

Affairs

TO

REMEMBER

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A DELICIOUS NOVEL

Rayna Sun



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Publishing*

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Dedication

FOR “BIG” MAURICE, JR.

My love. There are no words to express how much I miss you. My best friend who shared in laughter, in love, and in like. You have given me the joy of my life and for that I am truly and eternally grateful. You should see him. He reminds me of you at a young age with your stubbornness, resilience, and your extremely huge heart.

and

FOR “LIL” MAURICE III

You are my world. My rock. You keep me humble in insurmountable ways. I don't think you understand how important you are to me. I enjoy your smile, your oh-so-inappropriate humor, your curiosity, and your jokes. You were brought here for excellence and I am excited to see the man that you will become in this world. Keep striving, keep pushing, and always keep being you. Don't let anyone define who you are as a person and always remember that mommy has your back. I appreciate the value you bring to my life. Thank you for picking me as your mom and allowing me to share in your walk of this life with you. I love you so very very much.

“The person who says something is impossible
should not interrupt the person who is doing it.”

Chinese proverb

Chapter 1

MENNETTE

*H*er shoe was missing. She knew this because cool air rippled across her bare toes. And nothing bothered her more than cold feet. She tried to wiggle them. Pain shot straight up her back to her head like a rocket. Eyes still closed, she focused on the air flowing in and out of her lungs. She silently willed her body to get up. She couldn't move.

Where was her shoe?

The repugnant stench of wet asphalt and grass hovered inside her nose, penetrating the base of her head. The head that felt like it had been split open. For a moment, she was only aware of the splintering pain and a fear that settled over her. An unnatural pace of her heart pounded out the rhythm of rapid breaths and the unsteady rise and fall of her own chest.

She was on the ground. She willed her body to get up. It denied her request. That's when the voices started. At first, they sounded far away, peeling apart and coming back together. Then, the voices were close, as if hovering over her. She squeezed her closed eyes tighter and tried to ignore her throbbing head to concentrate on them.

A high-pitched, hurried voice ran swiftly across her head. Then, a deep, agitated voice followed slowly behind. Both sounds sunk like claws into every crevice of her brain. They fumbled and bumped into each other in the darkness of her mind, making a

garbled mess. Slowing down, the voices fell in sync, harmonizing, as if they were singing a duet. They were accustomed to being in conversation together.

The voices riffed over the background noise of the overhead freeway like a soundtrack. A dog barked in the distance. The incessant irritation of the noise forced her to clinch her face tighter. Prickles of pain, agonizing and steady, pinched up her neck.

And then it quieted. The darkness behind her eyes stilled. It was too quiet. An eerie calm. Then, out of the dark solitude, the voices started again. This time, they were close enough to understand. The high-pitched voice pierced the calm and said something which broke through to her consciousness.

"She dead?" The voice asked innocently with a hint of fear and agitation. A new, dull pain nudged into her side.

The second voice, deep and seasoned with maturity, sprung to life.

"Tionna, don't kick her! She ain't dead! See her chest moving up and down? She breathing. Dead people don't breathe."

"But she bleeding, Grandma!" Tionna said.

She could feel the presence of someone hovering. It was that inexplicable, instinctive feeling that one gets when another human entered their personal space.

"Bleeding don't mean dead. People bleed all the time." Her grandmother asserted.

"But from her head, grandma? She dead for real!" Tionna insisted.

She wasn't dead, though. At least she didn't think she was. Maybe she was dreaming? She tried remembering what had led to this strange situation. Her head throbbed in response. She tried again. Images flashed for brief nanoseconds and evaporated into white noise. As hard as she tried, no thoughts or memories formed.

Panic gripped her. Her chest tightened and a suffocating fear took over her body. She frantically searched her brain for any information related to any happenings prior to this moment and was

blocked at every turn.

Focus on your breathing, she thought. In through your nose, out the same way.

In through your nose, out the same way.

In through your nose, out.

Her breathing slowed. Someone was touching her. The soft soothing strokes were calming. The metallic taste of blood hit the back of her throat. She swallowed. It felt like it had been scrubbed with sandpaper.

She desperately wanted to open her eyes, but fear kept them shut. By now, she could feel the hard ground beneath her whole body. Aggravating grains of gravel pushed into her back and dug into her arms.

Where am I?

She managed to slowly drag her arm an inch, sliding her fingers over the texture of the street.

The deep voice slipped soothingly into her ear.

“Honey, can you open your eyes?”

Warm breath trickled across the bridge of her nose, reminding her of roast beef and coffee.

“Open them.”

It sounded like a motherly command she dared not disobey. Carefully, she parted her eyelids, as if she wanted to sneak past the confusing pain unnoticed. She could barely make out the fuzzy face leaning in close and looking down at her because it was shrouded by the darkness of the night.

Did she know this face? She tried to focus on the woman's eyes, then her nose, anything, hoping it would become familiar. Her brain responded with throbbing, searing pain as if accessing her memories was off-limits. The eternal night sounds etched away inside her head like a construction site.

Blood poured from an open gash somewhere on her face. It streamed into the corner of her mouth. She could feel the salty taste in the back of her scratchy throat and she swallowed again.

Cold chills skipped over her skin and all the hairs on her body stood up. Her eyelids gave up.

“Come on. Open your eyes again for me honey. Stay with me. Focus on me.”

Her eyes fluttered fully open again, then focused in spite of the intense pain. First on the nose again. Then each wrinkle set in one after the other. Next, she lifted her gaze to see curly gray hair poking from the yellow scarf. The older face seemed laced with worry.

“That’s right, sweetheart. Focus. Yes, I’m here. You see me?” The old woman smiled. A full moon fat with lunar glow hung just over her left shoulder. It must be in retrograde, she thought as her brain tried making sense of what was happening to her at that moment. The woman’s mouth started to move and she shifted her attention there.

“Looks like you had a pretty nasty blow to that head. We got to get you up off this ground, but I ain’t no spring chicken, so you gon’ have to help an old lady out.” The old lady tilted her head towards her teenage granddaughter who hovered with arms crossed.

“She ain’t gon’ be much help either. Tionna barely can hold up herself. You understand?”

Another breeze whipped through her toes and lifted a few stray hairs on the woman’s head. She shuddered. Every muscle in her body ached. A sharp pull near her ribcage made her draw breath. She desperately wanted to get up but this was going to be a chore.

In through your nose, out through your nose. In through your...

She plopped back down after a tormenting spasm thwarted her effort to pull herself up onto her elbows. She glanced up helplessly at the woman. Sounds of cars swooshing on the overhead freeway vibrated with the cool air and the barking dog echoed in her head.

“I gotta bad back.” The old woman raised her eyebrows at her. “And my knees ain’t good. This is all on you to get off that ground. Then we can help you into the house.”

She took this not-so-subtle hint and tried again. After a few minutes, she successfully pulled herself up all the way into a sit-

ting position and looked around. She was sitting in the middle of the street. The full moon and scattered streetlights outlined a neighborhood with rows of old homes, beat-up cars, and unkempt yards. A littered cul-de-sac rounded out the end of the street and blended into an open field with tall brown grass wildly shooting up through the soil creating shadows on the asphalt from the streetlights. In the distance, a rusted railroad track peeked through a chain-linked fence.

None of her surroundings seemed familiar. She looked at the woman, her voice coming out as a hoarse painful croak.

“Where am I?”

“On the ground.” Tionna sweetly snapped. She looked over the old woman’s shoulder to see the teen standing with her arms crossed over her chest. Tionna pulled her phone from her back pocket and aimed it at her. She concentrated on the teen’s face but recognition refused to flood her mind.

“In Oakland.”

Adrenaline shot through her veins, sparking her heart again. She swiveled her neck around quickly, confused, taking in the rows of beat-down houses and the stretch of freeway high above the neighborhood. In the distance, the cars seemed like miniature toy cars. The God-awful smell of wet street made her want to gag.

In through your nose.

She needed to calm herself and get a hold of this situation.

The teenager rolled her eyes at the anonymous woman’s confusion.

“It’s a city.”

Her Gen Z sarcasm dripped from her mouth. The young girl looked like she would rather be anywhere else in the world, than there helping her.

In through your nose, out through your mouth. In through your nose, out through your mouth. In through your nose out through your mouth!

Her breathing increased anyway and tears threatened to fall.

"First child, you need to calm yourself. You getting yourself all worked up." The old woman said, motioning for the reluctant teenager who didn't move. "What happened to you?"

All she could do was reach up and touch the tender part of her forehead. Chills sprinkled on her arms, either from the pain or the cold. She couldn't tell.

"What you doing out here so late all by yourself anyway?"

Shame washed over her as she realized that she didn't have the answers to any of these questions.

"Well then, what's your name?" The older woman sighed. Her face was so full of concern, so worried, so sweet. She seemed trustworthy.

She opened her lips to say it but froze when no sound would escape. Wait. What is my name? She tried searching her brain for the answer. Pain flashed white behind her eyes in response, forcing them shut. A hand flew protectively to her temple. She couldn't produce an answer for this simple question. So instead, she cleared her throat and pushed down the saliva. It burned. She frowned.

"Never mind all that." The older woman flicked her hand dismissively.

"We need to get in the house. Don't worry. We gon' help you. *Tionna!* Get off that phone taking pictures and call 911! Sometimes I don't think you got the brains God gave you! And hur'up and help me get this child! Just don't know what's wrong with your generation."

"*Grandmaaaaaa!*" Tionna let out a long whine and punctuated it by stomping her foot and crossing her arms. "She look heavy."

"Tionna, do as I say, girl!"

"Grandma?" The teenager looked genuinely confused. She held up her phone. "Call 911 *or* help you with her?"

"Help me first! Then call 911 when we get in the house!" The old woman removed the agitation from her voice when turning back to the clueless lady on the ground.

"My grandbaby gon' get you under your arm and I'm gonna

get the other. But you need to help us. Lord, I hope you can stand, cause my sciatica been acting up lately.” The old woman squared her body up, spreading her legs a little.

“Alright now, on the count of three, I need you to get up.”

“Grandma. This is dangerous. You know this can be a trap. We shouldn’t be out here in the dark. It’s 1:00 in the morning.”

“Child. I’ve walked this earth for 87 years. I ain’t worried ’bout no trap. When I finally meet my Maker and stand in front of those pearly gates, I don’t want no written words about how I left this girl out here to bleed in the streets. Now get under her arm. What did I teach you, huh? We got to take care of each other. You know we...”

“...all we got.” The teenager mimicked. “I know grandma, I know. But she got blood all over her.” The girl sucked her teeth. “I don’t want that on me. These my favorite shorts.”

“Tionna!”

She felt Grandma and Tionna’s arms slip under hers. They began tugging. Her legs were like rubber but she managed to half stand, half slouch onto Tionna’s shoulder. Her other arm slung over the older woman. She looked down. The leaves on her sunflower T-shirt looked like blood rained on them. Her black leggings had twisted into an uncomfortable fit and she shimmied a little to loosen the grip on her crotch. A sexy boot with criss-crossed designs adorned her left foot. She limped on her right foot, which was exposed to the night air, trying to avoid broken glass.

“Don’t worry about your shoe.” A reassuring smile crossed the old woman’s face. “We’ll worry about it later. We almost there. You doing good.” The old woman prattled on. “We just gonna cross this street and get to that house over there.”

“Grandma, them red bottoms!” Tionna contributed, then sucked her teeth. “I’d be worried about ’em too if I was her.”

She took a few more baffled steps towards the house then focused her attention again on the older woman, working up the courage to ask an important question.

“Are you my mother?”

“Jesus!” The old woman choked and all movement stopped. The teenager snickered.

“You hit your head harder than I thought. Let’s hur’up and get you inside so you can lay down. You hallucinating!”

Chapter 2

MENNETTE

The light pouring from the house was a stark contrast to the dimly lit street. She blinked when she stepped across the threshold. Sounds of a different kind assaulted her ears as she hobbled inside, leaning on the old woman and teenager.

The house buzzed with voices and television noise. A small den was to the left, housing a couch and a barrage of chairs. An old television atop stacks of wooden crates was turned on. She focused on the couch; she wanted to get to it quickly. In the background, a laugh track from a rerun of *Good Times* played on one TV. It clashed with the sing-songy voice of a news reporter spilling out from another TV elsewhere in the house.

The old house looked like it was never updated. Hundreds of canned foods lined the walls. Boxes of rice and noodles stacked up in piles. Faint smells of strong coffee and remnants of roast beef lingered in the air with a hint of cigar. They helped her onto the couch. The old woman sat and examined the side of her head.

"Tionna, go in there and get some wet towels, the Neosporin, and those large band aides. We need to cover these cuts up here. Junie?" The old woman bellowed the name. She turned her head from side to side.

"Where is that man?" she asked no one in particular under her breath. "Junie!"

A lanky man appeared from the back room, just as the teenager

disappeared behind him. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and leaned into the door jam. There was a loose knot in his robe. His hair, a silver and gray pattern cut close to his head made him appear much younger than he probably was. He blinked a few times in the bright lights of the den.

"Lita. Waz all that hollering about?" When he saw the stranger, he allowed his leg to ease out of the gap a bit, exposing a hairy thigh.

"Who this woman?"

"We found this child out in the streets."

Junie looked the stranger up and down with a frown.

"Lita, you know we can't be taking no prostitutes in." He covered his leg and tightened the knot on his robe. "Cops'll be all over us."

"Nah I don't think this one a prostitute. See..." Lita grabbed her hands and held one up for Junie to see.

"Her nails clean. This here a new manicure. And see that one foot? That's a recent pedicure. And ain't no wedding band but see that tan line where one used to be. She act like she don't remember nothing."

Another woman who seemed to be around her age walked out sliding her slippered feet loudly against the linoleum floor. In her hand, she carried a cup of hot tea. Her mug read "Mondays are for suckers." She stopped when she saw Mennette and cocked her head with an instant attitude.

"Lita, what's this?"

"I found her."

"Outside?" The new woman scoffed.

"Yes, Tonya, outside."

"What in the hell..."

"Language, Tonya!" Lita warned.

Tionna reappeared with a handful of wet towels, bandages, and tubes of ointment. She handed them to Lita and resumed her spot leaning against the wall opposite the couch, uninterested in the

adult conversation, engrossed back in her phone.

Tonya sized up the stranger, then patted her hair a few times, making her loose weave jump with each assault.

"You can't keep her Lita. She can't stay. We got enough people staying here. Coming in and out. Rent free. Can't save 'em all, Lita. She can find her way right back out that front door y'all brought her in." She pointed to the front door with her mug of tea.

Tionna looked up from her phone. "She was bleeding outside."

"Bleeding or not. We ain't got no more room. We can clean her up and send her on her way." Two more assaults on the weave made it shift slightly, creating a deeper part.

"If she need to stay, she will." Lita said with an authoritative tone in her voice which no one questioned.

Tonya sent Junie a look, sighed deeply and pursed her lips. "Where you come from?" Tonya obnoxiously slurped long and loud from her mug. She smacked her lips for dramatic effect. "Anybody looking for you? You in any trouble?"

Mennette stared at Tonya. The lacey camisole and the sheer pajama pants with seashell prints let her know that her situation had disturbed Tonya's rest.

Junie shifted his weight. "I 'on know, Lita." He said, his arms crossed over his chest. "Manicure or not, she look like a prostitute to me."

Agitated, Tonya sucked her teeth. "If anybody know a prostitute, it's you!"

"Think you offending me?" He snorted. He seemed unfazed by her lashing out. "Well, you ain't. I would. And I do," he said firmly with a hard nod.

Tonya rolled her eyes at Junie and mentally dismissed him as she resumed her interrogation.

"Where you from?"

Mennette knew better than to try and search her mind for the answers so she simply hunched her shoulders back at Tonya in response. She wasn't sure if it was the trauma or the shock of the

situation, but her memory simply wasn't working at the moment.

"I don't remember." She heard herself say.

"How you don't remember? I don't understand that?" Tonya said irritated. "How you even get out here? Where your car? You walk? Seem like people know where they from. Or at least why they out in the middle of the night by themselves."

She opened her mouth to say something but no words came out. A deluge of shame and confusion washed over her. She didn't know why she was out there. She tried speaking but couldn't find her voice. It had lodged itself in the back of her throat, scared.

She slowly shook her head. She didn't know the answers to any of the questions that Tonya, Lita, or herself were all asking. Her face crumbled and she couldn't help the flood of tears. Her heart quickened. Suddenly she felt lost. She felt helpless. And the sobs came faster.

"Tears don't work up in here, boo-boo!" Tonya shifted her weight onto her right hip and rolled her neck. "Now I'ma ask you one more time..."

"Tonya." Lita snapped. She sat up straight and fixed her scarf on her head. "That's enough. Go get her some Tylenol and put that tea kettle on. Cops should be here soon. Junie, why don't you go out and look around. See if you can find some answers or something. She ain't from around here so somebody must have seen something."

Lita turned back to the stranger with a gentle tone in her voice. "Lay down."

Mennette complied. Lita pressed the wet towels on her forehead. She welcomed the cool pressure. She closed her eyes. Images flashed briefly into her mind and disappeared just as quickly. She saw herself in a car, then white light. She clenched her eyes tight, etching frown lines into her forehead. She saw herself lurch forward and hit the steering wheel, then white nothingness again. Her body tensed and she felt the pain in her head radiate again. Then she felt a cool soft touch on her forehead, a gentle pressing at

the source of her pain.

“There, there. You okay now?”

She opened her eyes to see the frown on Tonya’s face peering over Lita’s shoulder. Tonya held out her hand and in her palm were two Tylenol.

“Take these. Cause when you feeling better you gotta go. There’s no more room here.” And with that, Tonya disappeared into the back room. The man and teenager were nowhere to be found. It was just her and Lita in the living room.

“Don’t worry about Tonya. She’s just protective of me. And real territorial.” Lita chuckled and reached for a cup of water. Lita watched as the stranger accepted the cup and used it to wash down the two pills.

Lita dipped her fingers in a bowl and pulled out another cool towel. Her aged fingers continued their gentle stroking and pressing.

“Tonya just don’t want nobody taking advantage of me. But I’m a tough old bird. Been tough long before she was even born.”

Lita paused long enough to softly gaze into her patient’s eyes. “You can stay as long as you need. My home is open to the community. I’m here for whoever needs me. We all we got. So we have to take care of each other.”

Lita kept talking to her in soft tones about nothing in particular as she continued cleaning the head wounds and applying ointment. The woman’s touches gave her a warm maternal feeling that for some strange reason, she yearned for. She closed her eyes again and allowed Lita to soothe an unknown pain in her soul. Tears pooled under her lids and slipped down the sides of her face. What was happening to her? Why was she having such a hard time remembering any details of her life? She felt like she should get home somewhere, but she had no idea where home was.

Lita gently wiped away her tears. She opened her eyes. Lita pulled her chin so her eyes met hers.

“You’re safe here. Like I said, you are welcomed. This is my

house. My grandmother left this house to my mother. And she passed it down to me, God rest their souls. Strong women. She paid \$5,000 for this house. One of the first blacks to integrate this part of Oakland. Can you imagine?" She giggled.

"Five thousand was a lot of money back then. And my, how the neighborhood has changed. But I'm still here. Helping. Need a place to stay? I'm here. Hungry? Lita's gonna feed you. That's the only way that we are gonna survive this world. We all we got."

Lita smiled again at her patient. "There," she said, smoothing the bandages down.

"You need to have that looked at. Probably gonna need stitches. And I can already see some bruising coming through." Lita pressed the sticky part of a bandage on her forehead.

"Rest child. We called the cops. Hopefully, someone will be here soon."



The sound of Lita's voice talking to a new one filled her awareness. She must have dozed off. She rolled over and opened her eyes to see Lita's back, hands on her hips, talking to someone. Every now and then, Lita took her hands off her hips and waved them around to make a point. A young white man in a policeman's uniform nodded with each motion of Lita's hands. He had his tablet out and was tapping his notes on the screen. Mennette slowly shifted her eyes to Tionna, who had resumed her spot leaning against a wall. She had on short shorts and a half-shirt. She was chewing gum, texting, and looking down at her phone. Every now and then, Tionna's belly button ring caught glints of light from the lamp.

"So let me get this straight..." the officer inquired. "You found this young woman wandering the streets?"

"Yes. I was sitting here in my chair watching *Family Feud* with that bald-headed fella with the big lips, um..." Lita paused and

snapped her fingers three times.

“...Steve Harvey!” She said triumphantly. “You know who that is?”

“Yes ma’am, I’m aware of who Steve Harvey is.”

“...cause every night before I go to bed, I watch me some *Family Feud*. Getting real good at answering all the questions right too!

He nodded quickly to encourage the storytelling along.

“...So right in the middle of the sudden death round, I saw her through the window. I had to stand up to get a better look. She was walking around, looking lost and holding her head. I said to myself, what is this child doing out here at this timea night? It was after midnight. And I knew it was after midnight ‘cause I looked over at that clock there...” Lita said, pointing to her microwave.

The officer stopped punching his screen and sighed. Tionna briefly looked up from her phone.

“Grandma!” She whined. “Can you please just answer his questions?”

Lita craned her neck to see the girl leaning against the wall. “That’s my grandbaby. I’m taking care of her cause her mama can’t. Or won’t. Or just don’t. Whichever one.”

“Oh my gawd, grandma. Do you have to tell everything?”

“I tell what I wanna tell.” Lita snapped. Then turned to the frustrated officer. “Fifteen years old and think she know everything. Shame when a teenager think she know more than a 65-year-old,” Lita said loudly over her shoulder for Tionna’s hearing.

“Grandma, you 87!”

“See what I mean?” Lita said to the officer, pointing. “I know how old I am! But I look every bit of 65.” She tucked a gray curl behind her ear and batted her eyes. “Think she knows more. You ought to arrest her for indecent exposure, possession of a nasty attitude, and elderly aggravation!”

“Ma’am?” He said, clearly annoyed by the way his finger was poised over his tablet.

“Hmmm?” Lita purred sweetly.

"The young woman," he repeated, forcing a patient, pleasant tone to his voice.

"Right." Lita cleared her throat. "Like I said, she was walking around and when I opened the door, I saw that she had blood all over her head. I called out to her. I said, 'Hey!' Like that, real loud but more like a loud whisper 'cause I didn't want to wake up my neighbors. They raising they grandbaby too, but she gotta newborn and that thing barely sleeps. So I whispered real loud, 'Hey!'"

Lita demonstrated with a harsh whisper. "And that's when she fell to the ground." Lita snapped her fingers. "Just like that. Like a sack a potatoes. Not the small sack. But like the large sack you get from Grocery Outlet for 'bout \$3..."

"Ma'am?"

"Huh?"

"I'ma need you to focus."

Lita looked at the officer sideways and slid her eyes slowly up and down his body.

"Focus? I'm focused!" She snapped with a roll of her neck. "I'm 87 years old. And I'm more focused than half a Oakland, including the Oakland Police Department!"

"Ma'am, I just meant..."

"I know what you meant! If half of OPD was as focused as I was, then we wouldn't have those crackheads hanging on the corner now would we?" She crossed her arms over her large breasts. "Or those drug dealers who be hanging in front of the grocery store so I can barely get my tomatoes 'cause they all in the way..."

The officer shifted and cleared his throat.

"If y'all was as focused as this 87-year-old, that street light out there would be fixed! Ain't worked in over a year and two babies got hit last year 'cause a it! Can't even let my grandbaby go out by herself around here. If y'all was so focused this child wouldn't be laying here on my couch right now in this condition! So don't tell me to focus. You just write down what I tell you when I tell it to you."

"Go head, grandma!" Tionna said with a snap of her finger and a hint of pride in her voice.

"I'm focused. I'm as focused as they come." She said, placing her hands back onto her hips and shifting to the right. "Now where was I before you interrupted me?"

The officer sighed in defeat. "She fell to the ground," he said wearily.

"Right, she fell to the ground. Then me and my grandbaby got her in here and called you. Now what are you gonna do?"

"I'll dispatch an ambulance and we'll get her to a hospital." He pulled out his walkie-talkie.



Junie came back in a huff. He stomped in and adjusted his hat. His wild eyes darted around the room. "Where the woman?" he said to Lita's back.

"Ambulance took her to the hospital about twenty minutes ago." Lita was bent over cleaning up the bandages, rolled them up into a ball and tossed them in the trash. Walking away from the trash, she turned and faced Junie, then stopped in her tracks.

"What's that?" she inquired, pointing to the pink leopard tote bag he had on his shoulder. It had two gold handles, one with a cute dangling heart keychain.

"Up the street, about half a mile from here, there's a car rolled over in the ditch. Look like it ran smack dab into the tree before it slid down the embankment and rolled over." Junie spoke fast. Lita knew him all too well; he was up to something, but she couldn't figure out what.

"It had to be her car. I don't know how the hell she got out of it... airbags deployed and everything. It looked real bad. I'm surprised she not dead!"

Lita's eyes furrowed together. Despite the late hour, she was fully awake.

"This was all I was able to get before I saw the police coming with a tow truck." Junie held out the tote bag, opened and looked into it. "She musta been going somewhere. It's got her clothes in it, toothbrush, deodorant, and lotion. Two old black and white pictures of a baby. No ID. No other information...and..." He stopped and looked up at Lita for a moment without speaking.

"And what?" Anxiety clipped both words.

"And look..."

Lita walked over and peered in the bag.

"Sweet Jesus! How much is that?"

"\$14,000." Junie responded with a straight face. He had scurried far enough away from the scene to avoid being seen by the cops. He hid in a narrow passageway between two old houses and rifled through the bag. He found \$17,000 in large bills stuffed under her clothes.

Lita gasped and brought her hand to her mouth.

"Where you think she was going with this type of cash on her?" Concern spread across her forehead. "You think she a dope dealer?"

"Na, too pretty for a dope dealer. No dope in her bag neither. Think I mighta been right earlier. Probably a prostitute." He stated. "With a good manicure."

"Think this money belong to her pimp?"

Junie hunched his shoulders. "Maybe. I wonder if all this money got something to do with that crash she had?"

Lita twisted her mouth and bit down on her bottom lip. She walked into the kitchen with Junie right behind her. She grabbed two glasses from the cabinet, poured herself a Pepsi and poured him a shot of whiskey. He greedily downed the drink then waltzed back into the front room and sat on the couch. She followed suit. The silence gave them a moment to think about the situation. Then Junie spoke up.

"Them wheels is turning in that head of yours, ain't it? What you thinking, Lita?" He watched her closely.

She flicked a dismissive hand at him. "It's all so bizarre. We don't even know who she is."

Then Junie said. "Do you know what we can do with this type of money Lita? How many people we can help?"

The gesture was nice. Junie was always kind-hearted to the underserved. He was like a modern-day Robin Hood.

"But it's not ours."

"Technically, it ain't nobody's. Remember, she don't even know who she is, soooo..."

Lita pondered his implication of keeping the money. It wasn't right. But she also didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Don't block your blessings" is what her grandmother used to say.

Junie had a good point. She did a lot of philanthropy work in the community. She tried to feed, house, and clothe as many people as her social security check could handle. This extra money would be a much-needed blessing.

Lita turned to look at Junie. He was anxious.

"What if she comes back for the money?"

"She ain't."

Lita narrowed her eyes on Junie. "How you know?"

"I got a feeling."

"Did you see her, how she was crying?" Lita asked.

"Yeah, poor thing with her pretty little self. Looked really lost and scared."

"It's a good thing that we found her out there and nobody else." Lita said. "No telling what would have happened to her."

Junie shook his head in agreement. "Was thinking that also. That's why it should be okay to keep this money...as a thank you."

"No, Junie."

"She look like she got plenty of money. This money probably don't even matter to her. You saw that little expensive boot with all the red on the bottom? Tionna said those shoes expensive. I was out there looking for that boot so I could cash it in but found this

pink bag instead. And that diamond necklace she had on? I bet it's real. People like that, this kinda money is like pocket change. Just like ashtray money."

Lita pondered. "Junie you got my mind wondering and my scalp itching. I can't even think straight." She shook her head. "We'll have to find her."

"Find her?" Junie said. "What cho mean Lita? I don't know about you but I ain't plan on looking for nobody!"

"Junie! We can't keep that money. We gotta at least try to find her to return it. Or..." She hesitated with the next few words. "We turn it into the police." There, she'd said it. Although that option was not truly on her heart.

