t you look at me?”

“I can’t look at you. But why would I want to?” A pain is all of sudden shooting through my head. I hated to admit that my eyes no longer worked. Suzy just would have panicked more.

“LeRoi, look at this.”

I can only guess that my nosy best friend found the empty pill container and the drained vodka bottle. She has always been a snoopy one. Maybe that’s why she does so well in the detective field.

“Simone, why would you do this?”

“First. Of. All,” I can only speak slowly and in a whisper. My throat feels like there is no moisture in it, “Suzy. You. Shouldn’t be. So damn nosy. Get out. Of my stuff. How did yall. Get in my house? Lee-Roy. Why are you even here?”

I could hear Suzy’s high-heeled feet leave the room in a panic. I couldn’t make out what she was saying. LeRoi sat on the side of the bed. Much like he’d done when I was in college and suffered from that concussion that Hakim had inflicted on me. The same concern mixed with a little confusion sounded in his voice and made me feel a heavenly covering. My eyes aren’t open, but I can see Grandma Bonny and Grandpa Sonny standing at the foot of my bed. Grandpa

is holding my baby in his arms. And Grandma is holding my little dog, Flea Bag, in hers. Now I understood why LeRoi's face was shining so brightly before me. There light was shining with a brilliance I'd never experienced before in life.

“Simone, give your friend a break. She's been worried about you. She called me and told me that she'd been trying to call you and that there was no answer. I just happened to remember that my grandma had said that Miss Bonny would leave a key under that old ceramic plant stand on the porch.” LeRoi chuckled slightly, “You know them old bitties would keep up with the neighborhood gossip about everybody and each other.”

My breathing became rapid to stay conscious as much as be angry, “Lee-Roy, how dare you ask me why I would do this. It was you. You. You hurt me bad on them railroad tracks when I was little. I haven't been able to forgive you since. And you never said you were sorry.”

“Yes, I did, Simone. I apologized to you when you were at Fort Valley State. And since you don't remember, listen to me 'cause I mean every word of it. I really wish you would open your eyes, though. I want you to see what I'm saying.”

LeRoi's hand found the top of my head and I could feel his breath inches away from my face. “Simone, I am so sorry. I am sorry as sorry can be. If I could take it back I would. Unfortunately, I can't and I have spent my life trying to be a better man than I was boy. Lil' Simone, the baby that you told me that you conceived was mine and I know it to be the case. I acknowledge that. You never told me what happened to that baby and I never saw you with one so I can only imagine what happened. Actually, it really doesn't matter does it? But as much as I was trying to convince you that you wouldn't get pregnant, showed just how stupid I was then.

Just plain young and dumb. No excuse. Just fact. But, Honey, words could never express just how sorry I am. Please believe me.”

What am supposed to do with that?

Forgive him baby. You have got to. Grandma intercepted in my head.

“Lee-Roy, I have to share something with you.” I breathed deeply to be able to speak clearly. “I went through life not feeling valued enough to find true happiness. And here I am dying. Cutting off all chances. Grandma spent her life making sure that I went to college. But my own mama couldn’t love me for the hate that she felt for herself. So there were deficits in my life. So, what do I do now? How do I come to grips with what happened almost forty years ago?”

“Simone,” I can feel LeRoi lift up. The bed shifted as he stood, “the worst thing that I could think of is to know that something I did could keep you from being the best person that you should be. I knew that you were smart as a whip. At least that’s what the gossip committee said. And when I saw you at Fort Valley, I knew you were. I tried to keep up with you over the years. I would see you here and there like at Miss Bonny’s funeral and Miss Vivian Lee’s funeral. I knew that you had been through some things. Having a mother like Miss Vivian Lee had to be a challenge, but you did the best you could and still excelled. Be proud of who you are. And please forgive a foolish, foolish boy. If I could jack up that boy that did this to you, I would. But I can’t. So this man, who has paid some dues of his own, wish and pray that you heal and that you ride on his sorrows into your healing. Give me all the pain back that I gave you. Please.”

The tears were flowing down from my stubborn eyes into my ears, well before he got through speaking about my college days. The sincerity in his voice flowing at the same pace and

through every cell of me. Grandma and Grandpa are smiling down at me and I know that for once I can see healing.

“Okay, Simone, they are on their way.” Suzy, ran back into the room and grabbed me up to her. “Girl, what have you done to yourself? Open your eyes, Honey.”

”I don’t think she can, Suzy,” LeRoi disclosed, softly.