"PO-LEESE?" He leaped up, clutching the pink tote bag protectively to his chest, hooking his fingers around the gold handle. "The damn police got enough money! They don't even fix the street lights around here!" He screeched like he had been electrocuted. "Why would we give them anything?"

"Junie!" She hissed a whisper to him. "Hush your loud talking. You're gonna wake up Tionna and Tonya. And I know you don't wanna deal with them."

She followed him as he paced to the other side of the room. Junie was Lita's oldest sister's widowed husband. People thought it strange that they forged a friendship bond that was undeniably strong. They thought it was even stranger that they lived together. Early on, Lita used to be bothered by the whispers and speculations about their attachment. But she knew she was honoring Dessie's deathbed request that she take care of and look out for Junie.

None of it ever bothered Junie. He didn't give a damn what people thought of him.

"Ya know," Junie surmised. "Since she don't remember how she got here, that mean she don't remember this money." He looked at Lita.

"No Junie." She shook her head. "Brother-in-law, you don't get your blessings by doing wrong. We got to contact her husband,

possibly ex-husband.”

“Ex?” He said.

“Remember her ring was missing? Don’t matter; this money don’t belong to us. Now go put it away somewhere safe before Tonya or Tionna see it. And don’t you utter a word to either one of them.”

“Think about this, Lita!” Junie said in a harsh whisper, his eyes wild. He pinned her with his stare and pulled her to the couch to sit.

“What we could do with this money! She don’t remember, so what harm can it do? We could help a lot of people. You always taking in strays. We can feed more people. Help more people with money that’s...not...even...missing.” These last three words came out in a whimsical whisper.

“Don’t matter Junie...we’ll get our blessings some other way. Now go put it away, please.”

“Yep.” said Junie and stood with an attitude. “We’ll hold on to it, all \$12,000 of it. Till we find her.” But Lita could tell by his response that he had no intentions of looking for the young woman.

“Twelve?”

“Twelve.” He stated firmly.

She could tell that his mood shifted and she was not ready to battle with him. “I don’t have a good feeling about this Junie.” She paused. “Are you really gonna look for her?”

“Tell you what, if I ever see her again, then I’ll offer her the money back. Deal?”

“Promise?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “You too good Lita. You too good. I promise. But until then, I’m in charge of it.” He hiked the bag back onto his shoulder.

“When Dessie died, you promised her to look after me. Both of y’all knew that I wouldn’t survive without her. And how could I? I’m just a man. You’re good Lita Brown. Let someone take care of you for a change. Blessings come in all kinda shapes forms, sizes,

and situations. God wouldn't have allowed this to play out the way that it did if it wasn't supposed to be. Children can eat offa what she paid for those shoes she had on and you know I'm right. But as God as my witness, if I see her again I'll offer her the money, but until that day happens, the community has just caught a much-needed windfall. 'Cause I don't ever plan on seeing that woman again in my life." He walked off into the back room.

Lita sighed. She didn't even want to know where he would hide the money.

Chapter 3

KENNY

*I*m gonna say this loud because I want all the men to hear. So turn up the volume, tell the kids to be quiet, and stop the dog from barking.” Her hearty laugh at her own theatrics filled the inside of his car.

“Get your pencils out and take notes!” The podcast host paused to take a breath, then proceeded slowly.

“Women want honesty, respect, transparency, and most of all...” She paused for a cliffhanger effect. “...Patience!” There’s something to be said about a man with patience. That’s all us women really want in a man...”

That’s where she lost him.

Kenny glared at his iPhone which was connected to the car’s speakers. “Bullshit!” He spat out in response to the unknown woman. If patience was a virtue, then he should be the most virtuous. Thirty-seven days without sex. Humph! He was damned near a saint!

Kenny punched the phone’s screen with his index finger to kill the source of the sound. He put the car in reverse, peered over his shoulder, then ripped out of the restaurant’s parking lot onto the main street.

This was one of the many podcasts about women’s inner workings he had been researching, trying to get some insight. Now it was time to admit that the more shows he listened to, the more

confused he was. But to be fair, there probably wasn't a podcast in the world that could help his unique situation.

The thick aroma of the sweet citrus glaze on the orange chicken with fried rice stuck to the insides of his nose. His stomach rumbled. It was his wife's favorite meal. And just like that, her essence seeped into his brain. His groin jumped.

Flashes of her ripe and swollen nipples poked through his mind. He pictured them bra-less and peeking through the thin fabric of her favorite white Bob Marley t-shirt. Kenny had to adjust himself in the driver's seat. He imagined lifting her shirt over her head and him slowly tracing his tongue around her areolas. He loved trapping one gently between his teeth and lips, teasing it until it was as hard as a milk dud, then sucking on it with his whole mouth until it popped out.

Kenny felt his manhood straining against his pants' zipper. He shifted his hips upward to relieve the mounting pressure as he maneuvered through the streets of Antioch, California, in anticipation of seeing her. Eager, he pressed harder on the Honda Accord's gas pedal, pushing the 4 cylinders to their limit. The engine sputtered and the car lurched as the traffic on Highway 4 loosened up.

Sex was on his mind. All day! When he drove to China Garden, he was thinking about sex. As he stood in line to order, he thought about sex. And now, headed back home, sex was still on his brain. The good, long-lasting, wet, all-in, sweaty kind of sex that had eluded him for the past five weeks and two days. A soft, tortured groan escaped his throat.

Kenny ached for his wife. He pictured her being excited when he came home, touched by his thoughtfulness to get her favorite food. He saw her hypnotic smile and felt her soft breasts as she leaned into him to kiss him. He missed having her lips on his skin and putting his tongue all over her body.

Going without sex this long would drive any red-blooded man crazy. Fuck yeah, Kenny was extra horny and just wanted to feel his wife again. But more than that, he really longed to get things

back to the way they used to be.

A shudder ran up Kenny's spine. His shoulders shook in response and a smile crept into the corners of his lips. Today could be his lucky day. He hit a corner off Lone Tree Street to avoid the barrage of slow traffic lights.

She had been through so much. Kenny sobered up at the thought and his hardness softened. Her days were clouded with pain and mental anguish. A suspicious silence now clung throughout the house. Kenny desperately wanted to lighten the mood that was now their new normal. Just to see her flash her genuine smile would make him feel that what had been going on the last few weeks wouldn't always last.

Kenny shoved the car into the driveway, grabbed the bag of food, and rushed through the front door, ready. He looked around for Mennette. She wasn't in the living room or the den. He moved swiftly into the kitchen, his chest rising and falling with each deep breath. Not there either. He placed the take-out on the dining table.

Kenny felt something rubbing against his ankle and looked down. Fluffy, their cat, wrapped herself around his leg; he felt the vibrations of her deep purring.

"Not the pussy I'm looking for..." he said flatly.

Faint sounds from upstairs caught Kenny's attention. His eyes snapped to the top of the staircase leading to their room. He shook his leg to release it from Fluffy's embrace and moved in that direction.

"Mennette?" Kenny called out. No answer.

"Lord, let this work," he said under his breath as a gust of air escaped his pursed lips. Inside he was anxious. A knot sat in the pit of his stomach and sweat sprouted on his forehead.

Kenny jogged up a few steps, then froze. A memory from a few days ago flashed in his mind. He turned around and returned to the kitchen. He needed some liquid courage.

He poured a quick shot of tequila, swallowing it in one gulp minus the salt and lime. It went down with a burn and he gnashed his

teeth together. He took a moment to get his mind right. He wanted to make passionate love to his wife. He knew his intentions were purely selfish, but who could blame him?

Kenny had taken a leave from work and had been waiting on her hand and foot for weeks. Didn't he deserve to have his needs met in return? Most men in his situation would have cheated after the first few days of no sex, Kenny reasoned. But Mennette was the only woman for him. Had been since the day he laid eyes on her. So he had no interest in going on the prowl. He had to wait. Just like the podcast lady stated, he knew that patience was vital to any situation dealing with women. But at some point, the waiting had to be over, right?

Inspired by the fire of the alcohol blazing a trail down to his stomach, he bounced up the stairs two at a time and entered their master bedroom. Kenny heard the dull sound of the shower running from behind the master bathroom door.

"Perfect timing!" he thought.

Kenny looked around the room. He noticed her discarded sweatpants lying over the back of the chair. One of her many pairs of stilettos lay pigeon-toed on the floor, seemingly spilled out from her shoe organizer which hung over the closet door. A muffled thud came from behind the bathroom door. She probably dropped her body wash bottle, Kenny thought. He imagined gentle circles of her loofa gliding with bubbles across her soft, beautiful skin.

Kenny moved to ruffle through the top drawer of their dresser that was filled with candles and incense. He picked out five Cinnamon Berry candles, her favorite, and lit them quickly. He snatched his shirt over his head. He almost tripped trying to get out of his khaki pants while slipping his shoes off his feet at the same time. He left them there in a heap.

He flung his boxers towards the corner across the room, checked his breath, then dropped to do a quick round of pushups. He popped up and caught his reflection in the mirror mounted above the dresser. Kenny smiled back at himself. His six-pack abs

had abandoned him years ago, however he was far from a dad bod. Kenny nodded his head in approval.

“Not bad for a 44-year-old,” Kenny said aloud to his reflection. “Not bad at all!” He stroked his beard which had a few specks of gray. His freshly lined cut perfectly framed his face. He received looks and compliments from women often, but barely paid attention. To his dark, deep-set eyes, he considered himself plain, especially in the shadow of his older brother. But then again, most people paled in comparison to his brother.

Kenny playfully wiggled his eyebrows at his reflection and pushed the thought out of his head. None of that mattered because he already had the girl of his dreams. And even after being together for 24 years – through dating in college and crossing over their 19th wedding anniversary mark – despite their ups and downs, his heart and lust burned only for Mennette.

He opened the window. A breeze flittered in and trickled across his bare chest. Sounds of the neighborhood children playing in the late afternoon sun floated into the room, along with the annoying barking of the next-door neighbor’s dog. It was close to dusk with enough daylight left to cast the shadow of the flames on the nearby wall.

Mennette had a pad of paper and a pencil lying in the middle of the bed. Kenny moved them to the chair and smoothed out the bed sheets. Today, of all days, he desperately hoped her passionate and stubborn Aries personality didn’t lock horns with his Taurus, because he physically needed his wife right now.

The pocket of his discarded khakis crumpled next to the wall chimed and buzzed. From the special ringtone he had programmed, he knew it was Tamara, Mennette’s best friend. Before the accident, the two of them were thick as thieves. Now, she’d been trying desperately to get Mennette alone for weeks, but Kenny was not having it. He had only allowed one supervised visit for about 10 minutes.

Kenny didn’t twitch a single muscle. Tamara would have to

leave another message along with the other 32 she'd left. He had important business to handle right now.

The water stopped running. Kenny jumped atop the bed, ready. He heard fumbling in the bathroom. She was humming a little medley that he didn't recognize. He adjusted himself, then wondered if it would be too much being naked. He decided yes it would. So he slipped under the sheets.

The anticipation was driving him crazy. Kenny touched himself as he imagined sliding deep between her brown thighs into her wetness. He was so close to seeing that beautiful brown skin of hers. She was the same color of coffee prepared the way she liked it: with two shots of cream and three spoons of sugar. He'd been ready for this all day. He stroked his full erection, hungrily sliding his closed fist up and down his shaft.

Just then, she opened the bathroom door. Kenny felt himself get a little stiffer in his hand as he took in her beauty. Mennette didn't notice him as she emerged wrapped in a towel. Her shoulder length hair clung to her face in stringy curls.

"Hey!" He said in a low tone that sounded a little too eager to his own ears. There was a quick pause. This was either about to go totally right or all the way wrong. He silently prayed for the first option.

Startled, Mennette froze. Her mouth and eyes ballooned wide open in shock. A bit of vibrancy drained from her coffee colored face as a question flashed across it.

Kenny tried to smile but it came out as a tight anxious line. "I was 'gon join you in the shower but I didn't wanna scare you."

Her forehead crinkled. Kenny's heart sank a little in disappointment. Mennette looked ready to take off running at any moment.

"Like last time," he added.

The last time, she couldn't remember his name. And although he bristled and all hopes of sex went down the drain then, he couldn't be mad at her. This situation wasn't her fault.

But tonight, there was no room for mistakes. He wanted, no,

he needed her to comply. The last 37 days were miserable for so many reasons; the lack of sex was second only to her memory loss. Of all the recent issues they've had in their marriage prior to her accident, sex was not one of them. He was never bored with their sex life.

Today he tried to set the mood. But his fresh erection saluting her and steeping the bedsheet like a tent must have been quite a sight.

Kenny couldn't get used to this new Mennette, who stood before him now, wrapped protectively in the terry bath towel. And truthfully, she was not who he wanted. He craved the spontaneous, adventurous, and daring woman that he married. The one who celebrated her own sexuality and her freedom to be aggressive in her needs and desires. New Mennette never wanted him to touch her in any way and she never seemed to remember his name. Was his 37-day drought about to turn into 38?

Hunger and desperation boiled in him as he watched her eyes take in the entire scene. Every muscle in his body was tense like a taut sling ready to snap. Mennette's eyes sweep the room from the lit candles and over to the bed, where the sheet tent started to droop some. She didn't make a sound or move a muscle. The long silence between them persisted into awkwardness.

Wrinkles gathered at the top of the towel where her fingers gripped it tightly. The only sound was the exchanges of their breaths. The excruciating moment seemed to last forever to Kenny. He focused his attention on the seductive rise and fall of her chest. Had he been patient long enough? Slowly, a thin hopeful smile tugged at the edges of his mouth as he attempted to move things along.

"Ummm..." he said, hesitating. Then he pulled the sheet and got up from the bed. His erection sprung loose like a jack-in-the-box, pointing at Mennette.

Startled, she yelped and quickly darted towards the bedroom door. Kenny, equally fast, flew out of the bed and met her at the

doorknob. That sent Mennette into full panic mode. She started screaming like someone was killing her.

“STOP!!”

Mennette swiped at him, raking her nails deep across his skin. He recoiled and instinctively brought his hands up to protect his face.

“Get away from me! Heeeeeelp!”

In a split second, Mennette spun around and shot to the other side of the room. She grabbed a book and hurled it at Kenny.

Barely missing his head, it crashed into the wall behind him with a boom. It dropped to the floor, its pages fluttering open.

Kenny charged towards her with a frown. Mennette backed up in a panic at the sight of his penis and scrambled to grab a stiletto from off the floor.

“Mennette!” He hollered, slowing his approach when he saw the shoe in her hand. His hands went up in surrender and he crouched a little to try to match her height. “Put the shoe down.”

She shook her head ‘no’ vigorously. He eased closer to her, purposely speaking slowly and carefully.

“Mennette... put...the...shoe...down.”

A flash of fear skittered across her wide eyes. Kenny took one large step towards her and Mennette threw the shoe, hard. It missed, barely whizzing by his ear.

She yanked up the other shoe and her towel fell to the floor.

Kenny’s mouth fell open, distracted by her naked body. He dropped his guard, much to his mistake. He didn’t pay attention to Mennette winding her arm back like a sling and chucking the second shoe at his head. He felt the blow immediately when it clipped the right side of his forehead, sending him staggering backwards.

Little pops of white light bloomed behind his eyes and intense pain shot through his skull. He steadied himself and slowly touched his head, pulling fresh blood away with his fingers.

“Help! Get away from me! HELP!”

Mennette lunged towards him, swinging wildly before he could

focus. His brain had not registered the pain growing in his forehead before he was pummeled with a barrage of tiny fists on his face and chest.

“Help! Help! Help!” She screamed with each blow.

One of the blows landed on the sore spot on his forehead. It took every ounce of Kenny’s self-control to not body slam her like a dude. She was a flurry of wet curly hair, knuckles, and windmill palm slaps.

Instead, he grabbed her and pinned her biceps to her sides. Mennette bucked like a wild horse, knocking him closer to the bed. Kenny rolled her onto it and they both bounced on top of the mattress. She wiggled out of his embrace and landed a hard fist into his stomach, knocking some of the wind out of him.

Kenny rolled over onto the floor and coughed a few times. Mennette ran to the door. He tried bolting up but the pain was too intense. Instead, he scrambled his naked body on the floor towards her. She proceeded to pummel him some more with her fists.

“MENNETTE!” His voice boomed and she froze, her left hand still held high up in the air. “Mennette, damn it, it’s *ME!*”

Kenny rubbed his head, wincing with each touch, feeling the area rise up under his skin. She reached for the doorknob but didn’t turn it. Mennette’s face registered confusion and distrust all in one sweeping emotion. He could tell she was struggling by the way her fingers lightly touched the knob, stroking the roundness of it while her mind twisted, trying to recover memories.

He was struggling too. Kenny was still fixated on her nudity. His eyes greedily scanned her from her neck down to the towel that had fallen to the floor. He practically drooled over the rounded teardrop curve of her breasts and the perfectly shaped and trimmed landing strip centered between her legs. It created the perfect runway for his body to enter hers. Kenny stared at the damp legs that used to cling snugly around his waist whenever he glided into her, trying to get the most of her... all of her. He had to snap out of his fantasy and focus on the moment.

“Do you know who I am? Do you remember my name?” Kenny asked slowly.

A slight wave of recognition entered her eyes and she tilted her head.

“My husband?”

It sounded more like a question than a statement. Mennette reached for the towel and wrapped it tightly around herself again.

“You’re my husband, Keith?”

“Kenny, actually. I’m Kenny,” he said. “Keith is my brother.”

“Sorry.”

“Not a problem.” Under any other circumstances, he would be furious.

She stared at him with her big eyes. Blinking. Thinking.

He wanted to touch her. Pull her to him and kiss her mouth, then trail his tongue from her neck to her breasts and down through the landing strip. But he dared not move. He’d just screwed things up tonight, as if he hadn’t learned his lesson from a few days ago. Then, he had approached her too fast, too eagerly, with hunger and fire in his energy. It only scared her away and he found himself alone in the bathroom later with a bottle of lotion and a magazine. It looked like that might be the case again tonight.

Dusk blanketed the street. The bright yellow of the sun had been replaced with deep orange and periwinkle. The dog had calmed down and silence replaced the children’s laughter. Kenny looked over at the Cinnamon Berry candles with their flickering flames dancing against the walls. It was the only light in the now dim room. A tightness began to rise in his chest to match his throbbing head. Kenny wondered how much more of the whole situation he could take.

“I didn’t mean to sneak up on you.” He sighed, holding his head. “Orange chicken. Remember? I went out to get dinner. Chinese food.”

“I was, uh, just taking a shower. I wasn’t expecting you to be in the room when I got out.” She paused and let out a heavy audible

sigh. "Listen, we've got to come up with a better system. I nearly had a heart attack. And in the buff? It's quite a bit. A lot actually." Her eyes shifted to a spot away from his drooping penis.

"My bad." He said retrieving his shorts and slipping them on quickly. "Didn't realize it would be such a shock."

"It's just that... when you're getting out of the shower... and there's a naked man standing with... all that just...hanging out..." Mennette's choppy words trailed off, her arm swinging from side to side completing her thought.

"Not just any naked man. Your husband," Kenny interjected.

"Right," she said softly.

Mennette's cheeks warmed a little as she shyly looked away. Her skin glistened from the water. He imagined his tongue lapping at the moisture which settled on the tops of her shoulders and his lips pulling at her skin, tasting her body. She was as captivating and beautiful to him as ever. Kenny felt himself start to get excited again and silently willed himself to calm down.

The doctors told him to take it slowly with Mennette. He hadn't listened. He expected they'd jump right back into their routine and thought it would help her to remember. The last five weeks hadn't played out the way he hoped.

The day she returned home from the hospital, Mennette locked herself in their bedroom. Kenny resigned to sleeping on the couch. She only let him in during the daytime to take a shower in their bathroom and to change his clothes. She just laid in bed all day, unkept, and barely ate. By week three, Kenny decided he had given her enough space. He made her start showering and getting dressed every day and insisted she re-enter the world. At least their world.

Kenny wanted to go back to the movie nights on the couch, and the laughter they shared over one of her bad jokes. He missed the unusually high off-key notes she hit while cooking spaghetti or trying to keep up with Whitney Houston on Pandora. Their old life. The one in his mind that was now lightyears away. He had

accomplished getting Mennette back to the couch alright, but that was it. New Mennette just looked at reality TV show marathons in the living room during the day and retired to the room she'd commandeered at night.

Kenny reached for Mennette's hand and led her to the bed. She followed reluctantly, sat down next to him, and looked into his eyes. A small smile teetered on the corners of her lips. Kenny mistook the look as an invitation to advance. He gently moved a hand to her thigh, inching his fingers up under the towel. Mennette stiffened and stopped his roaming fingers.

"Relax," he said.

She hesitated, untrusting. Her eyes desperately searched his. Kenny patiently waited for a hint of trust. He looked at her mouth, her eyes, and her hair. He resisted the urge to run his fingers through her wild, crinkly mane. She usually wore it in a straight, sleek style that cascaded just above her shoulders for her job. But lately, it protested boldly with proud, tight, and wild curly ringlets. It was a beautiful sight to him because it's how she wore it in college when he met her.

Her soft thighs poked from the towel. Kenny lovingly eased two of his fingers further up.

"I, I'm not sure. I, I don't know about all of this," Mennette stuttered nervously, securely clutching the top part of the towel. "What if, I mean... how am I supposed... It just doesn't seem right."

"Oh, baby. Mennette. It's all the way right." His sexy growl filled her ear. "We're married. And it's been well over a month since we've acted like a married couple, if you know what I mean."

Kenny inched a little closer to her. He touched her face, traced his thumb over the tiny railroad tracks left by stitches, and smiled, trying to regain her trust.

"We've been together for half our lives. In love. Making love. Not once did you ever have complaints. We were both very satisfied. I need to feel the inside of my wife."

"I..."

“Please don’t make me beg, ’cause I will. Be my wife.” His voice dipped to a deep purr and he whispered into her ear. “Please! Let me be your husband.”

He watched her as he slowly traced her collar bone with his thumb, outlining the fading bruise caused by her seatbelt. Its deep strawberry color splattered up around her neck like fireworks. Just under her delicate skin surrounding her eyes were the black and blue ghosts. Kenny placed the soft pad of his finger onto a spot behind her ear. Her breathing skipped and he thought he saw something change in her eyes. Even if she couldn’t remember, he damn sure did. He knew all her spots and it seemed like her body remembered.

“You always love when I touch you there.” He leaned into her with a slow graze of his top lip across her neck. Kenny’s moist tongue peeked out to gently stroke that spot behind her ear. He kissed her there again, slowly, until her body relaxed. His breathing fell in sync with hers.

“I used to kiss you right there.”

Her nipples hardened through the thick cloth. Kenny focused on them. He touched her shoulder blade, ran his fingers down to the rim of the towel and followed it with his thumb before slipping it between the terry cloth and her skin.

This is what he imagined in his car! She released her grip on the towel. It slipped down around her waist onto the bed, exposing her bare breasts to him. He bent to kiss her skin and circled her nipple with his tongue before taking it in its entirety in his mouth. He gently pulled at the bud with his tongue and lips, sucking on it. The slight arch in her back let him know he was on the right track.

Before she knew it, Kenny had her laying back on the bed, the towel forgotten. While he sucked on her breast, he ran his fingers up her legs. He found her secret place. He massaged it in circles and inserted his fingers inside her.

Mennette let out a soft moan as her body continued to melt under his skill. Her eyes glazed over and began to roll to the back

of her head. Kenny stretched her out and hovered over her. It was finally happening.

"This is what the fuck I'm talking about!" he screamed in his mind.

He dropped to the side of the bed. Mennette's knees fell apart, inviting his face into her. He buried his mouth into her landing strip, inhaling the tiny hairs until they tickled his nose. She inched her pelvis toward him. Kenny slipped his tongue across her clit. Then he focused on her lips, sucking them one at a time, giving each individual attention before refocusing on her clitoris.

Mennette shifted her hips upward. She instinctively started slow-grinding into his mouth. Kenny slid his tongue up and down, slipping in and out until he felt her hands gripping the sides of his face. She pushed harder, easing herself onto his tongue. He slowed the motion of his tongue and caressed it up, down, and across her like he was licking ice cream. The sounds escaping Mennette's open mouth increased. She arched her back and clenched her butt cheeks. Her body missed him just as much as he missed hers.

Mennette's breathing became ragged. Her moans morphed into high-pitched squeaks as she dug her fingers into the skin on his face, gripping and grasping at his ears.

"Oh my God!" she gasped.

Her animated motions and sounds drove Kenny wild. He sped up his licking. He sucked up her juices and rubbed his nose and tongue deeper into her.

"Right there." She panted. "Right there!"

The distant chime of his phone's unique ringtone broke through the sound of Kenny's slurps and Mennette's squeals. She jerked back to reality and then, as if a jolt of electricity shot through her body, she jumped up, snatching the towel and protecting herself again.

"Damn it!" Kenny yelled, punching the space on the mattress Mennette had just vacated. Why did Tamara pick now to be persistent?

Mennette thought he was mad at her and said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't let that disrupt us," Kenny pleaded, already on his knees.

"I don't think I can." Mennette moved closer to the door.

"Like hell, you can."

"I can't. I'm sorry I let myself go. I shouldn't have. It was a bad idea."

"Just a minute ago you didn't think it was a bad idea."

Her face warmed. He pushed himself up from his kneeling position and sat on the bed. He knew better than to try to walk toward her. Kenny continued pleading his case.

"You were already there." He licked his lips, which were still slick with her juice, and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "Lay back down and let me finish." He reached out to Mennette. Gently, he sat her back on the bed and propped next to her.

"I couldn't possibly now."

"But your body says you can..." he moaned into her neck, reaching his fingers back to the spot she liked. Mennette winced and pulled away, not wanting her body to betray her again.

"I know. But I really can't," she replied. "I really don't remember..."

"Baby, you don't have to remember." Kenny paused, eyeing her neck. "It'll all come back to you. Once you open up to me. Like you just did..."

She slowly shook her head no.

"Trust me! Let me just..."

She continued shaking her head.

"But baby, you can. You just gotta relax again and lie down. You were almost there. I can help you with that."

The phone started up again. She raised her eyebrows. Kenny acted like he didn't hear it. That damn Tamara was relentless and he was ready to throw the phone out of the window. The phone chimed again. Kenny sighed and closed his eyes, trying to contain the anger rising within him.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do with this?" He pointed to

his erection.

"It's hard for me too. I just really got to know you..." she hesitated. "We just met."

"But we *didn't* just meet. We've been together for half our lives! I'm your *husband*!" He pleaded. Kenny inhaled, trying to regain his patience and understanding. He fucking hated amnesia. The throbbing in his groin was beating in rhythm with the knot on his head. Kenny felt he might pass out soon from one or both.

"Mennette, I brought you home from the hospital. Do you at least remember that?"

"But..."

"You want some wine? How about some wine? Chocolate red wine. It always makes you feel better," Kenny nervously prattled. "It will relax you. And that's all I want, baby, is for you to relax. I'll take care of the rest. I just need to feel that wetness again. Just let me taste you."

She firmly shook her head again, clutching her towel tighter. Mennette set her mouth in a determined line.

"Food then?" Kenny probed. "I got your favorite downstairs?"

He watched her closely as her eyes searched his face. What he wouldn't do to be able to open up that brain and see what was going on in there. He genuinely wanted to empathize with his wife and understand how it felt to be suddenly dropped into a world that wasn't familiar.

Mennette locked her jaw. If her memory was gone, her body did a terrible job of hiding it because he knew that look. Her mind was made up. It was set in her eyes, her body language, her stance. Kenny was not getting any tonight. He had to make do with the appetizer he stole. At least he'd come closer than he'd been in a long time.

He sighed loudly. What could he say? He loved strong women, probably because his mother was one. It was one of the things that had attracted Kenny to Mennette in the first place.

Exasperated, he puffed out his cheeks and rocked forward be-

fore getting up from the bed.

"Okay." His face held a tight smile. "I understand. We'll just wait until you're ready."

Kenny leaned down and placed a kiss on her forehead, right on her railroad tracks.

"No pressure. But, you will let me know when you're ready again, right?"

"Of course."

"Don't forget now!" Kenny tried smiling.

She returned the attempt.

"You promise?"

She bobbed her head up and down.

"You ain't gon' forget?" He asked playfully. "If you ever ready again... get that tingle between those legs, let me know!"

"Okay." She giggled a little.

"As soon as you know." He took in a deep sigh, stretched, then looked down at her. "Now?"

She gave him a sweet smile. "I promise. You'll be the first to know."

"Alright. Like I said, no pressure. I just don't want you to forget."

"I won't."

"Dinner is downstairs. Why don't you get cozy and put on your nightgown? I'll meet you in the kitchen. All of a sudden I feel the need for a cold shower!"

Mennette went to the dresser to pull something out. So much for patience, Kenny thought. He grabbed his magazine and lotion and shut the bathroom door behind him.

Chapter 4

KENNY

Dinner was a silent pulling of teeth; painful and slow. To Kenny, they felt like strangers on a terrible first date. But it was actually worse; they were lovers with a history that couldn't be discussed, remembered, or romanticized.

Kenny chewed slowly and thoughtfully as he watched Mennette slide her fork across the loose noodles on her plate. Periodically she stabbed at the broccoli and orange chicken, sulking. Earlier she ditched the chopsticks she used to use and opted for the fork.

Her shoulders drooped and her eyes were downcast. The damp hair had dried around the ends but stuck to parts of her face behind her ear. Silence swelled between them and the obvious glared at Kenny; after five weeks, they still had a long road ahead. Recovery was nowhere in sight.

Her first day home was painful for both of them. Kenny led her into their home, hopeful that familiar surroundings would spark some memories. Mennette kept a distrusting distance between them as she slowly toured the house as if she were viewing a museum exhibit of her life. She glanced up at the curtains, ran her fingers across the lacey fabric, then let them drop from her hand. She picked up small items here and there, examined them, and put them back. She frowned at a piece of furniture. She gazed at pictures in utter confusion.

Kenny stood in the den, watching her. He wasn't sure if the

clash of emotions on her face spelled distaste or something else he couldn't read. He felt powerless to help the woman he loved. When Mennette ran out of objects to scrutinize, she turned to Kenny and asked where her room was located. She wanted to know where the shower was and where exactly he would be sleeping. That's when Kenny first realized that this journey would not only take some time but would also test his strength.

Mennette grabbed the bag from the hospital and followed him up the stairs to their master bedroom. Kenny stepped aside to let her enter. She shut the door behind her and promptly locked it. He'd been sleeping on the couch ever since. Some nights he fell asleep in the chair in his office. These were the times he stayed up late, trying to figure out their bill situation. Her hospital stay, her medication, the therapy, it was all adding up to a large financial strain, even with his health insurance.

Then there was the fact that she would not be returning to her job. He'd sent several emails to her company's HR department but still had yet to hear back from them. This was one less income than their budget could handle. His job was only allowing him so many weeks off with full pay, even with California's generous Family and Medical Leave act. And he was nearing the time when he'd have to tell his boss something. He needed to figure out if it was even possible to go back to work while she stayed at home to cope with her memory loss alone for nine hours of the day.

"It must be serious." Mennette's voice snapped him back to the present.

"Excuse me?" Kenny blinked at her.

"Whatever it is you're thinking about must be pretty serious."

Kenny looked into her eyes, then at her plate. She had managed to finish eating everything but a few broccoli florets.

"You were frowning."

"Nothing I can't handle." Kenny brushed her statement away and loosened the muscles in his face in an attempt to ease her concern. But she was right. It was serious. His concerns about their

finances, future, and what was to become of their marriage had been at the forefront of his mind since the night of her accident.

"It ain't easy, but I've been through worse." He tried to lighten his voice.

Kenny leaned over and flicked a tiny piece of noodle from her cheek then stroked his thumb against the top of her eyebrow where the stitches had been removed. He called it her "railroad tracks" because of the pattern now embedded in her skin. Mennette visibly flinched, but he ignored it. Any chance to touch her skin was worth her rejection.

Mennette cleared her throat and leaned out of reach of his hand. "I saw some paintings in the garage." She waited for his response but when there was none, she continued. "Paintings. Easels, some brushes. And paints." Her eyes met his. "In the garage?"

"Hmmm." Kenny leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest. Apparently, she'd been doing more than remaining perched in front of the TV.

"You paint." He finally said.

"I do?" Her voice lifted slightly. Her eyes brightened a little like a light switch flipped on in a dark house. "As a hobby or professionally?" She placed the fork down.

"Hobby. But you're pretty damn good. Acrylics, oils, watercolors, something like that. You like painting beaches and sunsets the most. Said nature clears your mind or soothes your soul or does something to you." Kenny hunched his shoulders. He loved the flower-child, tree-hugging part of her personality even though he never truly understood it.

"I just know that you're amazing when you're painting."

"Amazing? How?" Mennette sat up. Her back straightened and her face seemed hopeful for some familiarity.

Kenny paused for a moment as he thought wistfully of times she spent hours in her "paint room." They dubbed it as such shortly after purchasing the house, with an understanding that he'd give up his upstairs office in favor of a nursery when the time came.

"It is what makes you feel whole." He nodded steadily. "How you de-stress. You go into your own little world. Sometimes I would just watch you for hours." A small smile appeared on his face. "Envy you a little."

Mennette cocked her head to the side inquisitively.

"You have passion. Creativity. I wish I had something like that to take my mind away."

"Hmph..." Mennette bit her bottom lip. "Have I been painting for a while?"

"From what you told me, many years. You used to draw a lot when you were a kid. A lotta weekends, you'd drag me to all these shows and festivals. I was trying to impress you and make it seem like I was cultured and shit." A chuckle escaped his throat.

"Did it work?"

He threw his arms up in the air with a wide grin. "I'm here ain't I?"

The corners of her lips pressed upwards as she tried to imagine the woman Kenny described. But it was a sad smile.

"I don't remember any of that."

"It's okay," Kenny reassured her. "It'll come in time. We just gotta keep at it." He filled his chest with air and continued.

"One weekend, we went to Atlanta for a wedding and you found an art show there. One of the artists was this cat named WAK. Beautiful stuff, man." He shook his head remembering how excited she was at the show.

"That's when you thought it was doable. Said he inspired you. It changed your life that night. Since then, I couldn't keep a paintbrush out of your fingers!" A warm smile spread across Kenny's eyes.

"You've been dabbling ever since. I've always said you should pursue it professionally."

"Oh."

Kenny had Mennette's full attention. She pondered this new information while tapping the prongs of the fork against the rim of

the plate.

"Why haven't I painted? Professionally, that is," she asked after a few moments.

"Not really sure. Money, mostly, I guess. Fear, I think."

Mennette stopped the tapping and swiveled the fork around to softly stab at the poor broccoli.

"Maybe I should try it," she announced. "See what happens."

He nodded with a reassuring smile. "It might help. You'd be surprised about the power of the mind."

She looked at him but did not respond.

A moment trickled by. Kenny gnashed down on his back teeth. He wanted a shot of the Hennessy Pure White he had tucked away on an upper shelf in the kitchen. But he liked that they were finally sharing a genuine moment. So he stayed put and continued.

"It was the one thing that brought you joy. You used to sit in the paint room for hours." He cleared his throat. "So, I think it would be a great idea for you to venture back into your paintings. Might spark something interesting or important."

"Hmmm..." Her mind drifted, cutting off the momentum of their conversation and parking it in silence.

There was a time when this scene would have enraged Kenny. Sitting, staring, not engaging with each other... that was not the old Kenny and Mennette. Distance was not a part of his make-up. He, his mother, and brother had always been tightly bound like loops of rope. Communication was the fiber of their household.

He didn't understand Mennette's new ability to turn it off as quickly as she turned it on. Most days, Kenny walked on eggshells around her. But over the past five weeks, Kenny had developed a type of patience that both surprised and intrigued him. He understood the doctor's orders to move slowly and be gentle with her. Trying to do too much too soon could shock her and send her further back into her mind. Earlier tonight had been a prime example of the consequences of pushing before she was ready.

His brother told Kenny he had the patience of Job when he told

him about his intimacy drought. Kenny's love for his wife helped him endure her mood swings, financial strain, and sex-less love. But he could feel his patience for the entirety of their situation wearing thin.

"Was I a good wife?" Mennette's question shocked the conversation back to consciousness. It came out of left field, but to Kenny's ears, it sounded as if it had been bouncing around in her head for some time.

Kenny put his fork down and gave the question serious thought. Was she a good wife? In the beginning, when they met in college, they were like Bonnie and Clyde. He felt he was a King and he had found his Queen.

Early on, Mennette had shown him the value of love. It wasn't the occasional gift on Valentine's Day or the barrage of carefully wrapped presents bundled under a brightly lit pine tree. It wasn't the size of a diamond to profess the magnitude of one's love to the world. No, it was the endless commitment to each other when life took a turn for the worse. It was when you saw no end in sight, yet you kept pushing forward together.

Mennette did that for him. She had proved that she could stand by him during the most difficult time in his life. In his heart, he vowed then that he would stand by her for the rest of his life. She was The One for him. With her by his side, Kenny felt they could take over the world.

But somewhere along the way, their love lost its way. The world had grown too big and unmanageable. And the idea of tackling it became too daunting. The shift in their dynamics left him puzzled. Unfulfilled promises between them frayed the seams of their union. Dissatisfaction sometimes lurked as an unspoken heaviness between them. Other times, it manifested as hurtful words bolstered by raised voices.

Over the last few years, she grew more unhappy, restless, and edgy. His answers to her questions made her snap. She gave short, quick, and cold responses. In the months leading up to the acci-

dent, Kenny began contemplating what had previously been unthinkable for him: Were they going to make it? The fiber of their marriage had worn quite thin and the threat of it unraveling was not to be ignored.

His vision of them conquering the world together was now cloudy. As a matter of fact, the idea of tackling such a task felt smothering. In recent times, Kenny felt as though he were losing his breath. It was like he was trudging up the hill that was his marriage all alone, with a heavy ass backpack on his shoulders.

"You managed," Kenny finally responded. "You worked with what you had."

"What exactly does that mean?" Mennette snorted and cocked her head to the side. "You make it seem bad."

Kenny's jaw twitched. "It means you worked with what you had. Our marriage wasn't perfect. No marriage is."

"But?" Mennette prodded, raising an eyebrow. She wanted to know what his silence was trying to imply. Mennette frowned when he remained quiet. He could feel her frustration growing. But hell, so was his.

"We worked on it, period." Kenny hoped that would shut down this line of questioning because it was the one part of their lives he did not want to explore. Of all her memories that could potentially return, he didn't want to risk those re-surfacing first. He looked into her face. He saw the struggle in her eyes. His sweet, strong, determined Mennette.

Catching his hint, Mennette changed the subject, trying to lighten the mood.

"Again, I'm sorry about earlier. About your head." Then she looked at his cheeks. "And your face."

"Don't worry about it. The bleeding stopped." He touched the side of his face where he'd placed a series of Band-aids to cover the stiletto knot and the nail swipes. She gave him a timid smile.

"I just... it has to be some type of announcement when you plan on popping up."

Kenny visibly bristled and bucked his eyes. The nerve of her! He didn't mention that it was hard for a grown-ass man to "pop up" at his own house, where he paid the mortgage. He also didn't mention the fact that he'd stepped out to get her something to eat. Or that he'd told her that before he even left the house. So he didn't. Kenny swallowed his anger and relaxed the muscles in his face.

"You're right," he nodded in agreement. "I didn't mean to scare you." That part he actually did mean.

Kenny glanced through the open kitchen window to observe the rain which had begun falling. His mind drifted. He thought about the grass that would welcome the much-needed rain. To the unknowing eye, everything in their lives seemed as it should be: a doting husband and a beautiful wife inside a well-manicured, quaint but neat home. But Kenny knew too well that appearances were deceiving.

A crinkle formed on his forehead. In spite of the recent turbulence, Kenny still loved Mennette with everything in him. Probably more than she knew. But this accident, this hiccup in their lives threatened to change everything. Their marriage was already teetering on a cliff. Would this event push them over the edge, sealing their demise?

Or was it a blessing in disguise? Kenny selfishly entertained the idea of the benefits of Mennette's inability to recall their life together. Would they be able to start over? Could he restore their bond by reshaping their relationship in the image of his memories? Would it erase the last few years of arguing, unraveling, and drifting apart? Kenny felt guilty but continued indulging the thought as he looked at her.

Mennette had closed her eyes. She leaned her chin toward the window to better hear the sound of the rain. Kenny watched her chest rise and fall as she breathed deeply. Her lips were slightly open, glistening from her favorite cherry lip gloss that she always wore. He watched silhouettes of the raindrops scroll across her lips like a movie screen. He longed to kiss her. Kenny wanted to fold

her into his chest, wrap his arms around her, and whisper in her ear that she was safe. But her latest rejection cut him like a knife and he feared that the stab wounds only served to incite dormant anger. So he tried a different route.

"A lot of nights like this when it was raining, we'd play Uno or rent a movie. It was like a date night for us." Kenny forced a smile. "Today's Friday night anyway... you in?"

Mennette shrugged, slowly shaking her head.

"Nah. Not in the mood."

When she looked back at him, Kenny noticed something had changed. The calm behind her eyes had bubbled into a brew. Did he interrupt her meditative state?

"How could you not..." he started, but stopped when she narrowed her eyes at him alarmingly. He wanted to ask how a person with no memory could not be in the mood for something.

"I'm just saying. Instead of you walking around here depressed all the time."

"I'm depressed for a reason." Mennette snapped, her eyebrows jumping to the top of her forehead.

"Listen," he held his hands up in surrender. "I get it..."

"Do you?" Mennette stabbed a broccoli with her fork. "Do you really get what I'm going through, Keith?"

"Kenny." He corrected, mildly.

"Kenny." She scoffed, rolling her eyes in the process, but continued her thought. "I don't think you do. I don't think anyone does."

Suddenly, heavy rain poured down. The sound of fat droplets smacking the top of the roof made Kenny a little anxious. He ran his palm across the back of his neck.

"I'm just trying to..."

She leaned forward into her plate, cutting him off, and wrapped her arms around her body. Her face was completely closed into a tight frown.

Agitated, he spoke slowly through gritted teeth.

"I'm just trying to figure this out too."

Mennette snapped angrily out of her pose. "What the hell do you have to figure out, huh?" She poked a finger into her chest. "I'm the one suffering."

"You think you the only one suffering?" Kenny's voice climbed. He slammed the fork onto the table with a loud bang and the plates jumped a little. "I walk around here on fucking eggshells in my own house! You have the nerve to tell me that I gotta make some fucking grand ass announcement just to enter my own bedroom?"

Kenny cracked his neck and huffed out a deep breath.

"I ain't been able to fucking touch my wife or have some God-damn sex in fucking weeks! And YOU the only one suffering? Nah baby girl, your ass ain't the only one in this motherfucker suffering! I can guarantee that!"

Kenny's ragged breathing came out in loud bursts of air. His glare landed on the top of her head as she bowed it toward the table. From her body language, he could tell that she wasn't ready for his outburst and suddenly he felt like an asshole. Kenny took in a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. This is not what they needed. He looked up at the ceiling to steady his thoughts and softened his tone.

"Listen," he said, bringing his eyes back to the top of her head. "I love you, Mennette, I do. I'm here with you. We in this together. But your accident was a week before Thanksgiving. Today is December 21st...it's damned near Christmas! Tha's a long time to be dealing with something like this. And we don't even know who to blame this on 'cause the investigation is still open 'cause you..." Kenny stopped himself.

"Because of your condition," he continued cautiously. "There's no telling how long it will take for you to recover. I'm only trying to make you as comfortable as I can."

Mennette didn't respond. Her eyes stayed focused on the contents on her plate. His next few statements were met with silence from her. She rolled the broccoli around tracing it on the patterns on the plate. Kenny realized that he was speaking to himself. She

was gone back into the folds of her mind with a pained expression on her face.

They sat for another 20 minutes in silence until Mennette retreated to her usual spot on the couch without a word. She curled up, wrapping herself in the throw blanket and settled in to watch a marathon of *The Real Housewives* episodes. Usually, she would crawl upstairs to bed. But tonight, it appeared that the couch would end up being her bed. Which let Kenny know that he would be bunking upstairs in his office chair.

After washing the dishes, Kenny walked by the couch. He wiped his hands dry on a dishtowel. "Need anything before I go upstairs?"

She shook her head no, never taking her eyes from the television. He let Fluffy in who immediately rolled her eyes at him and delivered a low deep growl from her throat. She then jumped onto the couch next to Mennette, who promptly started stroking the cat absentmindedly. Kenny narrowed his eyes and stuck his middle finger up at the cat. At least someone was getting some attention tonight.

Kenny went upstairs into their bedroom to tend to the bump on his head. It started throbbing again after his blow-up. He headed for the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and threw back four Excedrin Migraine pills. He walked back into the room and fell back onto the bed. He missed sleeping in it. He lay there watching the ceiling fan rotate in circles until he was dizzy. After a few minutes, he got up and walked out, moving across the hall toward his office where he was determined to tackle their bills. Just then the phone in his pocket buzzed and chimed that special ringtone. Man, she was annoyingly persistent!

"Yes." Kenny answered abruptly, squelching off the ringer.

"Good evening Kenny, it's Tamara. Is Mennette available?" Her curt, clipped words instantly enraged him.

"She's resting."

"Each time I call her, she is resting."

"Well Tamara, she had a traumatic event happen to her. She can't remember a thing. Again, you know this because I tell you this every time I talk to you. Right now, the doctors want her to stay away from stress, stressful situations, and stressful people." He heard her gasp. "Too much too soon could be bad." Boy, did he know that to be true!

"I promise, as soon as the doctor says it's okay to expose her to more, you will be the first to know." Kenny tried to be as polite as his annoyance would allow him.

"Is she really sleeping? Is she even really still alive, Kenny? I watch *Snapped* and I will have the cops there in 3.3 seconds if you've laid a hand on my BFF!"

He raked his palms across the top of his head. Her little threat was cute.

"Tamara, have you taken all of your meds today?"

"How dare you!" Tamara scoffed with a sharp breath and Kenny could picture her clutching her pearls. He smirked with pleasurable satisfaction.

"Listen, work with me here." Kenny's voice was composed. "Mennette needs rest..."

"...and her friends!" Tamara cut him off. "You know I am her very best. You're just jealous that I know more about her than anyone..." She paused for dramatic effect. "...even you!"

Kenny ignored her rant.

"Rest Tamara. Let her get some rest. I promise I will have her to you soon."

He could hear her deep breathing on the other end, so Kenny rushed to end the call.

"Thank you for calling to check on Mennette, but I assure you as her husband that she's in good hands. I got the invite to your New Year's Eve party. I'll check with her doctors to see if it's okay for her to go. Meanwhile, I will let her know that you called. Good night."

Kenny hung up without letting Tamara respond. He turned his

phone off. He was already dealing with one moody woman. There was no way he would invite another one into the mix, especially one with an attitude like Tamara's. When you know the devil is knocking at your door, you don't willingly open up and let him in.

Kenny was really ready for that Hennessy Pure White so instead of heading to his office, he traveled back downstairs to the kitchen. When he got there, Mennette was digging in the freezer. Fluffy sat dutifully by her ankle, wrapping her tail around it. Mennette turned around with a bag of ice and was startled to see him.

"I was just coming to look for you." Mennette held out a plastic bag full of ice. "To bring you this. An olive branch."

She closed the gap between them and gently placed the bag atop the bump on his head. Kenny winced, then relaxed, allowing her to gently roll and dab the bag against his skin. Through her thin nightgown, he could see the silhouette of her legs. Her hair, finally dry, stood rebellious just like her personality. A hint of red undertones flushed under her skin from the freezer's chill.

"It's getting better. The throbbing's not as bad as earlier. I took some Excedrin for the pain." Kenny touched her hand that was holding the ice bag to his head, brought it down to her side, and put the bag on the counter.

"Honestly, I'm the one who should be apologizing. I didn't mean to yell. I know you can't help that you don't remember anything." Kenny was sincere.

"I want to get better, I really do."

"What do you remember?" Kenny really wanted to ask her to tell him what happened the night they argued. He wanted her to confess that her angry words that night were untrue. Wanted to take back the words he spewed back at her. Instead, he just waited to see what she would say in response to his question.

"Not much," Mennette replied. "Waking up in the hospital with a bunch of people talking real fast." She bit her bottom lip for a moment. It was a habit she'd formed whenever she was concentrating on something important. Mennette shifted.

"It's like, once I think I remember something, I'll forget it that quickly. It could be something simple. Something so small, like..." She looked sheepishly at him.

"...like your name."

Kenny nodded silently.

"And then, it's like... foggy. Like I can't decipher between reality, a dream, or a memory. There are times that I wake up and think, 'Where the hell am I?' Last week, I woke up in the middle of the night, walked into the living room, saw you on the couch, and was thinking, 'Who the hell is this man?' Some days it takes a minute." Her face fell slightly.

"Some days, it takes longer than a minute. It's frustrating! I wonder, how long? How long do I have to deal with this? It's so unnerving to not know even the smallest details of your life. Like what I did for a living? Did I like my job? Where is my family? This is supposed to be my life and I can't even remember it. Do you know how heartbreaking that is?" Her voice trailed off.

Seeing his strong wildflower like this broke Kenny down inside. Kenny reached for both her hands.

"Honestly, I can't imagine that. And I don't want to cause you any extra stress." He winced, thinking about the stiletto from earlier. "We've had enough excitement for one night."

Kenny looked at Mennette. At that moment, he vowed to be more patient about the whole situation. He raised her hands to his lips and kissed the top of them. Her body stiffened and he noticed. "Slowly," he repeated to himself. He gently placed her hands back down by her sides and released them. He had no desire to get into any type of discussion about their situation, the bills, or the absence of his sex life. Or even the death of broccoli.

"My brain is all over the place." Mennette shrugged her shoulders. "I can't focus. Was thinking about the meeting tomorrow. Not sure how I'm gonna be prepared for something like that, but I think it'll help me. It'll probably be hard and I'll probably be emotional. I just wanna be prepared."

"You will. I'll be right there with you. It's getting pretty late. Why don't you take Fluffy and y'all go get some rest." Kenny smiled at her. "Big day tomorrow! New adventures! You're gonna be just fine."

"I'm not looking forward to this." She pouted. "I mean, a therapy group with a bunch of amnesiacs? How does that work?"

"That crossed my mind a few times. How the hell they gon' remember what they're there for?" He tried joking.

She stared at him blankly, blinking. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Okay. That was in poor taste."

She continued to look at him. It seemed like she didn't know quite how to respond.

"Too soon?"

"Way too soon." She replied and picked up a meowing Fluffy. She walked up a few stairs, then turned to him with a sweet smile. The one he fell in love with.

"Thanks for the encouragement. I really appreciate it." And with a few more steps, she was gone.

Emptiness and silence filled the room so quickly he had to inhale to catch his breath. He let the breath out like he was deflating. The loneliness shifted his thoughts to their life together. Kenny leaned over the counter, dug his elbows in, and buried his face in his hands.

Life had a way of tricking you. Making you think that you are in control. That if you make all the right plans and stick to the rules, you will be headed in the direction you intended. And then, something happens to disrupt your trajectory, and suddenly, you're completely off course.

This is the moment right before the impact, where your life floats before your eyes in slow-motion fragments, like a movie. You try and look for the point where you could have potentially stopped the undesirable event, but you realize you couldn't stop it because you never saw it coming. Bits and pieces of pivotal mo-

ments that flash in color and remind you that life is fleeting, short, and quick, elusive to the fool.

That is how Kenny felt every time he thought back to the night of her accident. November 18, 2018, was the day life ripped between them and spun them wildly out of control. He thought he had lost her when the police showed up at the house to report that her car had been involved in a hit-and-run accident. The vehicle was found with the airbags deployed, but the driver wasn't with the vehicle. He thought she might be dead. It was hours before he would show up at the hospital to identify the woman who had been brought in who couldn't tell anyone her name.

In actuality, their nightmare really started the moment he'd come home hours before the accident even occurred. A calm discussion had dissolved into chaos. Was there anything he could have done to prevent that argument? Kenny tortured himself by replaying in his mind the things he should have said and done that night to keep her from grabbing her car keys and storming out.

That night. The argument. The rain. The guilt eating away at his core because that night, he should have gone after her. But he hadn't.

Chapter 5

KENNY

*S*aturday morning traffic could be just as annoying as week-day rush hour. And given that it was three days away from Christmas, it was a different kind of crazy. Kenny turned off Highway 4 to exit Railroad Avenue in an effort to outsmart the traffic.

Mennette rode beside him, staring out of the window. A notebook lay in her lap. He could see from the side of her face that she was concerned. Her mouth set in a grim line, her face closed. Her grip tightened on the notebook coils. Her favorite bracelet tinkled with the movements of the car.

Before the accident, there was never a moment in Mennette's life where she was unsure of herself, at least as far as Kenny knew. Since they met, she was always confident and never doubted herself. She knew exactly what she wanted and how to get it. She fought for what she wanted. That's why Kenny couldn't figure out this new Mennette. She baffled him, causing minutes, hours, and days of his concentration, trying to understand her struggle.

Kenny often wished she would put her determined attitude into starting their family. Having children was the one thing Kenny needed to feel complete. Losing his mother fueled his desire to have a house filled with as many kids as Mennette was willing to bear. His being 44 wasn't a big deal, but she was 43; they were almost out of time. Each year their anniversary rolled around, his dream of holding Kenny, Jr. or his little princess in his arms slipped

further out of view.

But they had tried practically everything, hadn't they? Trips to the doctor for her and multiple tests for him. Kenny had even convinced her to try fertility treatments. She always insisted on attending her appointments alone, though.

"What if my memory never comes back?" Mennette blurted the question out of the blue without turning her head, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

"I'll still love you," was all he could think to say. She turned her head to look at him, then shifted her gaze back to the side street.

Kenny wanted to be positive: the beacon of light in this situation. But the truth was, he was just as concerned about her memory not returning as she was.

"We just need to stay positive and faithful. Keep going to these meetings and..." His voice trailed off. Mennette didn't even look at him when he stopped talking.

A pregnant silence hovered in the car with them.

What if she never got her memory back? Last night, Kenny was thinking of the advantages of the situation. But now in the light of day, he had to be truthful with himself. The Mennette sitting next to him was not the woman he married. Hell, she wasn't even the woman he was having marital issues with. Would he be able to continue to live with, love, and plan a future with New Mennette? Did he even like her? How exactly was he supposed to get back what they had or, God forbid, recreate it with this familiar stranger? Did he want to?

"What are you thinking?" Kenny asked to get his mind off his own swirling thoughts.

After a beat, Mennette finally turned to him. He felt her gaze and took his eyes off the road for a moment to meet hers. Her eyes searched his face as if she were trying to answer a question that had been puzzling her for quite some time. She turned back to the window and watched a few more blocks whizz by before she answered.

"That I don't know what I would do with this new life of mine."

"Meaning?"

She sighed.

"Us?" Kenny offered, filling in the blank she'd left.

Mennette slowly nodded.

"And what?" Kenny asked, trying to keep his voice from sounding agitated.

"It's not that I don't love you, I think. I guess I do because you are my husband, right?"

"So I've been told." Kenny didn't bother trying to hide his light-hearted sarcasm.

She cocked her head at him.

"Yes. I am," he tried again with a more serious one.

"This new life... it's so strange and weird." Kenny watched her chest rise and fall.

"It's your old life," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Well, it's new to me and I'm not sure if I can get used to it."

He nodded. She continued.

"...I thought a little about what if..." she paused as if her thought was stuck in her head. "Maybe when I get better... getting my own place."

"Your own place?" Kenny whipped his head around to look over his shoulder. He signaled and pulled the car into a shopping center they were about to roll past. He wanted to make sure he heard her correctly.

Kenny looked at Mennette. They were supposed to go the distance, till death do them part. Never in his wildest imagination did Kenny think it would ever be this. How could she shut off from him? If only he could reach her. If only he could make her remember and bring that old Mennette back.

"There are times when I'm not sure what I'm doing. None of this makes sense."

"It makes perfect sense to me, Mennette. I go out there and bust my ass at Airglass. I wake up every day as a Black man in this soci-

ety. I give 110% only to be told that I will never be good enough to have the things that I've worked for or to have more. Knowing that I've got you to come home to is about the only thing that keeps me going. We share in this experience; you're not going through this alone. And if I didn't tell you or if you don't remember, Baby, I am so so sorry for that night!" The guilt of that night fueled his own anger for himself.

She looked up at him, longing for answers.

"What happened that night? Where did we go wrong?"

"It was crazy. It was a mistake."

"It's just... it doesn't seem that this is working. For either of us."

"Mennette..." he sighed. "Give it some time. It hasn't even been two months yet."