“Oh, Suzy Mae. My bestest friend in the whole world,” I tried to shed light with a weak giggle. “I’m sorry I wasn’t a better friend to you. I’ve been so consumed with myself that you were always the one holding me up. I will never forget you. Thank you, girl.”

Suzy laid me back down. Her touch was careful and I could imagine that her eyes were full of sadness, “Wait a minute now, Simone Trellis Harvey. Are you going somewhere? ‘Cause I ain’t going nowhere. We got a trip we been planning for since we were just girls.”

“Suzy, I need you to promise me something. You take that trip. Take Lee-Roy with you. Please go and enjoy yourself. That would make me so happy.”

“Well, as soon as the paramedics get here,” Suzy spoke through tears, “you are going to go to the hospital and they are gonna help you and then you will be alright. Do you hear me, Simone? You will be alright...and I mean it!” she yelled.

Looking at Grandma and Grandpa through spiritual eyes, I knew that I would be okay. But not in the way that Suzy thinks. When she told me that she and LeRoi were an item I had the nerve to get nasty with her instead of seeing that LeRoi was a good man and that he had done well for himself. He’d started his own insurance agency and even with a failed marriage Suzy had told me that he took good care of his kids and grandkids. I just blamed him for anything bad

that happened to me and that wasn't fair. Too bad it's taken something this drastic to get me to sit still long enough and see the goodness of life instead of always being a victim.

Dear Lord, please forgive me for all of my worry. And for my unforgiveness. Take care of my friends in my departure. They will need you when I am gone from this earth. I want to be with Grandma and Grandpa and my baby. I know that they live with you. So, as I release myself, I ask that you allow me to enter into your paradise. Thank you for being so merciful.

I can see a white sun, shining through where my ceiling once was. The feeling of floating is consuming me. I can move my hands now. I am up, but my feet are not touching the floor. This dress that I have on. It's Alice's dress. All the way down to the black patent Mary Jane's. I'm floating toward the hole in the ceiling. Every part of me can touch the sides of the hole as my entire energy passes through it. I feel as though I'm headed home.

"She's in here!" Suzy yells.

"Well, Pip Squeak, you did good, Honey."

Turning around, I am standing here with Grandma and Grandpa and the baby and even the dog. Looking back at my body lying in the bed, I feel a sudden sadness. My how ashen my face looks. The bed is a complete mess. And my hair is all over the place. What they must think of me. But if they only knew. I feel free.

"That's me in that bed."

"Yes, Sweetie, it is."

“Simone, don’t you dare leave me! Come back, Simone! Yall help her! That’s my best friend!”

“Come on, Sue. Let them work on her.” *I’m glad that LeRoi is here to comfort Suzy.*

“Ma’am, she’s gone. I’m so sorry.” The paramedic pronounced. “Time of death - 4:00 am.”

“No, she can’t be! She wouldn’t leave me!” Suzy Mae screamed and ran to the side of my body. Laying chest to chest her heaving body pulled mine along with hers.

“Come on, Baby. She’s gone.

LeRoi pulled Suzy Mae from me and allowed the paramedics to finish their work of removing my body. LeRoi finally got Suzy Mae into the car to follow the ambulance to the hospital as I watched them leave to take care of what I knew would be funeral arrangements.

“So, I’m dead now, huh?”

“Yo’ physical body is, yes. Yo’ spirit goes back to ‘de Creator. God is such a good God in lettin’ us see the earth version of ourselves right now, so ‘dat you could transition ‘de right way. But we...you...we, are all in our glorified bodies now.”

“I’m glad, too, Grandma. For some strange reason I can understand that this is what I am doing. Transitioning.”

“Yes, everythin’ begins to make sense, Pip Squeak. We don’t jus’ know in part anymo’ we fully understand. ‘Dis ‘dat great by-and-by ‘dat we hear so much about in life. You are experiencing it in ‘de life after.”

“Would you like to hold your baby? She can finally grow up into what she was meant to if she had stayed alive.” Grandma held out the baby to me.

“Yes, I would.” The baby has my face. She hugs me hard and acts as though she doesn’t want to turn me a loose. Strangely, I can feel her body growing. Placing her down I watch her grow before my eyes. She has smooth, slanted eyes. Her thin lips are naturally pink and her hair is down to her spine. Her skin is a little more caramel than mine and she has the pointed nose of LeRoi, her daddy. Outside of that, this beautiful young creature has my face.

“Mama, welcome to Heaven.”

Vita

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