"Well, how much time? I mean, this is difficult! I look at you and I... and I just can't remember the last conversation we had or the last time we kissed each other. The emotions and the desire and the tenderness that I'm supposed to feel and remember are simply not there. I'm sure that I love you... I mean I must, right? You said we've been together a long time. But I can't remember any of it. It's hard pulling that stuff up, ya know? I feel like this marriage... it's..."

Kenny pinched the bridge of his nose. He almost knew what would come out of her mouth next.

"This marriage..." she continued, "... it doesn't feel real to me."

There it was. She'd said what he'd been feeling. Every time he went to hug or kiss her, it was not received or reciprocated. Every fiber in his body wanted this marriage to work. All of the effort and the years that they'd worked well together as a team... he refused to let these years be in vain.

"What is it that you want, Mennette? Because getting your own place is about the most bullshit thing I ever heard. You do know we married right? Husbands and wives don't live in separate homes!"

"I just..." Mennette let out a hard sigh. "We argue so much." She whispered. "Is that normal for us?"

"Naw," Kenny said quickly, defensively. Then he inhaled deeply and let out a long sigh. "Yeah," he admitted, shaking his head. "Lately. But only lately. We were better."

"Is this all worth it? Is this struggle worth it? I may not remember anything about us, but I don't think marriage should be a struggle. It should be effortless. Flowing. Don't you think? Like a river?"

"A river? Nothing in this life is like a river." Kenny snorted. "Look, Mennette, we love each other, alright? We just going through a rough patch." Kenny felt a headache creeping up the back of his neck. He reached for her, brushing a soft thumb across her cheek, surprisingly she didn't flinch this time. Kenny thought this more out of surprise than desire.

"Life ain't easy. And we been dealt this crazy blow, but I know we can get through this, huh?" He cocked his head a little. If he could just make her believe what he thought he believed.

"I'm trying here Mennette."

"I know you are, but this is so hard for me. Each morning I wake up, it's like I'm starting all over again. I just thought that my own place might be easier on both of us. It could probably help me get things together."

"Things like what? You can't possibly be on your own right now."

"Soon, though... maybe? I just feel like there is something else. Like the ups and downs are too much..."

He nodded for lack of a better thing to do with his head. Kenny started to wonder about the nature of brain injuries and memory loss because she was starting to sound like the Mennette who stormed out of the house and drove them straight into this catastrophe.

"Well, it was just a thought," Mennette said with sudden levity in her voice. She flicked her hand as if to wave away the last few tense minutes.

"It was a fleeting one at that. Let's just forget I ever brought it up."

I'll just make the best of my meetings and try to get better," Mennette said brightly. She flashed him a fake smile.

My Mennette is in there somewhere, Kenny thought to himself. *She is worth fighting for*, he convinced himself. He let the tension ease from his face, reassured enough to pull the car out of park and resume their journey.

As they rode, thoughts filled Kenny's mind. He could deal with just about anything, but he was not interested in another major disruption to his life. He had enough trauma over the course of his life and truthfully, he was ready for a reprieve. If Mennette was serious about moving out, that would be more trouble than it was worth. There would be no hope of rebuilding their life together. Good, bad, or ugly, Mennette was his world. He wasn't ready to let her walk out the door just yet.



Mount Zion Baptist Church in Oakland was where the Affairs to Remember meetings were held. Every Saturday starting today, Mennette and six other amnesia victims would sit around in a circle in the basement and try memory-restoring techniques and exercises in a desperate attempt at regaining the lives they once lived. Kenny parked across the street.

"Do you want me to go in with you?" Kenny asked as Mennette made a move to get out of her seatbelt.

"I should be fine." She gave him a tight smile and opened her door. Kenny scrambled out and ran to close her door.

"I'm not exactly convinced. Let me at least walk you in. And when you're done, I'll be up the street at that Starbucks." He pointed a few blocks up. "Come straight out when you're done."

She looked nervously up the stairs at the church.

"Hey!" he said brightly, trying to ignore their prior conversation. "We'll get through this. You..." he pointed to her, then to himself. "...and me? We gon' be okay!"

He tried to pull her to him to hug her. Her body resisted, hesitated, and then finally gave in just a bit. Mennette quickly pulled away from the embrace, smoothed her hair down, and took in a deep breath.

“Let’s get this over with. The first day is always the hardest, right? Then, all downhill from there.” She turned again and her eyes took in the entire intimidating front of the large church. From behind he could see her visibly sigh and tighten her grip on her notebook.

He touched her again quickly on her “railroad tracks” and stepped in front of her to lead the way up the stairs. Inside the church, the stale air was cool and brisk. Mennette pulled her notebook snugly against her chest. A large dry-erase board on wheels held the words “Affairs to Remember” and an arrow pointing down the stairs. She tossed Kenny a little wave and disappeared down the stairs. Kenny spun and walked back outside the front doors.

Starbucks was abuzz with holiday shoppers, families with cranky kids demanding sweet treats, and work-a-holics hunched over their laptops. He never had that Hennessy Pure White last night so he ordered the next best thing: an eggnog latte. Boy did he wish he could spike it, but he needed to stay clear-headed. He also grabbed a blueberry scone to keep him entertained while Mennette was in her meeting. He sat out on the patio enjoying the crisp weather and warm drink. He watched the cars drive by for a few minutes. Then, he grabbed a discarded newspaper and began flipping through it.

A table away, a young Asian couple shared a large, frothy drink, a laptop, and earbuds. They laughed at something on the Internet. Across from them sat a well-dressed African-American who was probably a few years older than Kenny. He had on dark shades with a “D” and backward “G” logo on the arm. His taupe jacket was trimmed with the famous Burberry tartan plaid on the cuffs and thick hem. His pants were immaculate and pressed with a sharp crease. The man sipped a small cup of something as he stared in-

tently off in the direction of the church.

Kenny could tell the brother was no stranger to the finer things in life; he had on a pair of white Salvatore Ferragamo shoes. Kenny only knew this because Tamara's husband Eric wore them. Eric played for the NFL so the couple lived a lavish lifestyle. They were the only people Kenny knew in that tax bracket so that's how he learned to spot pricey items when he saw them. By the look of the stranger's whole outfit, he could have easily been Tamara and Eric's neighbors. Kenny chuckled to himself. Although gentrification was in full effect in Oakland, the man appeared out of place to him.

Kenny's phone vibrated wildly. The name "Brother" took over the screen along with the choice of a green and red button. The word wasn't a descriptor of their relationship; it was his older sibling's nickname since childhood.

Kenny tapped the green telephone symbol and before he could say hello, Brother was talking loud and fast. He was laughing, joking, and filling up the phone with his big, infectious personality like only Brother could do.

"Sup Ken! Where you at?"

"Oakland." He sipped his cup and slowly turned the page to a local real estate ad.

"I just left your house looking for you. I thought we was getting together today?"

"Awe, man!" Kenny roughly rubbed the back of his neck, apologetic. "I totally forgot. Today is Mennette's first amnesia meeting. It'll have to be tomorrow."

"You lucky I'm your brother, and that I don't whoop that ass for standing me up!"

The young Asian couple sipped their venti drink with whipped cream spilling from the top. The boy swiped his finger across the top and stuck it into the giggling girl's mouth.

A white college-aged girl had taken the expensive Black man's place at his table. She opened her books and then immediately

started texting. Periodically she glanced over at Kenny as if trying to determine if he were a threat or not.

Brother continued talking and then placed Kenny on hold to answer his other line. A few moments passed and Kenny was about to hang up when Brother clicked back over.

"Damn! She act like she didn't want to get off the phone!" Brother said with an irritated tone as if Kenny knew who had been on his other line. "Yeah, well, I'll be over tomorrow." He continued the conversation as if there wasn't a break in it. "Don't forget this time. I ain't got time to waste."

An ambulance rushed by screeching, squealing, red and blue lights wildly flashing. No one seemed fazed by the commotion.

"If anybody got time to waste, it's you! You the only man I know who..." Kenny abruptly stopped mid-sentence, his joking mood suddenly switched to heightened alertness. He narrowed his eyes and leaned forward, took a quick glance at his watch, then back up to the church.

"What the..."

Everything happened in a flash. From where he was sitting, Kenny could see a small group of people had filed out of the church. Mennette stood near the curb, her notebook still clutched tightly to her chest. She was looking around. Next, Kenny saw the expensive-looking Black man from Starbucks bounding across the street, approaching her like a speeding bus. He had a determined gait, like he was targeting her. The stranger abruptly stopped right in front of Mennette, startling her. With several inches on her, he bent down to lean into her face. He pointed his finger at her chest and yelled at the top of his lungs.

In a flash, Kenny shot out of his chair to sprint across the plaza parking lot at full speed. His hand automatically slipped his phone into his pocket. He didn't think to hang up his call with Brother.

Suddenly, the man grabbed Mennette by her shoulders and violently shook her. Her notebook dropped to the ground. Her scream shot out, sending a flock of pigeons into the air. Everyone

looked towards her.

Kenny weaved through the traffic, dodging swerving cars. He doubled around to avoid a collision with a diesel truck and stopped in his tracks to let a motorcycle speed by.

“Motherfucka!” Kenny roared, reestablishing his momentum. He made a beeline to Mennette. As he approached, he could hear her screaming and crying as her arms flailed all over the place. The man continued jerking her back and forth as he yelled in her face.

“MENNETTE!” Kenny yelled as he ran at his top speed and only had a few steps to go to close the distance. When the man heard Kenny’s voice, he let go of Mennette’s shoulders and took off running without so much as a backward glance at Kenny. He darted through the crowd and turned the corner but Kenny was close on his trail.

Kenny pumped his arms. It had been a while since he’d been on the track or the football field but in his mind, he was doing pretty good for a man his age. He was almost close enough to grab the back of the man’s flapping jacket when his left hamstring deceived him and twisted into a tight spasm that exposed not only his age but its lack of use.

Reduced to a hobbling jog, Kenny dragged his pulsating hamstring up the block. He tried keeping up, but the man was agile and quick even in his Ferragamo’s. Kenny cursed. He was simultaneously impressed and annoyed that a man in dress shoes would outrun him. The man leapt over a spilled trash can and sprinted across to the other side of the street. He quickly trotted down a flight of stairs into the 12th Street BART station, bumping into a few unsuspecting patrons coming up the stairs.

It took a few more hobbled moments for Kenny to make it to the BART entrance. He continued down the flight of stairs just in time to see the man jump the turnstile and disappear into the sea of people; his head swiftly bobbed up and down in the crowd. There was no way Kenny’s pride would let him turn back now and tell Mennette that he’d lost the man who tormented her. In his

mind, Kenny saw himself catching the stranger, grabbing him as he had done to Mennette, and pummeling him in the face as if he was the reason Mennette had lost her mind.

Kenny was overdue for relieving all the stress of the last few weeks. He wanted to walk back to the church proudly with his chest stuck out and an imaginary cape flapping behind him. Captain Save-A-Hoe! He wasn't about to let a cramping leg stand in the way of avenging Mennette in this singular incident.

Kenny glanced at the attendant and then, like the man in the expensive shoes, he jumped the turnstile, dragging his leg behind him. A southbound train had pulled into the station and waves of people entering and leaving the train collided. He saw the stranger's head slip into the doors just as they closed. The train swiftly moved away from the station. The tartan pattern was a blur as the train's last car rolled by.

"Damnit!" Kenny swore aloud and smacked the station wall. How the hell could he lose him? He bent over and placed his hands on his thighs, finally able to stop and catch his breath. His lungs were on fire. He sulked against the wall and massaged his calf, slowly kneading his knuckles into the back of his leg, trying to relax the spasms.

Frustrated, he frowned and turned to see a homeless woman sitting nearby, staring at him. They both stared at each other for a moment before she finally spoke.

"He got away," she said sarcastically. Her basket was filled with junk while her clothes were dirty and tattered.

"I see that!"

"You wasn't fast enough." She cackled. "You s'posed to run faster than him!"

"I know!" Kenny didn't appreciate a reminder of the obvious.

"He beat you up?" She adjusted her stained skirt. "That man? He the one put them knots on your head?"

"Huh?" Kenny straightened up but his leg muscle revolted so he leaned back down and kept massaging it. He touched the Band-aid

covering the infamous stiletto knot and frowned.

“Ah! Nah.”

“Well, why you chasing him?”

Kenny sucked his teeth. If it weren't for the twisted muscle he would walk off.

“It's none of your business.” He snapped.

He looked up the tracks as the next train arrived. The doors opened and spilled its bowel of commuters. Kenny sighed out loud. Jumping on the train was a dumb idea... who knows what station the man had gotten off at. Could things get any worse?

Their earlier conversation popped into his head. Where in the hell did Mennette get the thought of moving out on her own? Had Tamara gotten a hold of her somehow and filled her head with nonsense? Kenny pushed his fingers deeper into his muscle until he felt good enough to stretch it out. Then he stood and looked over at the homeless woman. Her stare penetrated through him.

“Your leg feel better?”

He didn't answer.

“You got any spare change on you?” She grinned exposing her two bottom teeth that were missing.

Kenny rolled his eyes. He didn't have any cash on him, just his credit card in his wallet and his phone. He walked off, headed up the stairs, exited the turnstile, and started back towards Mount Zion church.

He limped around the corner and tried his best to straighten his gait as he got closer to the church. A crowd had gathered around Mennette, including two people in clerical collars. She now had an open bottle of water in her hand. Kenny shooed them all away from her, asserting his authority as her husband.

“Did you get him?” Mennette asked, wiping away remnants of her tears.

“Naw, he got into a car and took off.” Kenny's pride lied for him. He pulled her trembling body into his chest and she didn't resist. She was still visibly shaken, her voice cracked as she sobbed afresh

into his shoulder.

“You okay?” He asked, smoothing down the sides of her hair.

She violently shook her head ‘no’ so hard, he thought her neck would break.

“Who the hell was that?”

She hunched her shoulders and struggled to catch her breath.

“What did he say to you?”

“He...he...” she croaked out before crumbling again into his chest. He rubbed her back.

“Shhh, shhh. It’s okay! He’s gone now.” Kenny had to take a few minutes to calm Mennette as well as calm himself. Inside, he fumed.

“What did this man say to you?”

“He said... he said... he said he wanted his shit!”

“Well, who the hell was he?” Irritation laced his every word. Why was this man yelling at Mennette about his shit? And what shit?

“I don’t know!” She hyperventilated. “He walked up and said I’ve been hiding from him. Then he got close and grabbed me and said he wanted his shit!”

“You been hiding from him?” His face flushed. He was unable to conceal his anger. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I dunno!” she wailed. “I thought he was some crazy homeless man or some crackhead! I don’t know him! I don’t remember him!” Her face dissolved into tears.

Kenny softened, holding her tighter. He kissed the top of her head. Homeless? Nah. Don’t no homeless man wear \$1,000 shoes and a \$1,000 jacket!



Kenny threw his keys on the counter when they got home. Red flags continued to flare up in his brain as he paced the kitchen floor. He stopped and looked at Mennette. She had perched on the

couch with her face in her hands and head hanging low. He started pacing again, his steps growing harder and more determined. The echo of his shoes on their hardwood floor marched in time with the ticking clock.

Up, down, turn. He brought his pacing into the living room in front of the silent TV. Mennette's head twisted from left to right, following his movement like she was watching a tennis match.

Back, forth, turn. Kenny's thoughts churned. His face was so tight he could feel the intense throbbing on his forehead knot. A quick flash of the stiletto crossed his mind. His fists clenched and his hamstring tightened. He abruptly stopped in front of her again, his face accusatory.

She jumped up, then threw her hands in the air in surrender, and went straight up the stairs to their room, locking the door behind her. He rubbed his hands roughly up and down the back of his neck.

He had yelled at her in the car on the way home, insisting that she knew more than she was letting on. Mennette cried. She profusely defended herself saying she didn't know or remember the man. But something about the situation wasn't sitting right with Kenny. Out of all the people that had come out of the church, why did he target Mennette? Fluffy scratched at his leg and Kenny shooed her away. He couldn't deal with this right now. He stretched out on the couch.

The house remained pregnant with their silent animosity for hours. Kenny woke up to the sounds of her footsteps on the stairs. She walked past him as if he wasn't there, making a beeline for her painting room. Kenny sat up. For the next few minutes, he watched Mennette go back and forth from the garage to the paint room. With each trip, she had an armful of different items.

Finally, she stopped and closed the door behind her. Shortly after, Bob Marley blared through the speakers. He laid back down and his thoughts swirled again. Some strange man all up in her face yelling? Kenny shook his head. Something wasn't right. Did

something go down between them? Was he the reason their marriage started falling apart and she started talking about leaving him?

Something was clearly up, but what? Of course Mennette said she didn't remember this man, but he surely remembered her. He didn't randomly pick Mennette out of a crowd. Kenny's doubt grew with each passing minute. Was she playing games with him? Did she actually remember something that she wasn't telling?

Kenny couldn't stay in the house. He needed to let off some steam. He jumped in his car and drove for an hour into Oakland and over the Bay Bridge into San Francisco, trying to clear his mind. He needed a chance to think clearly before he said or did anything further that he would regret.

It was late when he returned. As he climbed the steps on the porch, the sounds of Corrine Bailey Rae greeted him. He entered. The paint door room was still closed. He went up to the door, gently turned the handle, and pushed the door open a crack.

Mennette was sitting very still, staring at a blank canvas. The brush hung in her delicate fingers in midair while a cup of clear water rested by her elbow. Her shoulders sagged. Staring at her back, he imagined what her face looked like. It was probably lined with creases in her forehead, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth. Painting books piled high on the floor next to her feet.

Kenny watched her for a while. He watched her breathe in and out with slow, labored breathing as if she was concentrating on something... something that wouldn't come easily to her. He watched her a little longer. Then he closed the door and left her to her struggle. He showered and went back downstairs, threw his blanket on the couch and went to sleep. He missed when she finally went upstairs.

In the morning, the canvas was not white, but blue. Big angry dark strokes mingled with softer, sad strokes. The tray on the easel held her cup of water that was now tinted blue.

Chapter 6

KENNY

“Daaaaammnnn!” Brother put his fist to his mouth and howled when Kenny opened the front door. “You got knocked the fuck out!” Kenny stepped aside as Brother assessed his head. He leaned over to get a better view of Kenny’s cheek.

“What the hell kinda bobcat got a hold of your ass?”

With his knapsack still hanging from his broad shoulders, Brother’s presence filled the entire room, as he usually did. His animated personality and wide smile buzzed with energy wherever he went.

Kenny defended himself. “It’s not as bad as it looks.” He closed the door.

Brother let out a whistle and shook his head. “Sheeeet! It look pretty damn bad to me!” He tossed his bag onto the couch. Upon its mention, Kenny’s head throbbed a little as he relived the stiletto spinning in the air and connecting with his head.

“What you got to eat?”

Brother plopped onto the couch and crossed his ankle over his knee. Creases in his T-shirt dipped where six-pack abs lay underneath.

“Ain’t got much of nothing in there. Where you coming from?” Kenny joined him on the couch with his back to the staircase.

“Downtown San Fran. Handling business.” Brother smirked. That meant a woman!

"Tara?" Kenny asked.

He nodded.

"She have the baby yet?"

"Yep. This morning." Brother grinned. "A boy."

"She wanted you to do a paternity test?"

Brother gave Kenny a look that said, "What do you think?"

"You seem calm as hell about it."

"Cause Tara full of shit! She thought she was slick, going around trying to poke holes in condoms. That baby is pale with blonde hair and blue eyes. Look at my Black ass..." Brother swept his hands up and down his body. "I'm from the East side of Wakanda! How I'ma make a baby look like that?" He chuckled. "She been trying to tie down anyone who will help her take care of all those other kids she got. She's gonna have to find another sucka, 'cause I ain't him."

Kenny shook his head, amused. He could blame Brother's confidence on his attractiveness. But it was much more than that. Being Brother was a blessing and a curse. He was the kind of guy other men wanted to be and women wanted to be with. He dripped with charisma, was bathed in charm, and was an amazing conversationalist. Outgoing and very likable, people gravitated toward him. His booming voice and loud infectious laugh commanded the attention of everyone, every time. Brother was always the life of the party wherever he was. Kenny was used to people falling into Brother's gravitational pull whenever they went anywhere, especially the ladies.

Women loved Brother. All types of women. They often described him as "easy on the eyes," "scrumptious," "chocolate candy," and other little phrases that irritated Kenny. Brother's lean but muscular 6'1" frame easily towered over Kenny's 5'9" stocky build. He had smooth dark skin with a low-shaven beard. The waves in his dark hair rippled across the top of his head. His teeth were the color of ivory. Framed by his thick dark lips, his toothy smile always drove the ladies crazy. And there was always a woman around Brother: trying to get with him, stay with him, marry him,

or otherwise entrap him. Kenny called him the Black Unicorn.

“How’s it been going around here?” Brother asked.

“Man, I’m about to lose my mind. Shit is crazy. Yesterday at her meeting in Oakland – ”

Kenny halted his conversation. Brother’s eyes had focused on something behind Kenny. He turned around to see Mennette descending the stairs with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Brother stood. Her gaze roamed from Brother’s thick-soled Timberlands, up his olive-green cargo pants, and landed on the T-shirt stretched pleasingly across his chest.

Kenny stood up too and turned his body to her. “Mennette, do you remember Keith?”

She tightened the blanket around her shoulders and shook her head ‘no.’

Brother smiled at Mennette as he took in her disheveled hair, her sullen face, and the blanket wrapped around her drooping shoulders. He was not used to seeing her like this. She usually had on the newest name brands, flawless make-up, and every strand of hair was always obediently in place.

“HI MENNETTE!” Brother yelled. He slowly waved his open hand at her like he was in an old Western movie. He leaned closer to her and she took a step back. Mennette’s eyes quickly darted from Brother to Kenny, her face a twisted mess of confusion and irritation.

“DO YOU REMEMBER ME? I’M KEITH! KENNY’S OLDER BROTHER. BUT EVERYONE CALLS ME BROTHER. HOW YOU FEELING? HOW’S YO HEAD?” He pointed to his own head.

Mennette’s mouth opened but no sound came out. She looked at Kenny with confusion. Her forehead crinkled in agitation.

“Man, dayum,” Kenny said, irritated, pulling Brother a step back by his elbow. “She lost her memory, not her hearing! You giving me a headache with all that!” Kenny rubbed his temples, then turned to Mennette.

"We'll be in the backyard if you need me for anything." He placed a kiss on top of her tiny railroad tracks. Kenny walked towards the refrigerator and Brother made for the patio door.

"Want a beer?" Kenny asked him as the cold air hit his face.

"Nah, water is fine."

Kenny turned around and gave Brother a strange look.

"What? I know Christmas is in two days, but summer'll be here before you know it. Gotta keep it right and tight!" he said, patting his already flat stomach. Brother worked out religiously to keep his body rock hard. The only threat to his religious discipline was cognac and beautiful women who could cook.

Kenny grabbed the water and six-pack, slid out onto the patio, and rearranged the chairs so they faced the neighbor's fence. He tossed Brother his bottled water and sat down as Brother settled into his own chair.

"She been wrapped up in that blanket all day?" Brother asked.

"Yep." Kenny cracked the tab on his beer.

"And her hair like that?"

"Yep." Some froth ran down his fingers

"The old Mennette woulda never been caught dead looking like that."

"Nope." On that, Kenny took a sip.

"Well, least she's up, right?" He said. "Could be stuck in bed. How long did she stay in bed the first time y'all came home?"

"Damn near three weeks."

"What's up with the knot?" Changing the subject, Brother pointed at Kenny's forehead with the top of his water bottle before opening it.

"Mennette threw one of her shoes at me Friday night."

"Why she do that?"

"I guess I was too much in her personal space too soon."

"Well, what the hell was you doing all in her personal space?"

Kenny took a long swig from his beer bottle, letting the silence speak for itself.

"You was tryna get some ass?" Brother asked, leaning forward. When Kenny didn't immediately respond, Brother erupted in uncontrollable laughter. "You WAS tryna tap that ass... and she wasn't having it!" His laughter escalated into a deep roar.

It was times like this that Kenny wished his brother wasn't so involved in his life. He waited a minute to let him get the laughs out of his system.

"You done?" Kenny asked flatly, unamused.

"Yeah," Brother said, swiping at his eyes. "Yeah, I'm done." He chuckled once more, then composed himself. He crossed his long legs, reclining in the old backyard furniture. "Any progress on her memory?" he asked with genuine concern.

"Bits and pieces. Nothing major. She keeps having these dreams about fighting and car crashes. Crazy shit like that." Kenny said with a belch. "I was looking at the police report last night just trying to figure some things out. Too much has been happening. Yesterday, some crazy man runs up to her and shakes the shit out of her then runs away. I took off after his ass!"

Brother leaned forward, interested.

Kenny continued. "By the time I made it back to her, I was mad as hell. She's all hysterical. It was crazy."

"You didn't catch him?"

"Nah, man. He took off so damn fast." Kenny said, irritated. "He ended up making it to 12th Street, shot down them stairs and disappeared on one of the trains."

"BART?" Brother frowned. "How he make it all the way to a BART station?"

"Didn't you hear me say he was running so damn fast?"

"Yeah, I heard you but..."

"But what?" A crease appeared on Kenny's forehead.

"Why didn't you just run faster?"

"Man, he had a head start!"

"Like how far of a head start?"

"What difference does it make? You wanna hear the damn story

or not?"

"It makes a big difference. Yeah, I wanna hear the story but... did you get another one of those cramps again like you used to fake when you was losing a race?"

"Fuck it man!" Kenny slammed the beer bottle down hard on the side table. "You keep interrupting... forget it!"

"Alright, alright! Don't get your panties all twisted. Don't want you to get another cramp." Brother laughed but stopped when Kenny didn't join in the laughter. "Who was the man?"

"Dunno. She said she didn't know either. But he was hollering at her to give him his shit. Just kept hollering at her: 'Gimme my shit! Gimme my shit!' Bruh, that shit got me tripping." He tapped his fingers against the beer bottle. "What you think that coulda been?"

Brother leans back. "That could have been any old crackhead."

"Nah. Crackheads don't dress like he was dressed. A pair of white Ferragamo's? Burberry jacket? Designer shades? He was sharp as shit! Uh-uh," Kenny paused, shaking his head no. "I don't know, but something just ain't right. It ain't been right since she got home from the hospital." He took a swig from his beer bottle.

"Course it ain't been right. Y'all argue. She go out for hours. And when you see her again, she in the hospital and she don't remember shit. It ain't gon' be right."

Kenny leaned back and rubbed his hands down his face. He looked tired. "This shit like something outta a movie. And I'm trying so hard not to explode! But sometimes I can't hold it back. I wanna shake her ass. Like, why she don't remember? It ain't making sense. I feel like it's some shit I need to know about. And look at this..." He held his finger up to Brother then disappeared into the house, walked through the garage and reemerged with a little metal box in his hand. He shook it and handed it to Brother.

"What's this?" Brother set his bottle next to his chair, held the box to his ear and shook it also. "Papers?" He shook it again. "Keys or something?"

"I guess. I found it under her dresser.

"So?"

"So? It was hidden from me!" He gawked at Brother incredulously.

"Man, how you know it was hidden from you?" Brother tossed the box onto the extra chair. His interest faded.

"It was pushed up under her dresser drawer. All the way back, like she purposely hid it there. Like she knew that's somewhere I would never look."

"If she knew this, then how did yo ass find it?"

"I saw it."

"Up under her dresser?" Brother asked suspiciously. He tipped the bottle to his lips and swallowed. He knew Kenny all too well; his curiosity always got the best of him.

"Yes."

"Way, up under her dresser? Way, back there, up under, right?" He teased. He knew Kenny's ass went snooping around.

Kenny glared at Brother. "I was vacuuming."

"Snooping?"

"Vacuuming." He stated.

"Snooping. That's for women."

Kenny blinked. "Did you basically just call me a bitch?"

Brother shrugged. "I'ma hit your sorry-ass gym. Come spot me," he said, draining his water bottle. Brother made his way back inside, through the kitchen and around to the garage entrance. It only held one car. So between Mennette and Kenny, whoever got home first parked in the driveway leading up to the usually closed garage door. The other parked on the street. Kenny kept a bench press and a rack of free weights. It was his "sorry-ass gym" as Brother described it. Mennette had large canvases of old paintings, and a shelving unit full of art supplies in bins. The 6-foot fake Christmas tree laid on top of bins containing decorations that were likely not going to be used this year. Other items of various sizes that they didn't want cluttering the house laid neatly around.

Brother made his way to the weight bench and picked up a hundred-pound weight. Kenny followed and picked up the other, flipping the garage door switch open. He didn't want to be trapped with the smell of Brother's musty workout. They worked silently on each side of the bench loading weights simultaneously, acting in sync, like they were taught to do as young boys. Brother peeled his shirt and tank top off and laid flat against the bench.

"I can't figure this out," Kenny said. He stood over Brother, grabbed the bar securely and eased it off the cradle, relinquishing it to Brother.

"I know you don't want to hear it, but some things ain't meant to be figured out." Brother offered his unsolicited two cents.

"You mean to tell me that you ain't ever curious about what all your women be doing?"

Brother chuckled and pushed the bar straight into the air. He forced air out of his lungs, pumping the bar up and down for a set of ten. He took in a deep breath but steadied the bar over his head.

"Nah, women are smarter than us... more calculating."

Kenny nodded and reached out to help Brother with the bar. Brother shook his head, rejecting the assist. Kenny backed up slightly, letting Brother pump the weights up and down for a few more sets on his own. He leaned the bar back and Kenny moved forward to place it on its cradle.

"We think we fooling them," Brother continued, "... but they always at least two steps ahead of us. Why would I worry myself about that?" He grabbed for the bar again, lifted it and pumped up. "...They wanna aim higher? Wanna try to do better? Let 'em take their shot." Brother pushed air through his pursed lips, a frown of concentration on his face. His chest muscles flexed, then relaxed. "...They'll be back...they always come home."

"How can you be so sure?"

Brother brought the bar down slowly to his chest and frowned up at Kenny. "You ain't ready for the truth Kenny. Men can't handle what we might find. Personally, I don't wanna know." He pushed

up. "Two more. It's like that damn Venus fly trap. Get the bar," he said, sitting up, then leaning forward. Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead and the bridge of his nose. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and smiled widely, continuing his monologue.

"That sweet, sticky nectar, smelling all good and shit!" He chuckled. "Just like a damn woman. We after... I'ma do two more sets." He laid back down and grabbed the bar again. "We after that smell, trying to get that sweet nectar, and bam! Stuck! Trapped. The walls close in on us. Death by pussy!" He laughed. "I mean flower." His pecks flexed and tightened as he finished his last reps.

"Shit pisses me off." Kenny hissed grabbing the bar.

Brother sat up and leaned over on the edge of the weight bench, wiping the sweat from his face with his discarded tank top. "Don't let it piss you off. Your blood pressure gon' go back up. Hey, I told you 'bout Terry, right? Met her last month? She finally caught me! Finally pinned me down."

"The yoga instructor?"

"Nah, not her. The CPA."

"This one new?" Kenny asked. "Do you even know what a CPA is?"

"Man, do you listen to me? Can you keep up?"

"Well, do you?"

Brother shrugged. "I 'on know, Certified Pussy Assistant? Hell, I don't need to know. It ain't important to the story I'm about to tell you."

"Sorry!" Kenny rolled his eyes. "Go on... the CPA?"

"I'm trying to get your dumb ass to calm down. That vein in your neck gon' pop."

"Go 'head man, but don't tell me no bullshit." Kenny paced away from the weight bench and leaned against the wall, looking outside towards the driveway. He knew Brother was good for telling bullshit stories. Brother followed, posting up next to Kenny and gazed up into the sky before speaking again.

"She invited me to her house. Said she was gonna make me a

home-cooked meal. Roast with these little potatoes, carrots, and shit.” He slapped the backside of his hand against Kenny’s forearm. “You know I love roast. Damn, it was good! Anyway, she had wine. Bought me a whole case of beer.” Brother stopped and looked over at Kenny. “That roast was damned good!” He chuckled but Kenny just looked at him puzzled.

“Anyway, after dinner she made me this coconut cake. I can’t tell you the last time I had coconut cake. Man, that girl can cook.” Brother rubbed his hands together, reminiscing. “She was feeling good, tipsy after two bottles. Then she started kissing on me and touching me all over. You know I was down cuz her titties was like POW!” Brother cupped his hands in front of his chest, “...like fucking Nikki Minaj! Ass like Beyonce.” He smiled. “I was ready to get all up in that. She undressed me. Took her time with it too. I was standing there butt-ass naked. Ready! She laid me on the bed.” Brother chuckled amused with himself. He had Kenny’s full attention.

“We was breathing all hard. Then she went down on me and I swear it was the best head I ever had! When she was done, she turned the lights off so it’s pitch dark. I can’t see a thing. So I said, ‘Girl you got to at least open them blinds to let some of that moonlight in here.’” Brother looked Kenny in his eyes. “You know women be tripping off how their bodies be looking and shit. I didn’t care nothing about that, but I at least needed to see my damn hand in front of my face, ya know what I mean? So she opened the blinds to let some of the moonlight in.”

Brother shook his head slowly like he was visualizing it all right then. “She laid down on the bed and I pulled her shirt off and got to them titties. I started pulling on them tight-ass jeans. Man, Kenny! I was tugging and pulling trying to get them things off. Now, remember, it was dark as hell up in there. I pulled and then I heard a loud thud. Like bap! I stopped. I said ‘Baby what was that’? She said, ‘Oh, nothing, Brother. Just hurry up and put it in.’” Brother’s voice climbed to a high-pitched mock. “You know my ass looked

over the side of the bed and there was her LEG!”

Kenny frowned. “Man, you shitting me!”

“Ain’t! It was a wooden leg right by the bed!”

Kenny just looked at him. “What the fuck? You made that shit up. Here I am trying to be serious with your ass and you tell me some stupid shit like that?”

Brother laughed. “Man, it’s true! I’m telling you!”

“That shit did NOT happen!” Kenny said, but he had to laugh. He could always count on Brother to capture his attention and temporarily take his mind off things.

“Scout’s honor, my nig. Scout’s honor.” Brother held his hand up.

Kenny just shook his head.

“So what you gon’ do McGruff? Sniff some shit out like a crime dog?” Brother asked.

“Things ain’t adding up. Something deep down inside ain’t sitting right with me.”

“Uh, huh. You act like married couples ain’t never kept stuff from each other.” Brother said matter-of-factly.

“I know, but we used to be better than that.”

“Shit changes. You know that. Y’all used to be good, but now shit ain’t been right with you and Mennette in a minute. ‘Sides, everybody got secrets.” Brother paused, then continued. “You gotta make sure you ready for whatever answers gon’ come with your questions.”

Kenny drained his bottle and reached for another. He turned to Brother. “Do I love my wife? Yeah, hell yeah I do. Did we fight like cats and dogs, yeah we did. Does that mean I give up on my marriage? No. Am I gon’ tell her about our situation? Probably, maybe, eventually, I don’t know.” He said looking at Brother. “But right now, she still my wife. We got a commitment to each other. She’s vulnerable right now and I gotta take care of her, regardless.”

Brother stared at him without making a sound.

“Ah man!” Kenny threw his hands up, frustrated. “Do you hear

me? A single man don't get it! You don't get the commitment that comes along with vows!"

"Don't get frustrated with me 'cause your wife got Alzheimer's."

Kenny narrowed his eyes at him. "I should bust you in the head with this bottle. You know she got amnesia. How many times I got to tell yo dumb ass?"

Brother chuckled, shrugging. "Amnesia, Alzheimer's. Basically, she can't remember shit." He smacked Kenny on his back. "Come spot me again. Summer'll be here before you know it."

Chapter 7

KENNY

For the rest of the week, Mennette's mood swung like a pendulum. Her highs were extremely high, but her lows were extremely low. It was all Kenny could take some days and he found himself throwing back a few stiff ones each night. He didn't bother with Christmas, decorations, or trying to exchange gifts. She didn't notice.

Kenny continued to focus on taking care of Mennette, as he had the previous six weeks. He cooked her meals. He fluffed her pillows. He entertained her with movies when he felt her moods shifting downward. Their routine was exhausting him and he felt his energy levels plummeting.

Saturday rolled around again and it was time for her Affairs to Remember meeting. This time, Kenny escorted Mennette into the building and all the way downstairs. Then he waited in the main sanctuary's back pew till it was over to escort her out. He wasn't going to chance a repeat of the previous Saturday with Ferragamo Man.

Even though he was on edge the whole time, Kenny did notice that Mennette seemed to brighten up as she got ready to go, and in the car ride after it was over. He knew one meeting couldn't have made that much of an impact yet. Maybe it was just the fact of getting outside the house and having a change of scenery. Maybe they both needed a change of scenery.

That's why when they got home from the meeting, and with only two days to spare, Kenny called Tamara and RSVP'd yes for them both and a plus-one to her annual New Year's Eve party. Tamara was overjoyed to receive the call and bubbled with giddiness. He was annoyed because he had to talk to Tamara and be in her space soon. But he was simultaneously optimistic about potentially having a good time. Kenny realized that his life had become so mundane that he had forgotten what it was like to do anything that didn't involve caring for Mennette. It was nice to have something fun to look forward to.

The next afternoon, Kenny spent time choosing their outfits and accessories. He set them aside towards the front of their closet. He also called Brother to notify him about his third-wheel status. The chance to go to a bougie-ass party with free-flowing food, liquor, and classy women? He was in. That night, for the first time in months, Kenny exhaled.

Monday morning was New Year's Eve. Mennette woke up in a good mood. She skipped the couch and headed for her painting room. Kenny was also in a good mood. He was ready to drink, dance, and let loose for a while later on that evening. Mid-afternoon, he went into the painting room to check in on her and caught her humming while she worked. Mennette smiled at him and continued to hum.

"You're in a good mood today!" He leaned into the door jam and crossed his arms over his chest. She nodded her head with another smile. "What are you humming?"

"A song." She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know the name of it. Or the words. But the melody has been in my mind all day. You know how you hear a song on the radio and can't get it out of your head?"

She continued humming and he recognized the tune. He dropped his arms down and pushed himself from the door. If she was humming something with familiarity to it, that must mean her mind is fighting to remember. At least that is what Kenny optimis-

tically hoped. He walked over to her with a soft smile on his face.

"It's our wedding song," he stated, with amazement. "You're humming our wedding song."

"Oh." She stopped painting. "Who's it by?"

"Luther Vandross. It's called 'Here and Now.'"

"It's nice." She touched the side of his face. "Do you remember the words?"

"Of course I do."

"Will you sing them to me?"

Kenny's smile spread across his face. "I'll try but I have to warn you, I'm no Luther!" He cleared his throat and belted out a few off-key bars of the song, and even added some rough rifts, hoping to evoke some type of emotion from her. He ended on a low note, stretching it out, then bowed his head when he finally cut it off for dramatic effect. He knew Luther would be proud.

A moment of silence filled the room when he finished. And Kenny thought she might cry.

"Is that..." she paused, her face crumpled. "Is that how it sounded at our wedding? On our wedding day?"

"Not quite." He rubbed the back of his neck. "But close. I think Luther would approve."

She opened her mouth to say something then stopped. He watched her think of the right words. "It was..." she slowly smiled at him and shrugged slowly. "It was awful."

An awkward moment passed. And then they both erupted in laughter.

"It was so awful!" She continued to laugh.

He started the song over, leaned into her, and kissed her on her railroad. Kenny took Mennette in his arms to dance. He held her arm high over her head and twirled her a few times, like she was a ballerina. He pulled her back to him where he dipped her slowly, as low as he could. A giggle escaped her lips. She threw her head back, hair flying everywhere and he resisted the urge to gently place his lips on the front of her neck and kiss it. This was one

of their rare “good days” and he didn’t want to ruin it.

Kenny pulled her up and twirled her again as she flung her arms out, letting some of her inhibitions fall away. This only encouraged Kenny to continue his singing to which he thought he was doing a great job... of at least entertaining her. She laughed and they danced together. He took the paint brushes from her hands and twirled her two times. He dipped her again.

“Tonight’s the night you get out to get some air. Let’s have a good time. Celebrate. Do a little dancing. Eat some good food. Drink some expensive-ass alcohol on the rich Edward’s tab.”

Kenny brought Mennette back up and twirled her out in a wide arch then brought her right back in, this time, right into his body. He leaned into her face, their noses practically touching each other’s as they danced together. He led and she followed, as her body remembered. His eyes traced the curve of her mouth and he could smell her cherry lip-gloss. His voice was low, husky and serious. “Upstairs in the front of the closet is a purple slip dress. My absolute fav-o-rite thing to see you in. Spaghetti straps. Go put it on.”

“I got time to freshen up?”

“Be my guest,” he said. Kenny twirled her around and released her. She whirled a few times, giggling through the room, out into the hallway, and up the stairs.

Shortly, he heard the shower upstairs. He took the stairs two at a time and resisted the urge to slip into the shower with her. Her constant rejections of his sexual advances made him leery of any more aggressive moves.

She was singing in the shower. She had actually picked up some of the lyrics to the Luther song and was going for it. That was his Mennette! Kenny smiled broadly while he changed into his slacks. He had picked out a shirt that Mennette used to love to see him in. He brushed his hair, running his fingers over the waves in the middle with satisfaction and a smile on his face. He was ready.

He noticed that Mennette had laid the purple dress across the bed. He went into their closet to get the shoes to match. Stacked in

boxes with pictures taped to them, Mennette's shoe collection took up most of her side of the closet. Kenny scanned and saw the pair that made her calves look like a goddess. He grabbed the box, took out the pair, and moved to refill the space he created. That's when he noticed one of her paintings pressed up against the back wall.

She must have forgotten about this one. I'll just take it downstairs for her, he thought. As he reached to free the painting, his fingers slipped into a hole in the wall behind it. His eyebrows furrowed together, wondering how it got there and how much it might cost to plug and repaint. Kenny shifted the painting to the side and froze. The hole wasn't an accident or created by some rodent that had borrowed its way through. No. It was deliberately made by a human. Instinctively, he stuck his fingers inside and moved them around. They landed on a set of keys. Kenny pulled them out with a frown on his face. First the hidden box. Then Ferragamo Man roughing up Mennette. Now deliberately hidden keys. What the hell was going on?

Mennette cleared her throat and Kenny practically jumped out of his skin.

"Can you hand me my robe please?"

In one motion, he adjusted some shoe boxes with his right hand while secretly securing the keys in his palm. His left hand still held the goddess shoes, which he extended to her.

"Sure," he said, acknowledging her request. "But, here. I pulled these out for you because I thought it would look good with your dress." Mennette squealed with the delight of a child receiving a Christmas gift. She stepped out of the doorway and turned around to examine the shoes in better lighting. Mennette never noticed the hole or the askewed painting.

Kenny swiftly repositioned the canvas back over the hole. He grabbed her robe with his left hand and the few other items he needed to complete his outfit he loaded in his right hand to hide the keys.

"Here's your robe," he said, placing it on the bed next to the

dress. Mennette was busy slipping on the regal shoes. "I'll finish getting ready in my office."

"Ok," Mennette replied absently.

The discovery and almost getting busted happened so fast, Kenny didn't have time to think about how he felt about this new discovery. In all their entire 24-year history, Kenny never once hid anything from Mennette. He assumed she always reciprocated. But with uncovering a hidden box, a set of secret keys, and a strange, upper-class thug looking for her, it was all starting to look like pieces of a giant red flag.

On autopilot, he strode across the hall and tossed the items for the party across his desk as he sat down. He pulled the metal box he'd found out of his drawer and set it down, taking a deep breath. He tried all of the keys on the ring, but none of them worked. Stumped, Kenny really wanted to go downstairs to make himself a drink. He realized that it was going to be a much longer night than he expected.

Kenny leaned back in his chair instead. The day had started off great. Now, he was thinking about the damned box and what might be in it, the keys and what they could open, and if any other strange people looking for his wife would pop up on them. Did Mennette have any more secrets that he could potentially stumble over? He never thought he'd see the day when he would question his wife's honesty with him. And yet, here he was with a seed of doubt that was strong enough to put a crack in the foundation of his love for her. Could it be healed? Would it grow to cause irreparable damage to their lives?

This was all too much. Kenny was now actually grateful for Tamar's party. His need for the distraction far outweighed his disdain for the female host. Eric, he could live with. Kenny knew the pair would roll out the red carpet and spare no expense. This New Year's Eve party would take both his and Mennette's minds off of the stress of their situation. And adding Brother to any party was a guaranteed turn-up.

Mennette cleared her throat. Kenny sat up and turned in the direction of her voice. She leaned in the doorway one leg playfully slung back.

“How do I look?” She asked in a sultry tone.

The silky, purple dress hit every curve, just like he’d remembered. Her hair hung in a short straight bob with strands tucked behind her ear. Her purple-tinted lipstick coated her lips and the coy look in her eyes turned Kenny on. The sight of her took his breath away. He let out a low, slow whistle.

“You look... you look...beautiful, Mennette.” He smiled.

She giggled and grabbed her purse. “Come on, I don’t wanna be late. I’m so excited about seeing this Tamara person.”

The mention of Tamara’s name instantly wiped the smile off his face. Kenny got out of the chair to put on the last few additions to complete his outfit. He inspected his polished, hard bottoms shoes for the occasion.

“I’m also excited about learning more about my life. No offense, but there’s got to be more to me than just this house. And you.”

“No offense taken over here,” he responded dryly.



On the way to Tamara’s party, Kenny stopped to pick up Brother. To his surprise, Brother complimented Mennette on her dress. He even leaned into her open window and planted a kiss on her cheek. Mennette returned the compliment and he seemed to bask in her attention.

From the beginning of their relationship, Brother never liked Mennette. He only tolerated her because Kenny was head over heels. Mennette’s fierceness instantly sniffed it out. The two acted like cold frenemies towards each other for years. So to see Mennette and Brother displaying mutual admiration for each other tonight was a rare sight. The night was off to a great start and Kenny didn’t want to lose the momentum. Brother’s good mood added to

Kenny's excitement. Kenny suspected that he'd already started his New Year's celebration with a few drinks of his own.

"Happy New Year, you two lovebirds!" Brother's voice boomed, getting into the car. His wide infectious smile could be seen lighting up the dark. The relaxed chocolate shirt draped over the form-fitted tan shirt, and matching the tan pants made Brother look like a GQ model. And in Brother's true fashion, he topped it off with a tan fedora with a brown band. Kenny looked down at his gray fitted pants and deep royal purple button-down shirt. He knew he looked good, but like always, next to Brother, he only felt "decent."

"No date tonight?" Mennette asked.

"Nope! Riding solo." Brother said, settling into his seat. The strong stench of marijuana sifted from his clothes. He returned a tight-eyed smile through the rear-view mirror when Kenny cocked his eyebrow at him and tipped his hat.

"Any New Year's resolutions?" Mennette cheerfully asked Brother.

"Mennette," Kenny interrupted. "You ain't got the time to go through all the resolutions that this brotha needs." He grinned and started the engine.

"Whatdya mean?" Brother slurred with a chuckle.

"You so full of shit!" Kenny said over his shoulder.

"Yeah, I am!" Brother responded and they all laughed, creating the atmosphere for the night.

Kenny turned off the main street and into a gated community where they all had to show their IDs to the security guard in the booth. He checked the list to make sure that they were legit.

"Fancy!" Mennette exclaimed as they drove through the impressive rows of mansions. Most were elegantly decorated for the holidays with lights flashing and twinkling. Christmas wreaths hung on each door and fully lit Christmas trees sat in the windows. It was a far cry from their modest, working-class neighborhood. Even the air seemed more expensive to Kenny.

A large lake sparkled from the lights of all the homes which

encircled it. Fountains shot water up into the sky and folded back down in pretty, wet arches. Mennette's face was pressed against the car window, taking it all in, her mouth slightly opened in awe. About halfway through the back of the large community, they turned to the left and Tamara's mansion sat perched in a middle lot. They drove up the driveway lit up with large lamp posts. They curved to the left and rolled past the exquisite landscaping until they saw the house come into view. As they rolled up the driveway, Brother let out a low, slow whistle and sat up in the back seat.

"This is what you get for throwing pigskin around?" Brother asked, looking around. "We definitely went into the wrong business." He scoffed. "Hell, I can throw a ball!"

"You gotta do more than just throw it. Eric also invests. I can't even hate on the brotha... he's smart with his money. Probably the worst investment he ever made, though, was marrying that gold digger." Kenny said, pulling up to the massive driveway. "She's a hot mess."

"Hot mess?" Mennette repeated, her face still pressed against the window.

Kenny glanced at Brother through the rear-view mirror without responding to Mennette. They exchanged knowing looks about how much Kenny disliked Tamara.

Kenny pulled his Honda around the driveway and angled towards the home.

Mennette's eyes lit up. "Wow. I have friends living like this? Who is she again?"

"Your girl. The one that's been calling you."

"My best friend living like this?" She turned excitedly to Kenny, her eyes wide, her mouth shaped like the letter "O". "What does she do?"

"Not a damn thing." He said flatly. "Her man plays football."

"Balling!" Brother said. "This the kinda party I like!" He leaned forward trying to get the entire view of the mansion.

"And just how close were we?" Mennette asked.

"This is your best friend. The one you went to college with. She used to be your roommate. You guys were always on the phone, always going somewhere."

"Tell me again why we haven't talked much since my accident?"

"Me and the doctor decided that we didn't want to overwhelm you. And Tamara is the epitome of overwhelming."

Mennette looked back at Brother and he mouthed the word "overwhelming."

A stone paved driveway circled around in front of the house where a valet attendant stood ready to park their Honda among the other expensive cars.

"Well, I'm impressed. This house is overwhelming! Hurry up. Let's go in! I'm excited! It's been how long since I've been out somewhere?"

"Been awhile." He said looking at her, smiling at her excitement.

An attendant opened Mennette's door and handed her a glass of bubbling champagne. "The other guests are in the guest house ma'am." Off in the distance, they could hear the music playing an old-school Salt-N-Pepa song. "Right through those double doors around the back." He slightly bowed at her, then ran around to gather the keys from Kenny and hand them the other two glasses of champagne.

Brother drank his champagne in two quick gulps, fake-dusted off his shoulders and gave Mennette a megawatt smile. She flushed a little and took tiny sips of her glass.

"Time to turn up!" He said as he grabbed Kenny's glass out of his hand and took a sip.

The night air was cooler than expected. But they were soon inside the guest house which was, Kenny noticed, essentially a mini-mansion unto itself. It was approximately half as big as the primary residence. It was easy to see why Mennette always envied the Edwards' lifestyle.

The party was in full swing. Ice sculptures of roses surrounded the words "Happy New Year" along with a large letter "E" on top

stood in the middle of the guest house's entranceway. Gold and black glitter hats with "Happy New Year" printed on them were stacked on a table. Blowers and streamers to be popped at the right time waited obediently next to the hats. An attendant relieved the group of their coats, handed them a claim ticket, then disappeared out of sight. Several waiters greeted them at once with trays of food and wine. In the corner, a DJ rocked the old-school music that they loved. The Edwards had spared no expenses.

Mennette stood in awe as 150 guests smiled, talked, and danced to the music. Mennette grabbed a couple of hats for her and Kenny and they immediately placed them on top of their heads. Brother declined. He did, however, stop a waiter who was passing by with a tray loaded with tiny sandwiches that had green olives stuck to toothpicks. He allowed Mennette to reach for one. Brother took two, smiling mischievously at Mennette.

Kenny looked around the room and sighed. If Mennette ever got her memory back, this is one thing they'd argue about. Observing the guest house alone, it was hard for him to deny Mennette's persistent desire for more and her complaints that he wasn't ambitious enough. Opulence was not the right word to describe the way Tamara and her husband were living. Excessive was more like it. But as Brother always said: "It ain't tricking if you got it." Kenny shook the thoughts off. This night was his chance to blow off some steam, not gather more. He decided he'd enjoy one night of lavish living on someone else's dime.

The dance floor was packed with sweaty bodies gyrating, hands thrown in the air, bouncing butts, and all smiles. Everyone was having a good time. Then the music changed to E.U.'s "Doing da Butt." The crowd hollered with nostalgia and even more people crowded the floor, ditching their hors d'oeuvres and wine glasses to catch the song. Kenny grabbed Mennette and pulled her out onto the dancefloor.

They melted into the wave of the dance crowd, sweating and smiling along with everyone else. He could feel the silky fabric of

her slip dress sliding through his fingers as she moved her hips from side to side. Brother disappeared towards the full-service bar, apparently on the hunt. After four songs and two more glasses of champagne, Mennette was lucid and giggly. Kenny eased her through the dancing crowd to the other side of the guesthouse. They stood on the edge of the dancefloor and Mennette fanned herself with her hand.

Suddenly, Tamara swooped in and gathered a surprised Mennette in her arms. She jumped up and down in those ridiculously high heels. Her diamond ring sparked in the rotating disco ball lights. Her light brown highlights made each curl of her big hair seem like it was gleaming from within.

Tamara was accustomed to money. She'd been with her husband since he played college football. As his popularity and wealth grew, she was always by his side. Tamara made sure that everyone around her knew that Eric was hers and his money was theirs.

She pulled back and held Mennette at arm's length as though it was the first time she'd ever seen her. Kenny shot Tamara a look that she ignored. Her meticulously arched eyebrows on her flawlessly make-up job said she couldn't care less. Her hourglass shape was snugly squeezed into an expensive low-cut white dress that started with the letters D-I-O-R. She looked immensely uncomfortable balancing on her high heels and sipping air through her unnaturally cinched midsection. Not one strand of hair was out of place. She flashed her perfect smile before she spoke to Mennette.

"Honey, you look beautiful!" A small careful breath hitched in her chest. Her eyes glazed over Mennette and her dress with a sudden frown. Then she turned her attention to Kenny.

"Did you not get the memo?" She asked, visibly irritated.

Something in the way Tamara looked at her made Mennette feel suddenly uncomfortable. She smoothed her hands down the front of her short, purple slip dress. The thin straps tightly held her breast in place and her matching shoes with a patch of leopard print on them seemed fitting to her.

"The memo to bring the best-looking woman? Got it. She looks beautiful." Kenny smiled at a blushing Mennette. "Sexy as hell," he flirted with a wink. He brought the glass of champagne to his lips for a sip. He himself also wore the same shade to purposely match his beautiful wife.

"It's a WHITE party!" Tamara emphasized, then sucked her teeth. "I specifically said that in the email invitation. Everybody was to wear white. And everyone did... except you." She spat her last word. "Did you not read it?" She glared at him.

"I did," Kenny stated smugly, as he tilted the glass to his smirking lips, taking a long swallow to polish off half of the liquid. When he was satisfied, he brought the glass down and stared out into the crowd, ignoring Tamara.

Tamara stiffened, sucked in air and straightened her back indignantly. If her face got any tighter, she would crack lines into her thick makeup.

"Is something wrong?" Mennette asked, looking from one to the other. Her eyes swelled and Kenny could tell that she was feeling the alcohol.

"Oh no, honey." Tamara said, taking her eyes away from Kenny and softening her glance to Mennette. She rubbed her palms up and down Mennette's arms. "It's fine. You're fine. You look gorgeous." She smiled. "I'm so glad to see you finally out of that house. I was so scared that you wouldn't be able to make it this year. How are you feeling?"

"Fine, I guess." Mennette slurred and smiled at Tamara with confusion.

"I'm Tamara. Your best friend. Do you remember me?"

Mennette slowly shook her head. "A little. We spoke once on the phone."

"Yes. When the crypt keeper isn't on duty." She chuckled sarcastically and glanced at Kenny who was not amused. "I've been trying, honey, to keep in touch with you. But you always seem to be resting when I call." She hissed out the last phrase through gritted

teeth which lay behind her wide, plastered smile.

Mennette turned and looked around in amazement. "You have a gorgeous home."

"Yes. Thank you," Tamara looked around and leaned in, lowering her voice. "But honey... you've been here a million times!"

"I'm so sorry."

"No worries. I'm just so glad to see you again." Tamara wrapped Mennette tightly into her arms again.

"Great party!" Mennette managed to say once Tamara released her hold.

"Well, you know how the Edwards do!" she said, beaming with pride

Mennette smiled as if she understood the inside joke.

"Kenny, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to steal Mennette away from you so we can engage in a little girl talk." Tamara swooned, taking hold of Mennette's arm. She securely linked her arm around Mennette's. "We have so much to catch up on!"

Kenny knew her all too well. He anticipated that she would try to get Mennette by herself, then monopolize her for the whole night. Kenny was determined not to let it go down like that. He swiftly positioned himself to block their escape.

"I'm afraid, Tamara," he said, gripping Mennette by her waist, "That me and my wife was just about to get this next dance. This is my jam." He snapped his fingers, exaggerating the beat and pulled Mennette close to him, planting a kiss on her cheek. They bopped out together back into the sea of dancing guests.

From the dance floor, Kenny could see Tamara's hardened stare. Finally she turned and stomped away. He didn't care. Mennette was having fun. Seeing her at least partly back to herself was good enough for him at the moment. Mennette laughed, drank and danced until Kenny convinced her to take a break. They partied like they were celebrating an anniversary.

In the last six weeks, Mennette had only left the house for doctor visits and her memory group. Kenny could tell that she was

desperate to socialize with other people besides him. With Tamara nowhere in sight, he let her meander the crowd by herself for a little bit.

Mennette made her way to the hors d'oeuvres table, while Kenny bobbed his head to the music. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked around for Brother, whom they'd only seen twice since they'd been there. He spotted him earlier on the dance floor. The next time Kenny saw him, Brother was leaning up against the wall, whispering something in a giggling woman's ear. From the corner of his eye, Kenny spotted Tamara closing in fast on Mennette like a shark. Before he could blink, she had reached her target and locked elbows. She leaned into Mennette like she was sharing secrets with her. When Mennette looked up in Kenny's direction, he knew it was time to break up their reunion.

"Hey, baby!" He walked up behind Mennette and laced his arms around her waist. "It's almost time for the countdown."

"Okay." She touched Kenny lightly on his arm and cocked her head towards Tamara. "I'll get us some champagne glasses. Do you want one also, uh, Tamara?"

Tamara nodded with a fake smile that barely hid her attitude.

Kenny watched Mennette seek out a waiter and then turned to Tamara. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't fill Mennette's head with negativity. The doctor said the stress could cause more harm."

She turned with a look on her face. "*I*d appreciate it if you went to hell!" She smirked, bucked her eyes, and cocked her head.

Kenny took in a deep, sharp breath, resisting the urge to reach out and let his hands do the talking. He wasn't down with being violent towards women, but at that moment, he wanted nothing more than to grab her and squeeze his fingers around her neck.

"Mennette is my best friend," she continued. "You are trying everything to keep us apart, Kenny. I know what you are doing. It ain't cool."

"I'm just trying to protect my wife." The muscles in his jaws twitched.

"From who? You?" Her eyes narrowed. "You forget that I know you. I know all about you. And more importantly, I know Mennette. Maybe even better than you do. And that is bothering you right now. If you want to act like nothing is going on with y'all, then that's on you," she said while pointing to his chest. "But I'm not going to." Tamara huffed off.

Kenny rubbed his chin. Tamara had been a pain in his ass from the first day he met Mennette. He hated her. And she hated him. And Kenny was sure that Mennette had told Tamara all of their business since they were friends a whole year before he came into the picture. If he were being totally honest with himself, that really bothered him. Always had.

Anger bubbled up. What exactly did Tamara know? Did she know about the divorce? Was there more to know? Did she know about their intimate secrets? What about their sex lives? Did she know about that too?

The DJ stopped the music and made an announcement over the loudspeaker. "It's getting close, ladies and gentlemen. Grab your glasses and that special someone and get ready for the New Year!"

A barrage of waiters busied themselves filling and refilling empty glasses all around the room. Kenny found Mennette talking to Brother near the open bar. He joined them and they all picked up their glasses. Everyone looked to the DJ as he pointed to the back of the wall where a constructed light shaped like a star was positioned to move up towards a blinking Happy New Year sign. They all moved into the middle of the crowded room. Kenny held Mennette by her waist in a snug, protective embrace and they joined in the countdown.

"...Four! Three! Two! One! Happy New Year!!" Everyone cheered, drank from their glasses, and made noise with their blowers. Some people kissed. Feeling inspired, Kenny leaned into Mennette to kiss her. The alcohol must have taken effect because she blushed and allowed him to kiss her.

About two hours later, the crowd began to thin. Kenny needed

to get Mennette home. In his opinion, the night turned out to be just what they needed to unwind and reconnect with each other. They had a great time dancing, drinking and hugging each other like they did when they were younger. Kenny waited in the foyer for Mennette and Brother to retrieve their coats. That's when Eric, Tamara's husband, walked up, slapping him on the back.

"What it do, man?" Eric laughed. "Been a while. You enjoyed yourself?"

"Most definitely!" Kenny responded with an appreciative nod. Eric was taller than Kenny and thicker in stature. He had a wide smile that reminded Kenny of one of his favorite cousins. Although he disdained Tamara, he had always been cool with Eric.

"How ole girl doing?" Eric pointed in Mennette's direction.

"Good, good." Kenny nodded. "Better."

"You gotta sec? Follow me to my office. I got something I want you to see." Kenny removed his party hat and followed Eric out of the guest house, through the more impressive, exquisite main house, up the wide elaborate staircase and onto the second level of the home. As they walked down the long hallway past numerous rooms, Eric chatted about football camp, his and Tamara's recent vacation to Europe, and his plans for the next year when he was finally thinking of retiring and living off his other investments.

They entered a large office filled with massive, expensive-looking furniture and a barrage of Eric's accolades peppering the walls. The smell of leather and frankincense and myrrh incense filled the room.

Eric pointed to a framed picture of himself on the opposite wall of his desk. "Check this out."

Kenny lit up and smiled. He pointed to the frame also. "Is that it?"

Eric nodded his head vigorously with pride. "Hall of Famer."

"Man! Congrats!" Kenny shook Eric's hand and leaned into the picture to get a closer view.

Kenny remembered reading about Eric being inducted into

the Hall of Fame. Mennette had gone to visit Tamara that day and came back in a jealous funk. They argued that night about their life. The lack of all things expensive. According to Mennette, they had lost their drive and given up on their goals. Kenny knew Mennette blamed him. As long as he'd known Mennette, she had always been a go-getter. Ambition coursed through her veins. Each day she woke up with a smile and focused on being productive. In her words, "What was the point of a day if it's unproductive?"

But in Kenny's mind, he had no desire to try to keep up with the Edwards' lifestyle. Sure, they all started out together in the same college. But Eric was talented enough to get himself drafted into the NFL. That instantly set the two couples' income potential on widely divergent paths before they all graduated. The gap only grew wider over the years.

While Kenny was happy for the brother, he couldn't care less. He didn't have any special skills that could make him millions like Eric, so he never felt compelled to compete with him. Kenny was content with himself and where he was in his life. He had a decent-paying job at Airglass with great benefits. He had the love of his life. All he needed was children to feel complete. He wished that Mennette was as ambitious about getting pregnant as she was about having the Edwards' lifestyle.

Kenny looked over at Eric. He had been talking the entire time they'd come into the office. He was just winding up one of his football stories when Kenny returned from his thoughts.

"Good times." Eric sighed, finishing his story, although Kenny hadn't paid attention. He shoved his hands in his pockets, still admiring the Hall of Famer plaque.

"Guess we better get back," Kenny offered, starting towards the door. On the way out of the office, Eric stopped, then doubled back to his desk in the corner.

"Wait a minute. I almost forgot." Eric plucked a business card from his desk drawer and handed it to Kenny. "The other reason I brought you up here." Kenny read the card to himself. It was the

name of some guy with the title investment broker. "Tell Mennette that he only deals in investments with a minimum of \$50,000."

Kenny frowned. "Sheeet. \$50,000?" He said handing him back the card. "You ain't got to worry about that. We don't have that kind of money to invest."

"Well," he hesitated. "She'd been on Tamara for some weeks before the accident for me to get her that card. Said she really needed to talk to the man." He handed the card back to Kenny. "Keep it. When she gets her memory back, she'll remember why she asked for it. Just in case. You never know," he said. "You never know!"

Kenny clenched his jaw and accepted the card without a word, shoving it into his pocket and walked out the room.

Kenny met Mennette and Tamara standing by the Honda outside, waiting for him. Brother lay sprawled in the back seat practically passed out in a drunken stupor. Red and orange lipstick marks in the shape of women's lips scattered across his cheeks and neck.

Kenny turned to Eric and shook his hand. "Man, good looking out tonight. We had a great time." Tamara went to her husband and wrapped herself around him. He seemed unfazed. Mennette and Kenny scrambled into the car as the Edwards made their way back into their paradise.

Mennette securely snapped her seatbelt and turned to Kenny. "I think I might remember this place. I think me and Tamara might have had some good times here. You say I hang out here a lot?" She inhaled. "You know, at first I was scared." She looked back at Brother who was out cold. "Scared to death. But now, I think I'ma be alright remembering and stuff. It's actually kinda interesting getting to know me. I wasn't too bad of a person. My family and friends, and the things I liked to do. My painting interests. I think I'm going to be alright."

She was speaking so fast, stringing her words together. She slurred a few and Kenny knew she was intoxicated. He wondered how much of this the alcohol would allow her to remember in the

morning. He backed out of the driveway and hit the road, turning the car away from luxury and back towards modest living. The vein in his head throbbed as he thought about all the strife and grief that they'd been through in their marriage surrounding the Edwards' finances. At the first red light, he fingered the card in his pocket for a moment, then slipped it to her just as the light turned green.

"What's this?" she asked giggling, taking the card from his hand. She read the card out loud, and her words blurred into each other. She struggled to focus through her intoxication.

"Tamara's husband told me to give it to you." He didn't look at her as he merged onto Highway 4 and picked up speed.

She looked at it seemingly clueless.

"He said the man only deals with a minimum of \$50,000 for investments." Kenny waited for her reply.

Her eyes widened. "We got that much?"

"Not even close. Try more like \$623 to our name." He tried to stifle a scoff. "And I don't even think all the damn checks have cleared yet."

"Well, I guess he got the wrong person." She said, rolling the window down, letting the card flutter in her fingers, before releasing it to fly out of the window into the dark freeway. She touched the side of his face and smiled.

A feeling surfaced from deep in his gut that he couldn't shake. There was something going on. Something. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

As he rolled up to the house, Kenny noticed the front door was slightly ajar. He was instantly on edge. He parked on the street and motioned for Mennette to stay in the car while he eased up to the house. He grabbed the oversized umbrella out of the trunk and intended to use it as a bat if necessary. He instantly regretted dropping Brother off first.

Carefully, he entered the house. Inside, the place was ransacked. Ironically, the TV still sat on its perch. But the couch had been

flipped over and items around the room were strewn everywhere.

Kenny moved stealthily among the downstairs rooms and into the garage. Completed canvases and some works in progress were tossed haphazardly all over the paint room. Most of the storage bins in the garage were misplaced, opened and the contents mixed with each other on the floor.

Strangely, Kenny started to relax. It seemed like whoever did this was already gone. So far, nothing of value seemed like it was missing, not that they had much. Everything was just turned inside out, like they were looking for something. Red flag bombs exploded in Kenny's mind.

He slipped quietly up the stairs, easing his grip on the umbrella. His anger, however, grew with each step. Not because he knew he had a hell of a job putting the house back together by himself... that alone was an extremely annoying thought. No. It was all these strange things that kept happening around Mennette that had him fuming. First the box, then the man. Today alone it was the keys and the business card. But now this home invasion?

Their world started unraveling the moment she lost her memory. And the pace of suspicious events and discoveries seemed like it was picking up. It was like the whole world knew something about his wife that he didn't. Well... since Mennette couldn't tell him what was going on, it was time to start getting some real answers another way.

He stepped into the bedroom. All of the drawers were empty and pulled out. The mattress was flipped upside down. All of Mennette's clothing and jewelry were pulled from the closet and lay strewn across the floor. This wasn't a robbery. Whoever vandalized their house was looking for something specific, or was trying to send a message... but what?

Kenny stepped into the bathroom to see if things were disturbed there too. He stopped dead in his tracks as a chill flushed through his body. Scrawled across the mirror in Mennette's red lipstick was a message that read: "U know what I want!" The discarded tube lay

unusable on the counter.

“Oh, my God!” Mennette gasped behind him, startling him. He didn’t bother chastising her for throwing caution to the wind and exiting the car before he let her know it was safe. He could see her genuinely distraught face reflected in the mirror. She moved closer to him. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know Mennette.” He slowly shook his head, his jaw muscles tightening. “But if you can remember anything at all, right damn now is a good time to start!”

Chapter 8

KENNY 2001

Kenny slipped the key in the lock. Mennette placed her hand over his.

“Ready?” Kenny asked, then counted. “1, 2, 3!” They ceremoniously twisted the knob to their new home together. They giggled like teenagers as they burst through the door. It was both their first time as homeowners. He was so proud that he was crossing this milestone with her.

Kenny remembered the look on Mennette’s face right after she signed her name on all the papers. It was as if she’d been holding her breath from the beginning of the application process until their realtor turned over their keys to them earlier that morning. They were so excited that they ran to their tiny apartment in San Pablo immediately after the closing and packed the car with a bunch of bare necessities. They whizzed across Highway 4 towards their new home in Antioch. They arrived late in the afternoon.

Once inside, Mennette dropped the boxes by the front door and walked through each room grinning. “Wow!” she exclaimed, walking up to Kenny. She wrapped her body around him in a tight embrace. “We did it!” She beamed.

He smiled. They had only been married for two years. The thought of making her happy was why he worked as hard as he did. If he had to continue to work like that to keep her beautiful

smile on her face, he was ready.

She unwound herself from him and picked up the closest box of supplies.

“Gonna clean?” Kenny asked.

“Of course.” She giggled and reached into the box. She pulled out a pair of rubber gloves, a bottle of Pine-Sol and a rag.

“I’ll take the kitchen,” Kenny offered. “Cause I’m gonna cook us a meal!” Kenny flashed her his most charming smile.

“Gourmet?” She walked her fingers seductively up his arm.

“You know it! *La spa-ghe-ttee* with homemade sauce,” he joked in a mock French accent.

She placed a kiss on his lips and lingered a moment, taking his bottom lip gently between her teeth.

“Don’t start that shit!” He groaned, rubbing his growing erection. He smacked her on her butt. “We ain’t gon’ never eat.”

Mennette wiggled her eyebrows at him and swatted him with the rag before disappearing up the stairs. Kenny put on his portable speaker. Maxwell filled the house with “Pretty Wings” and the place immediately felt like home to him. He cleaned the kitchen and prepared to make dinner, all the while thinking about Mennette and what she was doing upstairs.

As the water boiled for the noodles, winds gathered outside and rain pounded against the house. A few cracks of thunder snapped through the sky.

Mennette emerged from the upstairs bathroom, cleaning gloves still on, and glanced out the window. “We better get ready to go back to the apartment.”

He glanced over her shoulder through the window. “Let’s stay here tonight.”

She frowned, slipping one glove off. “Here?”

“It is ours. We own it now. We can stay here tonight. We got dinner and a few blankets. And of course this...” Kenny pulled out her favorite bottle of wine. “Been saving it for this very day. Plus, it’s too dangerous to ride all the way back to San Pablo in this

weather.”

She looked around nervously. “I guess so. You’re right... We do own it huh? But it’s so cold here. “And no furniture at all. Where would we sleep?”

“Wherever the hell we want!”

She smiled. “Okay! Let’s do it! I’m gonna go freshen up.”

He nodded, did a little two-step and a Temptation twirl before he stirred the sauce. She shook her head and disappeared into the back room. He hoped she would come back naked. Kenny couldn’t wait to show Brother his new home.

When he, Brother, and their mom lived in the projects, owning a home was all they ever dreamed about. They fantasized about where they would live and how their mother would decorate. He smiled and looked around. “She would have loved this house,” he mumbled to himself.

“This was a good idea,” Mennette said, appearing out of nowhere. She leaned seductively into the frame of the door. “And look what I found!” She sing-songed and wiggled her butt.

She wore a long-sleeved lumber-jacked style flannel shirt and thick multi-colored socks.

“Sexy.” He said sarcastically. “Just what I pictured you in.”

She came over, poured the wine into a glass, refilled his, then hoisted herself up onto the island where she sat and watched him cook. She listened to the rain outside. “It’s so peaceful out here. I wonder what the neighbors are like? I hope they’re cool. Maybe we can go meet some and visit.”

“Not in those flannel lumber-jacks.”

“What? This sexy thing? I thought you men loved your women strong.” She teased.

“Strong is cool. I just don’t want no motherfucking lumber-jack!” he laughed.

“Hmmp.” She sipped a few moments from her glass. “I don’t know...” she hunched her shoulders. “I think it’s cute. I figured you would like it too.”

He stirred the noodles in the water. "You figured wrong."

"Well, I thought I'd give you a little something to inspire you." She slowly opened her legs and then closed them quickly, exposing her naked vagina. "No panties!"

He instantly stiffened while his eyebrows rose to the top of his head. "Definitely inspiring! Would have been better if you took it off." He dipped the spoon in the sauce and brought it to her lips. "Taste this."

The spoon slipped into her mouth and she smirked when he pulled it out. "Needs more oregano." She mischievously licked her lips. He leaned in and gave her a slow sensual kiss. She could taste the tangy sauce on his lips and feel the tingle of his passion. "Mmmm. That's delicious."

"Mmm, hmmm!" he purred. "You wait till I'm done with this meal and I'll give you something more delicious than that."

She smiled and began swinging her legs as she sat on the island. "We did it! We're homeowners! Whooooooooo!" She let out a yelp, throwing her arms in the air. "I can yell as loud as I want and don't have to worry about that old-ass white man downstairs complaining! Whooooo!" She let out an exasperated laugh. "It feels good, baby." She giggled and wiggled her bottom on the island.

"So, Mr. Young," she held an imaginary microphone in front of his face as he beamed, "...how does it feel to you to be the first one in your family to own a home?"

"Is this thing on?" He played along, pretending to tap the top of the imaginary microphone. "Good. Damn good. And I want to thank my beautiful wife for being the inspiration to make a man wanna work harder."

She rolled her eyes. "You so corny!"

He chuckled. "Yeah, I am!" He peered at her. "I guess you might be the first in your family also?"

"Perhaps." She said with a dismissive shrug of her shoulders.

"Now all we got to do is fill this house with babies. Two in each room will do."

"That's six..."

"Yep."

She glanced at him to see if he was joking, but Kenny was serious. Mennette slowed the happy swing of her legs.

Kenny sprinkled in more oregano and gave the sauce another stir as he let his mind drift over his last statement. Everything was finally falling into place in his mind. He'd been on his job at Air-glass as a filling technician in San Leandro for over a year now. Mennette had finished her master's degree earlier in the spring and was now working as an inventory coordinator for the California Academy of Nature in San Francisco. Her new income helped them qualify for the loan. As far as Kenny was concerned, the next step was to start having kids.

Mennette didn't want to get pregnant while she was in school, and he understood that. But now there was nothing holding them back from starting a family. Kenny wasn't joking about two kids in each of the three bedrooms... he wanted to have at least four kids.

"But what if..." She started asking a question, but her voice trailed off. Her legs stopped swinging altogether.

"What if what?" Kenny sprinkled another dash of salt into the pot.

"What if we can't have any babies?"

"We will." He said confidently, leaving the sauce to check in on the noodles. Not having kids was not an option. Mennette already knew how he felt about family so he didn't take her question seriously.

"Yeah, but what if we can't." She asked again. "Terry at the office had a hard time conceiving. Took her so long that they finally just adopted."

"Well we ain't them." He said lightly and kissed her on her forehead.

"I know that, however, it could happen to anybody..."

"And I ain' worried about that. My stallions are ready! I know you can feel them trying to bust through your back? Or through

the back of your throat?"

She playfully smacked his arm. "Don't be nasty."

"Man, this is cool!" Kenny went back to marveling at their new house. "I see BBQs in the back. A fish tank over there. Of course, you know a brutha gotta have a weight bench and pool table in the garage for company." He winked.

His comment was met with silence. The air had changed a little. The shift made him uncomfortable and he wondered what was up.

"But seriously," she started again. She folded her lips into her mouth and waited for a response.

"Seriously what, Mennette?" His voice tinged with a little irritation.

She shrugged. "I on' know...like, if we can't?"

He stopped stirring and gave her his full attention. "Is there something you need to tell me?"

"No." She fumbled. "No. I was just wondering..."

"Well stop," he interrupted. "We'll be fine."

"But if we can't? What would that do to our marriage?"

"I will still love you. As long as we try, God will provide us with what we want and what we need." He turned the stove off and walked to her. He gently guided her legs open as he stood between them. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and he kissed her passionately. Urgently.

He pulled one side of her shirt down and kissed her shoulder. Kenny slipped his fingers under the flannel shirt and watched her eyes close and her head fall back. Her legs tightened around his waist. He slid down, pushed his head under the shirt and used his tongue. Soft moans escaped her.

"Definitely better than the spaghetti sauce," he mumbled, as he ran his tongue across the front of his teeth as he came up. He pulled the flannel from her body and tossed it on the floor. "Now let's practice. I say we start with a boy." He leaned her back onto the island, hiked her hips up and dropped his pants.

Chapter 9

KENNY

“Kenny!!”

Matt’s smile was wide and genuine. With his left hand, he slapped Kenny on his back hard. With his right, he pounded Kenny’s palm with his thick one multiple times before pulling him into an embrace. “You here to clock in?”

“I wish!” Kenny huffed.

Matt angled his wide and square body to the side in order to fit in the tight space of his desk and chair. Kenny sat across from him. Matt, a proud boisterous Italian, hired Kenny early in 1995, right after Kenny’s mother died. At the time, Matt himself had recently lost his own mother. He instantly related to what Kenny was going through when he came in to interview for a job at Airglass. Matt practically hired him on the spot, promising to teach him everything, even though Kenny didn’t have the experience or education for the position.

“Happy New Year, huh buddy?! The year went by so fast. You take the little lady out?”

“Actually, I did! We got out for a change. Took her to her friend’s house to do a little dancing.”

“How’s she doing?” Matt exhaled once he found a comfortable spot for his body. His baby-blue eyes pierced out from under his dark, bushy eyebrows. “I been wonderin’ about you guys. Crazy shit, huh?”

"Who you telling!" Kenny adjusted uncomfortably in his seat. "She's alright, though. Just trying to adjust."

"And you, buddy? How you getting along?"

"Same. Trying to adjust."

"You probably got this question a million times before but buddy... What the hell happened?"

"Car crash. Head injury. She lost her memory." Kenny said, curtly summing up the last seven weeks of his life. And yes, Matt was right. After hearing the question a million times, he was sick of it. So he finally found the 5-second version that easily rolled off his tongue and rarely prompted follow-up questions.

Matt bobbed his head up and down as though he completely understood that answer. He watched Kenny's face for a moment longer with genuine concern, then slid a folder across the desk to him.

"It's a new year, huh Buddy? Moving forward, looking forward! We gon' work on getting Mennette better, huh? You work on your end with her at home, and I'll try my best to help where I can." Matt took in a deep breath.

"Now, let's get this part over with. HR emailed me yesterday. They want to know when your DOR will be." Matt tapped his fat finger on the top of the folder. "Shoot straight with me, Buddy. If she don't remember nothing, what you plan on doing about your job?"

Kenny rubbed the back of his head and sighed. This is the exact question he'd been asking himself. "Need more time. Not sure when my date of return will be. I have no clue. I don't know what you gonna tell HR. I just need some more time to figure this thing out. It ain't like this the kind of shit that happens every day."

Matt opened the file, then turned to his computer and tapped on the keyboard a few times. "Twelve weeks is what they give you, unpaid FMLA. As if that's enough time to get your shit together huh?" He said glancing at Kenny. He looked back at the screen. "You already blew through a portion of that. You've exhausted

your sick time. As of now, your job is protected but you should have gotten your last sick-time check.” He started and looked again at Kenny.

Kenny nodded, exasperated. Indeed he did receive it. And now he was concerned about the rest of Mennette’s time off.

“You’ve been off since...when did the accident happen?”

“November. Right before Thanksgiving.”

“Damn. That must have been hard.”

“You have no idea.”

“Okay. Right before Thanksgiving.” Matt pecked the keyboard again. “It’s now January, so six weeks, means you about halfway through your leave time.” He turned and handed Kenny a pen. “Buddy, if you can sign on the lines highlighted we can finish up this formal shit and get down to the real deal.”

Kenny scribbled on all the appropriate places and slid the folder back to Matt.

Matt dramatically slid the folder to the left of the desk and steeped his hands in front of him as he looked into Kenny’s face. “Real talk, Kenny.” It took him a moment to speak after he took in a deep breath. “How you doing? We know Mennette is gonna be fine. But how is Kenny doing? Shoot straight with me.”

“As well as can be expected. I’m hanging.”

“I want you to know that I am here for you. I’ll try to pull any strings that I can for you and Mennette. You two are good people. I sure hate that something like this happened to you, Buddy. But you know the state of California, they got their own rules. When you get close to the end of your time, we could probably file for an extension. That I’m sure we can do if she doesn’t get her memory back by then.”

“I doubt that seriously Matt.” Kenny paused. “She’s been going to her meetings and still no breakthrough.”

“I’m worried about you, Buddy.”

“Don’t worry about me, Matt. I’m a Black man in America. I’ve survived worse.” He thought about his mother. “I’ll survive this.”

“How you doing on money?”

“We good.” He stated, even though he was deeply concerned about what they would do since he’d just received his last sick check. They already lived paycheck to paycheck before her accident. All he had in his favor was the few empty credit cards they kept for emergencies. There was no way he would let Matt know that he was nervous about finances.

“We’ll manage,” Kenny assured him. Their savings could barely sustain the recommended three-month emergency requirement, let alone an unemployed wife with no anticipation of her return to work. But regardless of their situation, he would never accept financial help. Especially from his boss. Kenny took his role as a man and the head of the household seriously. It was his job to figure this shit out. All he needed help with was securing more time off work until he felt Mennette was okay to stay home alone. The best gift Matt could give Kenny was time. Time to straighten things out with Mennette and figure out their life.

Matt nodded his head as if he understood. “When I hired you almost 20 years ago...”

“Twenty-three!” Kenny corrected.

“Wow! Twenty-three years ago? Sheesh! Well, I knew the moment I met ya, you were like a brother from another mother...” He chuckled. “I’m here bro. Whatever you need. Let me talk to HR. See what else I can do. Maybe an FMLA extension. Some type of disability for her until she’s able to return back to work. Let me do some digging. You got such a good work record that I’m sure I can do something for you. You go and take care of Mennette, cause she’s lucky to have a man like you, Buddy.”

Kenny stood. “I’m the lucky one.”

Matt tried standing also, however, it took him a bit longer to unjam his body from the chair. “Where you headed now? Got time for a bite to eat?”

“Nah, Matt.” Kenny shook his head. “I’ll have to catch you another time. When I leave here, I’m going to her job to pick up some

things. But I appreciate it.”

“No problem. You know I got your back.” Matt patted Kenny on his back, hard like he usually did. “Don’t forget it, okay?”

Kenny nodded while looking Matt in his blue eyes. “Most definitely man.”

Chapter 10

MENNETTE 1993

“Eighteen.” The girl responded to Mennette’s question, clicking her gum on one side of her mouth.

Mennette eyed her up and down as she stood behind the Popeyes counter. Mennette could tell the girl was young but she seemed grown; she had a hint of sophistication about her. Or at least enough money to make it seem so. She was what the older people called “Grown Ass.”

The girl smacked her gum and balanced her large pink Dooney and Bourke satchel in the crook of her elbow. On her wrist, a diamond tennis bracelet sparkled and bright colors accented her pretty face. She didn’t look like any 18-year-old Mennette had ever seen so she was instantly intrigued. No other customers were in the store at the moment, so she had nothing to lose in asking her a few questions.

Mennette looked down at her own dark brown polyester work uniform and something in her broke apart. She was only two years older than this girl but they were worlds apart. Mennette had been steadily working for two years now, but she couldn’t dress that glamorously if she worked a million years on her minimum wage income. She didn’t have any financial obligations but she still felt like she was barely scraping by. She was still trying to move on with her life after suffering a series of tragic events that most people

couldn't survive... yet somehow, she had.

Popeyes was abnormally slow on this balmy October day. Usually, when they opened at 10 AM, there would already be a car or two waiting in the drive-through, and two or three more waiting on the other side of the locked door. But this morning, it was crickets.

The only sounds were the sizzling crackle of spicy chicken frying and the click-clacking of her manager, Mr. Stayne's keyboard in the back supply closet. Just prior to Grown Ass's arrival 45 minutes into her shift, Mennette was leaning against the front counter in extreme boredom, counting the spider webs in the corner wall opposite her cash register. Grown Ass was the most interesting person that had come into the fast-food chicken joint in a long while. She appeared to brighten up the drab place when she waltzed through the door.

"So?" She said, blowing a large round pink bubble before smashing it between her lips and sucking it back into her mouth. "How much I owe you?" She shifted her body, placing her weight on her right hip.

"Oh right. Money." Mennette stammered. "But first. Chicken," she said, scrambling to get Grown Ass her meal. She stuffed the pieces in a box, shoved in a biscuit, tossed a bunch of fries in, and closed it. Mennette grabbed a cup and filled it with her drink. She jumped back over to the cash register and froze. Grown Ass was like a real-life magical creature that was standing in front of her. All of a sudden, she knew she wanted to be like her. Mennette couldn't help but stare at her in admiration.

Grown Ass impatiently cleared her throat. "How much?" she demanded.

Mennette looked around for her manager. He was still sitting in the back room staring at a computer screen. Slyly, she turned back to her and whispered. "It's on me." Mennette leaned in over the counter. "But only on one condition."

Grown Ass raised an eyebrow. It was her turn to be intrigued.

“Tell me how you can afford all that stuff at 18.”

She reared her head back and laughed. “That, honey, is personal business!” She opened her purse and pulled out a matching pink Dooney wallet and flipped through a stack of neatly lined bills until she came to a \$10 bill. “That should cover the \$8,” she said with a snap of the wallet and a drop back into her purse. “And keep the change.” She pivoted like she was on a runway and sauntered out of the door, her box of chicken dangling like an extra Dooney purse.

Mennette stared wistfully at her through the glass door as she sauntered across the parking lot. The last two years of her life were a blur. Most days, Mennette walked around in a fog, waiting for the good part of life to find her and happen. So far, during her 20 years on Earth, life had hit her with one sucker punch after the other. Her childhood friend Guadalupe and her family had given her this job because they owned the franchised location. They also allowed her to stay with them and only asked her to contribute a little towards the household bills. Mostly because she couldn’t afford the shocking California cost of living, but mainly because of her past.

Obviously, the family felt sorry for her. This act of sympathy only depressed Mennette as it reminded her of her tragic background. Instead of feeling gracious, Mennette’s depression took the forefront of her life. Her residence and her job were a daily reminder of what she survived and that she was now dependent on the kindness of strangers. Living in her numb, survival state, Mennette hadn’t dared to dream what her life could be.

But Grown Ass walking through the door was an amazing gift. Her fabulous wardrobe and saddy air suddenly helped Mennette realize who she wanted to be. Instinctively, Mennette yearned for a change. And if ever she needed a change in her life, it was now.

The sound of mild chicken getting dropped in the grease snapped Mennette’s attention back to the here and now. Her supervisor had come from the back room to do Xavier’s job. They were short-staffed because two people had called out sick. Mr. Stayne had been in the back, on the phone, practically having a

nervous breakdown as he called around, trying to get someone to come in. The mid shift person was supposed to show up by 11:30 AM, just before the lunch rush.

"Mennette. You might as well take your break now while it's slow. Ashley'll be here soon, hopefully," he said. A hint of urgency coating his words.

Mennette didn't need to be told twice. She instantly locked her cash register and went to the restroom. She stared at her face in the mirror. Most everyone called her pretty. But the first thing she always saw in her reflection was sorrow and pain in her eyes. Right now, though, she noticed a glimmer of relief and then, because of that, a wave of guilt. Mennette splashed water on her face, which took the few tears that escaped along with it. She slipped outside the back door they used for deliveries. She rounded the corner, then posted up on the side of the building, letting the sun warm her face.

Across the parking lot, Grown Ass was still there. She was standing by a nice Toyota Camry, talking on her cell phone and staring at the rear of her car. She ended her call with a huff, slipping it back into her Dooney and Burke. She looked around impatiently, at nothing in particular. That's when she caught Mennette staring at her. She sauntered back over to the building, towards the only familiar face in sight.

"Flat tire." She said with an exaggerated frown. "Gotta wait for Triple-A," she sighed, squinting up into the sky. "It's too doggone hot in Antioch!" She frowned.

"You can sit inside," Mennette said eagerly. "Mr. Stayne don't mind as long as you buy something."

She held up the box of chicken, sarcastically. "Already did." She huffed, then focused on Mennette. "You on break?"

Mennette nodded her head.

"Come on, you can sit with me while I eat." They walked back in through the front door and picked a booth and slipped in to sit. She dug into her bag, pulled out her box, and started in on the

fries. "Where's your food?" she asked Mennette between chews.

"I can't afford lunch today."

"You mean, you work at a food place and you can't afford to eat?" She shook her head. "That's just plain ole sad." She took a drumstick out of the box and slid the rest to Mennette. "Eat mine. I really didn't need it anyway. I gotta keep my figure right."

"At 18?" Mennette wondered as she tore into the chicken meat. Her stomach rumbled but she couldn't slow down. Thoughts of keeping her figure "right" never crossed her mind.

She watched for a moment as Mennette ate hastily. "What's your name?"

"Mennette." She wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "What's yours?"

"Tamara. Tamara Jones." She smiled like she was a movie star or something. Mennette wondered why Tamara Jones introduced herself by first and last name. "I'm gonna be rich when I get older."

"How you gonna do that?" Mennette looked up from her free meal with a piece of chicken skin hanging from her mouth.

"I have a plan!" Tamara said, proudly.

Mennette stared at her. A plan? Mennette had been planning since she was a child. But then life happened. "What type of plan?"

She half listened as Tamara told of her future modeling and acting career and how she planned on dating rich men and living this fabulous life. While she talked, something in Mennette stirred. Could she have another shot at life? Twenty was still considered young. Could she put the tragedy of her past behind her and not look back? Anything would be better than where she came from.

"So what kinda plans you got?" Tamara asked, finishing her story, sucking her Sprite through a straw.

Mennette stared at her once again, dumbfounded.

"You do have a plan, right? I mean, why you working here when you supposed to be in college anyway? My mama said, 'A person always got to have a plan if they are to ever get anything in life.' She made both me and my brother write out our goals." Tamara flipped

her asymmetrical bob. "Your mama tell you that?"

Mennette slowly shook her head no.

"So, again, why you not in college?"

"College?" Mennette asked. After what she had just gone through, her life didn't seem like it could accommodate college. It seemed an impossible dream now. Actually, it seemed that her life would never get back on track. She'd all but given up on any aspirations and goals.

"College!" Tamara stated with a snort. "You know, the 13th grade?" She placed the cup of Sprite down on the table and crossed her arms over her chest. "I thought everybody went to some kind of college after high school."

"Not everybody," Mennette replied dryly, eyeing the buttery biscuit. Suddenly she was not interested in the food anymore. This was the first time that she'd even thought of college in a very long time. Working had become the one and only norm in her life. Standing day in and day out ringing up greasy chicken meals to greedy people seemed to have made her lose any ambition. Even though she was smart, the idea of going to college disappeared from her dreams and was replaced by thoughts of survival. She frowned and looked into Tamara's eyes which were framed with thick coats of mascara. "What college you go to?"

"The one up on the hill. Cal State." Tamara said and took another sip from her soda as she assessed Mennette through judgmental eyes. "You know, beauty is essential."

"You're studying beauty?" Mennette scrunched her nose with the question. She didn't know that "that" was even a "thing" to study.

"Not beauty." Tamara corrected with another dramatic flip of her hair. "Fashion."

"Fashion?"

Tamara nodded her pretty head and chattered on and on about how high fashion was the wave of the future. That she was up on the newest and latest fashion and make-up tips to which she dis-

tastefully glanced at Mennette and muttered that she could “help” her with.

While Tamara continued to pick apart Mennette’s work uniform and lack of lip gloss, Mennette wondered how could there be a completely different world than hers that she was clueless about. A world that didn’t involve polyester pants so shiny and stiff that Pepsi, hot sauce and chicken grease slid right off. A world where \$8 was not a number to strive for after slaving for 60 entire minutes of hot sweaty grease-filled work. One where a chatty 18-year-old with thick dark eyelashes and smudged stained red lips could carry an expensive handbag and drive a cute car.

Why had she not known of this world before? Mennette looked over at Tamara still chattering away about spring eyeshadow colors that would look great on Mennette and decided right then and there that she wanted to be in that world. She wanted what this Tamara girl had. She glanced over her shoulder at Mr. Stayne. He was slouched over reading a magazine, his belly hanging past the tight belt loop of his manager’s polyester uniform. He leaned to his left, slightly lifting his butt cheek, which meant only one thing: he was farting again. Mennette swiftly turned back to Tamara and leaned in, cutting her off mid-sentence.

“Help me get into college,” Mennette said desperately. “Please!”

Tamara finally paused long enough to focus on Mennette’s face. “If you get past that sweat on your face and grease on your clothes, you kinda cute. Why you working here again?”

“Cute don’t have nothing to do with working here. I’m broke.”

“Hmph.” She snorted, then her eyes glanced behind Mennette.

“Umm, I think your supervisor is trying to get your attention.”

Mennette turned around again to see Mr. Stayne tapping the invisible watch on his wrist with a frown.

Mennette turned back to look almost helplessly at Tamara. She sighed. “I guess I better get back to work. Breaks over. Thanks again for the food. I probably wouldn’t have had lunch today if it wasn’t for you.”

"I'll write my number down. Call me. I'll help you out." Tamara said, peering over her shoulder at the tow truck pulling up next to her car. "Open enrollment is going on right now. It's the perfect time for you to apply for the next semester. I'll talk to my guidance counselor and see if he'll talk to you. Maybe you can pledge a sorority with me."

"A sorority? What's that?"

"What's that?!" Tamara paused, shocked. "Oh, you really need to go to college! You're wasting your cute young years in this..." she flicked her wrist looking around the restaurant. "We'll get you accepted to school first. And then I'll show you how I can afford all this stuff." She gave Mennette another long concentrative look, focusing on her face, then her body. "You can make some real money." Tamara scribbled her number on a napkin and walked to the door. "Smooches." She called behind her, blowing kisses as she walked out.

Mr. Stayne cleared his throat and squeezed out a not-so-silent fart. "Mennette you two whole minutes late from your break fooling around with that girl. You know I'm gonna have to take that out yo check."

Mennette turned to stare at him with new eyes. She stood looking at him for a moment, taking in the current scene that was her life: His sweaty bald head. The belly hanging over his belt. The faded wallpaper, eaten away by grease, on the wall behind him.

She blinked a few times and sighed. This is what her life had become? Her shoulders drooped. Things had to change.

"Why you standing there with your mouth all open like you lost, girl? This chicken ain't gon' fry itself. Get over here and get back to work. Ashley'll be here shortly."

Mennette did as she was told. But she now had a different perspective on her life. New possibilities had just bloomed. The more she thought about her conversation with Tamara, the more excited she became. The thought of college and getting an education were again at the forefront of her mind for the first time in five years.

She folded the napkin with Tamara's number on it and put it in her pocket like it was a winning lottery ticket. She wasn't about to lose it, because after having her first encounter with Tamara Jones, she had a feeling that her life was about to change.

Chapter 11

KENNY

Kenny pulled up to the business office at The California Academy of Nature around 10:15 AM. His meeting with Matt an hour prior actually proved a little more promising than he'd anticipated. Now as he waited in the reception area at Mennette's job, his body was tense with nervous energy. He nervously tapped his thumbs on his thighs as he waited. He'd been here before, having escorted Mennette inside after a few lunch dates.

Finally, the familiar face of one of Mennette's co-workers walked out. A sexy, voluptuous woman with flawless dark skin and deep dimples moved towards him. She carried a box of Mennette's belongings in her arms. Her name was Carolyn Tanner, but he and Mennette nicknamed her "Chocolate" years ago and referred to her as such when they were alone. Chocolate's face lit up when her eyes rested on Kenny.

"Kenny!" She exclaimed breathlessly, placing the box on the receptionist's desk. She leaned into a hug and inhaled. "Happy New Year!" The floral scent of her wafted around Kenny's face and he inhaled also.

He stepped away from her quickly. "Thank you! Happy New Year to you also," he replied. Still on his sexual hiatus, Kenny refrained from lingering too much in her energy.

"What'd you guys do to celebrate?" Her smile flashed and one deep hole appeared in each cheek.

Kenny nodded and finally smiled back at her. How could you not be joyful around such beauty? “Finally got her out of the house and took her to her best friend’s party. She had a good time.”

“How is she doing? Really?”

“Better. A work in progress.”

“Any breakthroughs? Her memory come back?”

Truthfully, he was getting tired of answering the same old question about her but he knew people were concerned. “No, it’ll probably be awhile. At least that’s what the doctor says.”

“We are all praying for her speedy recovery. I send an extra one each night for her myself,” she said, smiling genuinely. Kenny knew that she was one of the few coworkers that Mennette trusted and got along with. Her pause allowed his eyes to briefly catch her thoughts and she looked away, then tapped the box with the palm of her hand.

“Everything’s there. I boxed it up myself.”

Kenny looked around at the typing receptionist, then ushered Chocolate by her elbow away from the desk. He lowered his voice to a whisper.

“When I called this morning, they told me that Mennette hasn’t worked here in awhile?” It came out sounding like part question, part statement.

“That’s right,” she whispered back, glancing over to see if the receptionist was listening.

“I don’t get it.”

Her perplexed look and silence puzzled him.

“About her not working here,” he continued. “How could that be? She left the house to come to work everyday?”

Her mouth opened slightly like she wanted to say something, but didn’t.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned forward. “Do you know what’s going on?”

Chocolate pursed her lips together tightly and glanced at the receptionist.

“Come with me.”

Kenny followed her swaying hips into a small office near the back of the building. Once they were inside, Chocolate shut the door and sat carefully into her chair across from him.

“Please sit,” she said. “Do you want some coffee or something to drink?”

Kenny shook his head ‘no.’ He just wanted to get down to the bottom of all of the secrets that have been surrounding Mennette.

“How long has she been gone?”

“Mennette got fired a few months ago.”

“Fired?” Kenny frowned. He didn’t want to let on that he was completely clueless to his wife’s business, but the loss of her job shocked him. Months ago? She got up every morning, got dressed, and left the house each day like she was going to work. Even came home and told snippets of office drama. So if she didn’t really have a job, what the hell was she doing everyday... and for how long?

“I don’t like to gossip, Kenny. I try my best to stay out of that environment around here.” Chocolate looked at him again and he didn’t mistake the look she gave him. It read, how could he be married to someone and not know his wife’s day-to-day routine?

“I understand.”

“A sister is always the first to get cut, if you know what I mean. Just like we’re the first one’s to die in horror movies, it holds true in the corporate world too. I don’t wanna say the wrong thing. This is still the good old boys club. I’m lucky to have this job and I need it. My three boys are growing bigger and hungrier each day I get home from work.” She smiled and instinctively looked down at the photo on her desk. “Not to mention their growing feet. Jordan’s are expensive. Besides, how could you not know any of this?”

“I know...” he stammered, trying to find the right words. “I knew... um...” Kenny placed his fist in front of his mouth and cleared his throat two times, stalling before trying again. “Cho... um...Carolyn. We’ve known you for a little while now. I know that you are the one Mennette trusted the most around here. I’m just

trying to find out a little information because Mennette can't remember anything."

"But Kenny," Chocolate paused, unintentionally causing a dramatic effect. "Mennette was fired back in early October. It must have been almost a good two months before her accident."

Kenny's confusion transferred to her as she nervously traced her finger around the curly decorative lines of her desk calendar. The pair fell silent as they both searched for the right words to say next.

"I didn't know." He finally relented to her judgmental eyes.

"Well, I..." she started.

"Carolyn," he interrupted, leaning forward in his chair. He gave her a small, but sincere and charming smile, as he tried to tap into everything he ever learned from Brother about women. He knew she was attracted to him, just like he found her attractive, so he went with that.

"I'm not trying to stir up anything for you or get anyone in trouble." The way she was looking at Kenny made him believe that she knew more than she was letting on. He reached over her desk and touched the top of her hand, halting it from descending over the squares that made out the days of the week. He could have sworn that she shivered a little. "You can trust me." Kenny caught and held her gaze for emphasis.

Chocolate looked down at his hand on top of hers and audibly sighed. It took her a moment to bring her eyes back up to meet his. She sucked in a deep breath and finally responded.

"What I know for sure is that Mennette hasn't worked here in over three months. She was supposed to come back to clean out her desk but she never came. Next thing I knew, I heard that she had some kind of accident and was in the hospital. That's when they asked me to box up her things."

"Nobody ever said why she got fired?" Kenny leaned back in the chair and glanced over his shoulder. "A big company like this and nobody knows anything?"

Even though she was in her own office with the door closed, Chocolate lowered her voice. "There were several rumors about why Mennette got fired. I'm not sure of the real reason, but I do know it never really made sense to me. Apparently, the Director of Sales had something to do with it. Something about politics and sponsors or whatnot. Which was strange to me because that's not even Mennette's department. Mennette was known for being ambitious and a hard worker. She wasn't a slacker so I can't imagine that she did a terrible job at something. Things just didn't add up." Chocolate started nervously fingering her desk calendar again. "Kenny, I'm sorry I'm not much help in this area."

"No need to apologize. It's not your fault." He realized that he wasn't going to get any further with her. At least not here and not now. He suddenly just wanted to get home in his own space so he could think and deal with this new, shocking information about Mennette. She'd been fired for weeks before the accident? What the fuck was that all about?

"I just needed to know. I appreciate the information."

"It was all so vague, Kenny. You know this is a big company. Besides, a lot can be left up to speculation around here."

Kenny stood, his head in a fog. "Thanks. I owe you one."

"Don't mention it. Anytime." Her last word was flirty and suggestive. Kenny caught it. His inner Brother didn't let the moment slip by.

"Well," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his cell phone. "What's your number?" he asked, handing his phone to her. Chocolate's two manicured thumbs flew over the touch screen, and handed the device back to him. She peeked over to make sure he spelled her name right and caught him saving her number as "Chocolate."

"Chocolate?" She giggled.

"Yeah, um..." Kenny said, slightly embarrassed. "That's kinda what I always called you in my head because you're beautiful and your skin is rich like..."

"Chocolate?" Carolyn said in unison with him.

"Yeah." Kenny gave a small laugh.

"I'll take that as a compliment." She smiled up at him.

"You should because it is." They held each other's gaze for just a moment too long. Kenny blinked away first.

"I'm gonna call you right now. Keep my number. Just in case you find out anything else."

"Most definitely," Chocolate said, as she silenced her buzzing phone, then locked him into her contacts. "I'm saving you as 'Caramel!'" she teased. Kenny ducked his head as she giggled. Her eyelids fluttered as she peered hopelessly towards him.

"Kenny, she's very lucky to have you."

"I'm the lucky one."

Another pregnant silence passed between them. In another time and space, he and Chocolate would have had some fun together. Her electric chemistry buzzed all around her and she didn't mind flinging it his way, even though she knew he was married to her friend. It took all of Kenny's energy not to pick up what she was throwing down, especially since he hadn't made love to his wife in almost two months.

"Thanks a lot for your help today," he finally managed to say smoothly as he reached for the box of Mennette's personal items.

Chocolate's eyes roamed his body and she smiled. Kenny forced himself to peel his eyes from her mouth. There was too much sexual tension in that tiny office for him to be dealing with at the moment, so Kenny saw himself out. He already had enough on his plate.

Chapter 12

KENNY

Kenny sat the box of Mennette's belongings in the passenger's seat and turned on the ignition, automatically steering the car towards home. At a red light, Kenny peered into the banker's box, partially hoping a clue would jump out. When he got home, the living room was empty. He headed up the stairs and dropped the box off in his office. He checked the bedroom. She was under the covers, watching T.V.

"How you feeling today?" he asked. She looked like she was knee deep into *Say Yes to the Dress, Atlanta*.

"About the same I guess. What day is it?"

"Wednesday. It's January 2nd," he threw in for clarity.

"Thanks." She refocused her attention back to the television. Fluffy appeared through the door, bounded on the bed and snuggled under Mennette as she stroked her back, flattening her fingers all the way out to the tip of her fluffy tail.

"How's the head," he asked.

After Tamara's party, Mennette's New Year's Day pounding hangover headache was almost as painful as when she had her accident. She spent the greater part of the prior day with her face over the toilet. Now, resting on the bed, she seemed much better. Her color was slowly coming back into her face.

She shrugged.

"Let me know if you need anything," he replied, then waited a

moment. When Mennette didn't respond, he quietly backed out of the room and closed the door. He slipped across the hall into his office and shut himself in. Instantly, he ravaged the box. Outside of the usual female products that most women kept at work, a travel toothbrush, a picture of him in a frame for her desk, there was nothing that piqued Kenny's interest or curiosity.

Dejected, he picked up a work manual and randomly flipped through the pages. To his surprise, an envelope fell out. Kenny wasted no time slipping his finger in the groove and tearing it open. Inside was another set of keys. Kenny's face lit up. The last pair of keys he found the night of Tamara's party didn't match anything. Well, more importantly to him, they didn't go to the hidden safe box he had discovered.

He tiptoed to the closet to retrieve the lock box from where he had it stashed. There were four keys on the chain. He tried the first three without any luck. Before he tried the last key, he said a little prayer. He really needed to get to the bottom of these mysteries surrounding Mennette. The fourth key was not a match either.

Before he had time to let his heart sink, there was a soft knock at the door. Mennette cracked the door without waiting for an answer and peeked her head in. She just missing Kenny slipping the lock box and new set of useless keys into the top drawer of his desk. She was holding a meowing Fluffy as she lovingly stroked the cat's fur.

"Hungry?" Mennette asked. Her eyes surveyed the room and rested on the box. "I was thinking we could order delivery. I didn't have breakfast so now I'm kinda ready for lunch."

"I got your box from your job." He moved around the front of the desk to allow space for her.

She gently dropped Fluffy to the floor and moved slowly towards the box.

"Thanks." She said placing her hand on top of it with a frown. "Maybe something in here will help with my memory." There was a hint of hopefulness in her voice.

"Hey, you okay? I thought we had a great time the other night at the party?"

"We did," she smiled.

"Well, what's with the long face? Aren't you over your hangover by now?"

"It's just...we had such a great time and I know that I've been at that house many times because..." Mennette paused, as she struggled to remember something.

"Tamara?" Kenny offered, filling in the blank of her sentence.

"Right! Tamara told me so. But I can't pull anything else out of my memory. Like how many times I've been there. What we did when we were there. It's kinda sad."

"Give yourself time."

"Did anyone miss me? At my job?"

"Uh, yeah. Carolyn Tanner says hello. Do you remember her?"

She shook her head 'no.'

"Hey, listen Mennette," Kenny started to ask questions he knew she couldn't answer, but he needed to at least try to satisfy his curiosity. "Do you remember anything about work? Like any events, people, or things that happened there? Anything about your routine each day? Like what was the first thing you did when you got to your office?"

Mennette genuinely tried to pull up some memories, but after about a minute, she just shook her head 'no' as she ran her fingers across the top of the box.

"Can't say that I do. Should I?" she finally verbalized.

He hunched his shoulders. "Why don't you take the box in the room with you and I'll order Chili's."

"Thanks." Mennette hoisted the box then turned to the door.

"Mennette..." He hesitated. Too many unanswered questions were starting to pop up and he couldn't help but keep trying to hear it from the horse's mouth.

"Quick question before you leave. Can you remember the last time you clocked in at work, had a meeting, or even had lunch

with your coworkers?”

She just stared at him. Confused, slowly shaking her head.

He watched her closely as the wheels turned in her head. But suddenly, he felt oddly agitated by it all. “Nevermind,” he dismissed his questions. “I was just wondering. You were still working there, right?”

“I guess. so Why are you asking me all these questions? Is something wrong?”

“Just trying to make a puzzle fit. But I don’t wanna stress you out.”

She opened her mouth to say something but stopped. The look on her face was unreadable. Abruptly, she turned and left Kenny to his thoughts and to wait for him to order lunch.

Chapter 13

MENNETTE

*I*t's so hard for me to remember anything before the accident. Just bits and pieces that flash at me, but before I can grab on to it, it's gone. I do remember being in the hospital and everything after that. I remember spending Thanksgiving there because The Husband came to have Thanksgiving dinner with me in the cafeteria. I found it hard to be thankful for some rubbery turkey slabs with thick, clumpy gravy and a frozen slice of pumpkin pie.

Before I knew it, I was "home." Christmas was a blur. Not because I don't remember it, but because without my memories, I don't know who I'm supposed to be. I felt bad, but I just wasn't feeling very merry at the time. I think he forgave me, or at least understood.

I think I redeemed myself at the New Year's Eve party, though. We actually had a good time together. And for the first time since I woke up in the hospital, I felt like I might actually be okay. The Husband has relaxed a little bit. But I always catch him watching me, like he's expecting me to do something. While I'm painting. When I'm watching TV. It's like he's waiting to catch me messing up so he can jump out the bushes and arrest me or something. He's constantly appearing around corners, and slinking away to his office, hiding stuff when I come in, like he did earlier today. He's acting like a detective or private eye, trying to figure out a crime scene, but there's evidence missing.

Hell, if I can't find those missing pieces for myself, I don't know why he thinks he can! Sometimes I feel like I've got things figured out, then I realize I truly don't. There is so much about myself I don't understand. Like why I keep forgetting that man's name! I got so embarrassed from constantly calling him by his brother's name that I finally wrote it on a piece of paper and taped it to the back side of the remote control.

This house is so comfortably unfamiliar. It's like I've dreamed I've been here, but no real memories come to me. When The Husband is finally out of the house and not lurking around, I just walk around looking and touching, seeing if it will help. I randomly touch the drapes, not remembering hanging them. I feel the softness of the couch, but don't remember purchasing it. I know the doctors say to be patient, but they don't understand how frustrating it is to be on the edge of an epiphany, feel it slip away, and then be unable to retrieve it.

I fell back into "place" in my former house, but is it *home*? Am I really a wife? What kind of job did I have? What about my family? Is that snobby rich girl my only friend? It's downright frustrating to be bombarded by dreams, memories, nightmares or whatever they are of my old life without ever having real clarity. It's like I'm walking in a cloud all day waiting for the sun to shine, but it never does.

I really wonder about my old life. Was I happy? Did I have a good marriage? Because things between me and The Husband seem off. I can't really go back to a job I don't remember, so I spend most of my time watching TV, painting, and waiting. Waiting, painting, and watching TV. Painting is the only thing that feels right to me since that night this happened to me.

Today, I've had a change in routine. The Husband ordered in lunch for me, which I ate by myself on the couch. He said he wasn't hungry. My best friend from the party is here. When we were at the party, I overheard her tell The Husband that she planned on coming around more often. By the look on his face, I don't think

he liked that. Her name is Tamara. She talks a mile a minute, constantly touching her hair, re-applying her make-up, and saying things like “Remember this?” or “Remember when?” To which, I do not, much to her animated dismay.

She is a whirlwind of noise, giggling, movement, perfume, and make-up with swinging hair and clicking nails. She reeks of expensive materialism. When she leaves, I have a headache and I can tell this bothers The Husband. She doesn’t seem to have a problem going head to head with him. When she came in today, I heard him tell her that her visit time was limited. They argued. She didn’t back down. She’s feisty. I like that about her. I wish I had her fire so I could tell The Husband to back up and give me some breathing room every now and then. I wonder if I was like that. Feisty, in a big cloud of expensive smelling perfume. They say birds of a feather flock together. It’s a random thing for me to remember, but I do.

But I wonder how we are even friends? I don’t have the kind of money she has. One of her bags alone looks like it could pay the mortgage on this house for at least a few months. The Husband and I do not have a lavish lifestyle by any stretch of the imagination... and I get the feeling he likes it that way. I wonder if I do or did.

Right now, Tamara and I are sitting on my bed. She’s chatting a mile a minute, repainting her fingernails while I sip a large cup of what she tells me is my favorite tea, although I really don’t like it much. When she’s done with her nails, she gently blows on them as if they are soft rose petals. She’s quiet momentarily to fan her fingers and apply more lip gloss before she continues. She is telling me a story of one of our Las Vegas trips. Apparently, we travel together a lot and have quite a good time.

Tamara doesn’t seem to mind that I’m not contributing much to the conversation. Actually, I’m not really listening at all. I wonder if this is the dynamics of our relationship. She seems shallow and self-serving. Suddenly, Tamara puts her finger up to my lips and shushes me, even though I wasn’t the one talking. As a matter

of fact, I barely uttered two complete sentences since her arrival. She steadies her eyes, then points to the bottom of the closed bedroom door with her Ravishing Red fingernail. My eyes follow and we see a pair of men's shoes stop for a moment, linger, then move along. She gives me an exasperated look but then continues with her chatter.

Is this my life? I am just now starting to learn to sleep for at least half the night. I am just now starting to allow myself to let my guard down a bit when The Husband is home. Allowing him to make decisions that he deems are best for me. Some days it is all too much to process and it brings on my headaches again. I rub the area where the stitches used to be. It is a constant reminder of the night that stole my memory.

My mind betrays me. These days, I can't distinguish between reality and a dream. Or am I actually experiencing memories? For instance, I keep having this same nightmare. In it, I can't move. I'm struggling. I'm being held down. There are four pairs of hands, one on each of my limbs. I'm screaming. I'm crying hysterically. I'm scared. And all I hear is laughter. Cackling, actually. Evil. Menacing. Taunting cackling. I'm struggling but I can't get away. And then I wake up. And that's it. I just wake up in a sweat and I don't know what to do. Cry? Scream? Fight? Hide? Tell The Husband? Tell my best friend?

There are times when I just sit and think. I think real hard, trying to figure things out. Trying to force my brain to work. I turn off the light and sit real still and quiet. And when nothing comes, I cry. I cry into the pillow so The Husband can't hear. Every now and then, he could be real sensitive. Sometimes he gets sad or appears highly frustrated. After my first Affairs to Remember meeting, he was so frustrated with me about the homeless guy that kept yelling in my face.

That man kept yelling, "I want my shit! I want my shit!" At first when he grabbed me, I thought he wanted some money. When he started shaking me, I thought he was a crackhead or on meth.

But then he said something that made my heart stop. He said my name. Big as day he said, "Mennette." I knew that he knew me. I knew right then and there that he had to be someone from my life before the accident. But I didn't know who he was. Of course, I didn't tell The Husband this little piece of information. No way! He was already livid. If he had caught that guy, he might have killed him right there on the spot.

It's been some weeks and I have to admit that The Husband has grown on me... someday. I completely appreciate him taking care of me. I can tell that he is trying the best he can. I'm not always easy. I know for a fact that I have made his life a living hell. But it is what it is. How am I supposed to make things easier for him when things are extremely difficult for me?

Some days, I just wanna run. Some days, I just wanna scream and shout until I pass out. Many nights I've pressed the pillow so hard into my face that I wondered what would happen if I just kept it there and stopped breathing. Would this pain go away? Would my memory come back? Would I just slip into the empty abyss of my mind? It's becoming increasingly more difficult to "fit." To understand what it is I'm supposed to be doing. What did the old Mennette do? Besides painting, I'm at a total loss as to who that woman was.

When I think about the puzzle of my life, the pieces are all over the place. I just remember waking up in the hospital with a crushing headache and people all in my face asking me questions and rubbing my arms and shit. Then this strange man leans into my face. But I wasn't going home with this man. I started acting a plum fool. They had to sedate me. He kept yelling "I'm the husband, I'm the husband!" So, after a couple of more days in the hospital, I finally went home with The Husband. And here I am. I don't know what happened. I don't know how I got here. I don't know anything about my past. And I'm still trying to figure all this shit out.

It's not hard for me to see why I married him, though. He's handsome, I guess, and caring. For the most part he's clean-cut

with an infectious smile and laugh. And sometimes when I catch him staring at me, I see the love that he must have for me. I only wish that I could return that same type of feeling towards him. I just don't feel it though. There are days when I feel guilty because of this.

I like going to my Affairs to Remember group now. I immerse myself in the people who have been through the same thing as myself. I'm able to open up. It helps me. At the moment, that's all I seem to have that is mine.

"Did you hear me?" The Friend has said something she felt was important and I can tell that she is disappointed that my mind and full attention are not on her.

"Huh?"

She let out a sigh. "Mennette? How are you gonna learn anything about yourself if you're not listening?" She stopped talking mid-sentence and took another look at the bottom of the door frame. Shadows of the shoes can be seen again. She shakes her head and rolls her eyes then whispers. "That man is a trip. He wants to make sure that I don't tell you any of your business. Ain't that that rich? Me, telling you something you already know." She giggles. His feet move away from the door. "What I said was, men like Kenny like to be in control of stuff. You complained about it all the time."

I give her a look that I'm sure she can't read because she narrows her eyes at me in confusion. However, that doesn't stop her from continuing talking. "Eric's the same way though, 'cept he likes to be in control of everything. Money, house, me." She mischievously giggles. "But what he really doesn't realize is that I'm the one in control. He may make the money, but let him make me mad!" She laughs. "He'll have hell to pay!"

"Tell me what stuff? What business?"

She stops laughing and looks at me as if she just realized again that I don't remember. I think the new calm Mennette confuses her. "You know?" She shrugged. "Stuff."

"About Kenny? Or me?"

"Both of you. Your marriage. And like I said, how men like Kenny are."

"How are they?"

"Controlling!"

I think about her statement, "men like Kenny." I know nothing about Kenny. I don't really and truly know what type of man he is.

"What type of stuff did Kenny do to me?" I ask. "Did he beat me?" I blurt out although I don't know why.

"No!" she wailed, almost offended. "I would never let something like that happen to you."

"Well, did he cheat on me?"

"*Pphppst!*" She snorted. "You never said he did. But you know how I feel? All of them do! He's a man ain't he? Kenny probably just never got caught."

Her snottiness makes me wonder if she was a part of some of my marital issues. Did I have the same thought process about men and life? I look into my cup. The nasty tea has turned cold and I am starting to feel a wave of tiredness sweep down.

Tamara is exhausting, to say the least. Her presence, the conversation, the whole entire situation is exhausting, truthfully. I'm not sure if the old Mennette would scream and kick her out, but this is what I, the "new" Mennette, want to do. But I also didn't want to be rude.

"Do you want some more tea?" she asks, noticing the lull in my attention.

"No thank you."

"But it's your favorite. I can go warm it up for you."

I smile. "I'll pass. I'm good. I appreciate it though, thanks."

"Well, it wasn't cheating that you were concerned about." She confessed, flipping her hair and checking her face in a compact. I stare at her. "Kenny won't admit to this, but you guys were on the brink of divorce. You were ready to start over by yourself. Go out and live your life on your own terms. You were getting sick and

tired of all the other stuff.”

“Other stuff?”

“His brother always hanging around, his lack of ambition. Things were starting to get stale. Anyhow, you filed right before your accident. I don’t know if he ever signed those papers, though.” She scrunched her face up and tapped the tip of her long nail to her chin, then shrugged. “Anywho, I wish you could remember enough to tell me what happened. Kenny said you just took off in the middle of the night after an argument and next thing I know, he’s calling me about you being in the hospital. Do you even remember that?”

I shake my head. I don’t remember anything before waking up in the hospital. And it becomes frustrating when people constantly remind me of this fact. She continues to ramble, but my mind has already taken off to another space. What she doesn’t understand is that I don’t really care much about my old life. I’m just trying to get through this until I can figure out how to break out on my own. The Husband. The Friend. The house. The brother. It’s all too much for me. I can’t believe that this is the life that I was living.

“You have another headache?” She asks, feigning concern. I doubt that she cares. “You’re frowning again.” She reaches out and caresses my cheek. “I thought the tea would help.”

I’m sure at one point we were thick as thieves. We probably shared a level of friendship that was genuine; however, I am a new Mennette, and all I can think of nowadays is how I’m going to escape this nightmare I’ve been dropped into.

I toss her as genuine a smile as I can, although I believe Stevie Wonder can see through it. “I’m fine,” I say, thoughtfully rubbing my thumb up and down the side of my mug.

“I can’t wait until you do get your memory back,” she squeaks with a tiny bounce on the bed. “We have a lot of catching up to do.” She smiled at me and adjusted one of her eyelashes. “I hope we can spend a lot more time together.”

I smiled back at her and took a few more sips of my favorite

nasty tea. Not if I can help it, I thought to myself.

Chapter 14

KENNY

“Break it!” Kenny said.

Kenny was standing in the little pawn shop where his long-time friend Don worked. He wasn’t a locksmith, but he’d seen a number of unique items pass through. Don held Mennette’s metal box up, shook it, and turned it around in his hand. After the home invasion, Kenny knew that he had to take things into his own hands and get to the bottom of what was going on with Mennette.

“You trying to preserve the lock at all?”

“Nah.” Kenny replied, anxious. He had to get some answers. “Break that shit.”

“Let me see if I can unlock it first.” Don slipped a thin metal file into the lock and wiggled it in the lock but it didn’t open. “Stubborn little bugger, huh? Okay. I can break it.”

“I don’t really care if you break the lock or even break the box. I just want to get to whatever is inside.”

Kenny watched as Don put pressure on the lock. After a few futile attempts, there was a loud pop and the lock snapped off, flew through the air, and landed on top of the counter. He handed the box back to Kenny who quickly sifted through the contents. Another damned set of keys. Four envelopes, addressed to Mennette at a P.O. box in San Francisco. No return address, just a name: V. Turner. Each envelope was empty. Apparently Mennette had received, read, and discarded the letters. Each envelope addressed

to Mennette Bell, her maiden name, from a V. Turner. He flipped one over. On the back, Greenwood, South Carolina, was written in Mennette's handwriting.

Unimpressed with the contents of the box, Kenny's disappointment was written on his face.

"Is that what you were in such a hurry to get to? Those empty envelopes?" Don asked.

"I didn't even know she had a P.O. box. All that for this?" Kenny muttered, tightly holding the envelopes in his fists. Who the hell was this V. Turner that apparently knew Mennette before she was married? Did this person live in San Francisco where Mennette's P.O. box was located? Or in Greenwood, South Carolina? Was that the person who showed up to her first Affairs to Remember meeting or were they the one who ransacked the house?

Kenny looked at Don. "Not quite what I was expecting, but it helps. What about these keys? You seen any keys like this before?"

Don took the two keys and studied them with a squint. "Not a house key. Definitely not a car key. Like a government key."

"Government?"

"Like a bank key or post office key. School key. Some kinda government key. But I don't know what it goes to though."

"Both of them?"

Don nodded.

When Don said post office, Kenny steadied. Could one of these keys go to the P.O. box in San Fran? "Thanks man. I think you just put me on to something. How much I owe you?"

"Nothing."

"My man!" Kenny slapped his friend's palm over the counter.

Eager to get over the bridge, Kenny gathered the envelopes and headed to the parking lot. He sat in the car surveying the envelopes. Running the name over and over in his mind. Nothing about it was familiar. He turned the key in the ignition and pointed the car towards San Francisco. He called Brother and asked him to check in on Mennette for him; he was going to be gone for at

least two hours. Then he was off on Highway 24 headed toward the Golden Gate. He was not going to let grass grow under his feet on a clue.

Kenny's GPS guided him to the zip code's post office since he wasn't familiar with the neighborhood. Kenny wondered what Mennette was doing in this strange area. Why would she get a P.O. box that was 40 minutes and a bridge away? The only reason he could think of was to hide stuff from him. He pulled into the crowded parking lot of the small office. Inside, he found Mennette's box and tried the first key. It wasn't a match. But the second key fit perfectly. Finally some progress!

He twisted his wrist and with a slight tug, the door sprung open. Envelopes spilled out the tiny, overstuffed box. The mail must have been piling up since her accident. And who knows when was the last time she had checked it before then. Kenny gathered the spilled envelopes up off the floor, and pulled the rest from the box. Arms full, he headed towards his car, tossed everything on the front seat, then stared at it. He didn't know what to think or feel.

Kenny decided to drive back over the bridge to his side of town before he'd deal with it. Once he was back in Antioch, he found an In-N-Out Burger, went through the drive-thru, ordered lunch, then pulled into a parking space once he got his food. He bit into the greasy hamburger with one hand and started sorting Mennette's mail with the other.

Kenny pulled out all the stuff that looked like junk mail. He gathered all the advertisements and exited the car to dump them into In-N-Out's public trash bin. He hopped back into the driver's seat and stuffed some fries in his mouth before he paid attention to all of the official-looking mail. Thoughts of this V. Turner person still bothered him. He couldn't recall ever hearing Mennette speak of a V. Turner.

In her mail, there were several envelopes from Wells Fargo Bank. He always knew that Mennette had a little "secret" account separate from their joint one and he didn't mind. Last he remem-

bered, there was about \$200 in it that she didn't know he was aware of. Chewing, he started on the first bank statement. He slipped his finger in the groove and tore the envelope open, took a sip from his soda and practically choked at what he saw. He frowned at the statement.

"This can't be right." He muttered to himself. He put that one down and opened the next statement but that amount was the same amount as the first statement. The next few statements were all about the same, only being off by a few hundred dollars.

Kenny put the statements down and glared out of the window, perplexed, angry, stunned. He was sure his blood pressure was rising. At the moment he didn't know how to feel. Before her accident, he would have sworn that he knew everything about his wife. But the last few days proved that to be totally untrue. Learning that Mennette had secrets a few weeks ago was initially a shock. Then they started piling up, multiplying by the day. But now this? This new revelation was like a quantum leap into outer space. Just how deep and wide was the world of his wife's secrets?

Kenny picked up the statements again and went through each one carefully. They said Mennette had a couple of savings accounts, bonds, and CDs, all totaling a few thousand shy of \$500,000. The money first appeared on the statements back in September.

As the shock wore off, new thoughts raced through his head. Menacing thoughts. Where the hell did she get so much money? Why the hell hadn't she said anything about it? She barely made \$60,000 a year and that was when she did overtime. He brought home about \$50K. There was no way in hell she could have saved up that much money. Not even with their Christmas bonuses combined.

Five hundred thousand dollars. He couldn't wrap his mind around the amount. The business card from Eric now made sense. She was sitting on a nest egg and wanted an investment advisor to make it bigger. The advisor required a minimum of \$50,000. Obviously, that wasn't a problem. He wished he had that card to call the

dude. But he wouldn't be able to answer the most important question he had: Where the fuck did Mennette get all this money from?

He scanned the statements again as if they could tell him. Did this V. Turner person give it to her? Did she have a sugar daddy? He didn't know what Mennette was up to or what he was getting himself into, but he was going to find out and get to the bottom of these mysteries surrounding his amnesiac wife. He wanted to go home and shake her to make her remember, but logic prevailed. He knew that was not a good idea. He could possibly do more damage and make her memory loss worse. The doctor told him to keep as much stress away from her as possible. There had been cases of permanent memory loss.

And to think that the little box had him so perplexed. This new discovery had him enraged. They say you never really know a person. Well, he was figuring out that this just might be true.

He called Brother. "I'm on my way to pick you up. I need a drink. But first, I need to stop at Wells Fargo Bank."

Chapter 15

KENNY

The crack of the pool balls resonated throughout Rack Pack Billiards in Concord. Earlier in the day, Kenny thought that getting the black box opened would silence all the issues brought on by Mennette's memory loss. But the contents only unlocked more mysteries and raised more questions.

After discovering her P.O. box, the existence of V. Turner, and damned near half a million dollars, Kenny realized he was playing a totally different game with a new set of rules. And the rules were governed by Mennette's secrets. He didn't stand a chance of winning at getting their life back until he uncovered all of them.

So now, his mind was firmly set on just that. It was his mission to discover everything his wife had been hiding from him. But he needed help putting together a plan. He called Brother and swung by the house to pick him up. He didn't bother going in to check on Mennette. He just had Brother tell her they'd be back later.

Now, Kenny was leaning against the bar, half-listening to Brother's recent stories about his sexual exploits the previous night. Brother stopped mid-story when he realized Kenny wasn't listening.

"Which bank did you go to?" Brother asked, not taking his eyes off the backside of a woman playing pool at a nearby table.

"One in Antioch. Over there where Ma-Dear used to work."

Upon hearing their pet name for their mother, Brother gave

Kenny his full attention. Sadness filmed over his eyes. Both were close to their mother, but she and Brother had a deeper bond. While Kenny favored their father in looks and personality, Brother looked more like her. The two shared handsome dark brown skin, thick full lips, beautiful teeth, and similar personalities and energy. People used to stop and watch them whenever they went out, making others jealous to be a part of the inside joke they always seemed to share. They watched the same shows, snapped their fingers to the same beats, and laughed at the same jokes. Even Kenny marveled at their likeness.

"18th Street? What in the hell is Mennette doing over there?" Brother asked.

Aggravated, Kenny hunched his shoulders. Earlier, Kenny drove to Wells Fargo Bank with the intention of getting to the bottom of his questions. It took him over an hour of pleading with the overzealous teller to give him more information about Mennette's accounts to no avail. The only thing that he accomplished was discovering yet another secret: there was a safe deposit box attached to the account. Even after showing the teller what he thought could be Mennette's safe deposit box key, the young man still would not allow Kenny access. Frustrated, Kenny cursed him out and left the bank fuming. He was spinning his wheels, getting nowhere fast.

"The only information that I found out was that she got a safe deposit box. I didn't even know about that shit! I didn't know ANY of this shit!"

"I got a little shorty that work there." Brother said. "You want me to give her a call?"

Kenny stood up straight now and pushed himself up from the wall. He looked directly into Brother's eyes. "Shit yeah! You think she'll be able to let me in the safe deposit box?"

"I dunno, I'll see what I can do. I mean, I can't promise nothing. But she the Assistant Branch Manager over there." The woman whose backside he had been checking turned around to look in his direction. Brother sent her a charming smile, raising his glass to

her. She winked back. Brother grinned back at Kenny.

"It's gonna cost you," he said, sipping his drink.

"What?" Kenny glared back at him.

"Well... if I call her and ask her for a favor like that, she gon' want a favor back, if you know what I mean!" Kenny knew Brother's mischievous smile meant he was talking about sex.

"Now don't get me wrong, I'll do whatever I need to do to help you..."

Kenny rolled his eyes.

"...but then she gon' wanna start coming back around, taking up a brotha's time. And you already know time is money."

Kenny let out a dutiful sigh.

"What's it gonna cost me?"

"Not much. I just need to get my license back."

Incredulous Kenny asked, "They suspended your driver's license again?"

"Damn Contra Costa County!" Brother snorted. "I just gotta pay the \$200 fine, then I can get it back."

"Yeah sure. But tell me this, how did you get your license suspended and you don't even have a car right now?"

"Conspiracy."

"But man, you ain't got no car right now!"

"I know, but I gotta so I can get another job. They be tripping nowadays. You gotta have a license and shit. Gotta pass a drug test, gotta damn near have good credit. I mean, how the hell I'ma get good credit if you don't give me the job so I can pay my bills? Ludi-cious! You know I only work when the weather is good. With the economy and the housing market, construction work ain't been so profitable. And now, them Mexicans dominate that. They see my Black ass coming around the corner, start speaking that Spanish and shit. I know they be talking about me. *Negro*." He looked at Kenny and took another swig of his beer. "Did you know *negro* mean 'black'?"

"I knew that."

"Well when I come out there, that's all I damn hear. Negro this and Negro that. I know they just mad cause I'm taking up a space that one of they cousins could have had. It's time for me to do something else anyway. Something more stable. You know your boy getting up in age. That shit be hurting my back now. Knees be cracking and popping. Can't do it like I used to." He chuckled. "And you know these politicians messed up all kinda shit. God help us. Ain't no telling what's gon' happen. It's hard for the brothas out here. I need a change, man. I need to find some different kinda work."

"Yeah," Kenny said blankly, then changed the subject. "You get me in that safe deposit box, I'll put the fine on my credit card. I might have to make a trip to South Carolina." Kenny sighed. "I'ma need you to look after Mennette while I'm gone. Keep an eye on her. Stay at the house until I get back. Take her to her meetings."

"That's cool. You sure you don't need me to go with you, in case something goes down? I can have Karen watch her."

Karen, one of Brother's women, had it bad for Brother. She hung around, trying to wear him down until he was exclusive to her. She was like his right-hand woman.

"Nah. I need you here. I don't know what the fuck is going on with Mennette. So you'd help me best if you just keep an eye on her. Report to me anything crazy. And keep that damn Tamara away as much as possible. She so hot in the pants to let Mennette know that we had marital problems. Like we the only ones."

"Not a problem. I got you!"

He looked at Brother and nodded. "You always have, my brother."

"When you planning on going?"

"Not sure yet. I got to take care of a few things here first. Job and everything. My FMLA time is up. But at this point, I'm not even tripping. I'ma call Matt again tomorrow and let him know I need way more time than what I told him the other day. If they can give it to me, great. If they can't, I'll find another damn job. Cause this

trumps that bullshit job anyway. First, tho', I got to figure out how the hell I'ma get all the way to South Carolina." He roughly rubbed the back of his neck. "Would be nice if I could get at some of that damned money my wife's been hiding from me! It would make all this easier"

"I know a little shorty that works for Southwest." Brother said matter-of-factly. "Want me to call her too?"

"Damn, how many little shorty's you know?"

"As many as I need." Brother laughed

"Yeah, man. HELL yeah!"

"I can give her a call tonight. See what's up? She be having these buddy passes that she always trying to give me so I can go somewhere with her."

"Brother," Kenny started, staring him straight in the eyes. "If you can get me to South Carolina, not only will I pay Co-Co County for your license, but I'll even give you some change just for staying with Mennette."

"Uh-uh." Brother shook his head 'no.' "You ain't gotta pay me for that. I'm your brother! But I tell you what you can do. Just make sure there's some charcoal for the grill, some steaks in the frig, and some Hennessy in the cabinets."

"It's a done deal." Kenny fell silent for a moment. "First, she files for divorce. Then she's hiding P.O. boxes and shit. Lost her damn job months ago and didn't even tell me! Where the hell she been going every day?" He looked at Brother who was about to raise his glass to his lips but shrugged his shoulders instead. "And then, all that money! Hiding all that damn money! Where the hell Mennette get that kind of money?" He asked the rhetorical question. "For some reason though, I got a feeling that this V. Turner person is behind all these damn secrets!"

"Calm down, man." Brother said. "You've come a long way from the streets and how we used to handle things. You worked too hard, remember? You the good one. Let me handle this. You can stay with Mennette. I can fly down any time, look around, take my

Glock... if I need to handle something. I'll just handle it."

"Nah, Mennette's my wife. She's my responsibility. Obviously, I don't know her like I thought I did. You think you know a person," he began, "Nah. I can handle this. I need to get to the bottom of this, where this damn money coming from. And since she can't tell me, I got to make this V. Turner tell me, with force. Even if I got to pop a cap in his ass."

There was silence between them while they concentrated on two women across from them playing pool. The one that Brother smiled at earlier kept looking in his direction each time it was her turn to shoot. She smiled at him before she took her next shot. Astonished, Kenny watched as the woman practically undressed Brother with her eyes. Incredible, he thought. Wherever Brother went, he was always the center of attention.

Then Brother jammed the pool stick hard into the floor with a boom and blurted, "Damn!" The word echoed through the pool hall. A few people looked in their direction. "Half a fucking million dollars!" he mumbled to no one in particular, shaking his head in disbelief.

Chapter 16

KENNY

The next day, Kenny woke up feeling pensive and elusive. He avoided any chance of a conversation with Mennette. The new information about the money had his jaws tight. Nothing sat well with him. Kenny felt betrayed and distraught. She had lied. She pretended to go to work for weeks when she didn't have a job, meanwhile, she was sitting pretty on a pile of cash. Not in any conversations he remembered in the few months before the accident did she ever mention receiving that large amount of money. And where the hell did it come from? Seething, he wanted to shake her, to make her remember. But he knew it wouldn't do any good, so he refrained and simply made sure he didn't see her.

Kenny waited until she was preoccupied in her painting room to slip into their bedroom. After her accident, Kenny confiscated all of her electronic devices. He felt that it would only cause confusion and get in the way of her recovery. He had stored them in a box in the closet. He opened the box now, retrieved her laptop, then slipped back into his office and placed the computer on his desk. He powered it up and waited. Luckily for him, her password for the laptop and Facebook page were saved and it went straight to her Facebook page.

Instantly, a picture of a smiling Mennette popped up as her profile picture. He searched through her posts. There were some pictures of her with her girlfriends from her sorority. Most of the

posts were pictures with Tamara and all of their partying, shopping, and spa dates. The last post was from Tamara, made the day after Mennette's accident. She talked about how she missed her best friend.

Mennette had 846 friends. Kenny scrolled through them all. His main objective was to find V. Turner in this list. He tried searching various versions of what he thought the V stood for: Vernon, Vincent, Victor, or Vance... none popped up.

It took him about two hours, but he had scoured through her entire profile and nothing pointed to the mystery of the money, the break-in, the strange Ferragamo Man, or V. Turner. Was the strange man V. Turner? Was the man from Greenwood? And if so, what was he doing way out here in California? Kenny logged out of Facebook and checked Mennette's Instagram and Twitter pages. But none of them had been accessed recently either or posted on since prior to her accident. He closed down her computer.

Obsessed, Kenny pulled the bank statements out again and looked at the dates. This money had been sitting in this account for months. Anger rose in him and he tightened his grip on the paper statements until they were crumpled like a fan. They had been barely making ends meet each paycheck. She'd argued with him about how he wasn't bringing in enough money anymore. Fought with him about money to upgrade the house, buy a new car and splurge on a vacation. Accused him of losing his ambition for wanting more in their lives. Lazy is what she called him one day and a serious fight ensued. Not to mention, she berated him when he lost the mortgage money in the pyramid scheme. All this while she had this kind of money stashed away. Then what was all the fighting for?

Kenny's mind circled the same questions like water going down a drain. Where did she get the money from? Who was V. Turner? Was she cheating? The thought of this V. Turner giving it to her made his temples hurt and the vein in his neck pulsated. What exactly the hell else could Mennette do to get a man to give her that

amount of money?

Kenny flashed back to the image of the man on the street in front of Mount Zion church with his expensive shoes and jacket. As angry as the man was and the way he was shaking Mennette, it had to be about the money. Was he V. Turner? He must be the one giving her the money. But why? All the possible answers he could come up with for the question “why” made him so mad, he started to hyperventilate.

Kenny opened her laptop again, thinking maybe he missed something. He clicked on her social media pictures again, but slowly and more determined this time, sifting closely through each photo. He was looking for possibly a picture of Ferragamo Man that he may have missed earlier. He examined the many pictures of Mennette and Tamara again. Then he noticed a few isolated images of jewelry. One particular bracelet kept popping up. Kenny had seen that bracelet in her jewelry box but couldn’t remember the last time he saw her wear it. He dismissed it. Just then, that special Tamara jingle rang out on his phone. He glanced over, pursed his lips tightly, and tapped “ignore.”

“Not today Satan,” he mumbled. “Not today.”

He closed the laptop down again. He went downstairs, grabbed his keys and left the house.

Chapter 17

KENNY 1995

Two days after Brother's 23rd birthday, Evie Harold lost her battle with breast cancer. Every day since his mother had been placed in hospice, Brother had been by her side, feeding her ice cubes, wiping her face, clipping her nails, fussing with the nurses, and generally making sure that she was being taken care of. On the morning of Brother's birthday, she asked for Kenny. If she was asking, he knew things were getting serious, so Brother placed the call.

Kenny closed his eyes, stilled himself and took a deep breath before pushing the door to her room open. He dropped his backpack onto the floor and slid onto the chair next to her bed. He took a good look at his mother. Her breathing was shallow. Her eyes were closed and sunken into her face. Her beautiful dark skin was now ashen and the outlines of her lips were cracked and dry. The smile that always seemed to grace her face, even in the most difficult times, had vanished. He couldn't take seeing her beautiful, spirited life slowly evaporating away.

Kenny looked around at the tiny room. The large bed took up most of the space. It appeared enormous with Evie's tiny body engulfed in the mounds of blankets and piles of fluffy pillows. The pile of blankets kept her warm at night and their weight kept her comfortable during the day. There was a television that was always on and Kenny suspected that it was mostly for noise and company

since Evie rarely even looked at it. Kenny always knew his mother as a quiet book lover instead of a TV watcher.

Finally sensing his presence, she slowly opened her eyes. They landed on her second son and focused on him. He reached out to hold her hand in his and she managed a faint smile.

“Kenny.” Breathlessly, his name escaped her lips. “You made it.”

Hot tears flowed quickly. He swiped at his face to erase them. “Of course, Mama. I’m always be here for you”

Her eyes rolled back and she shut her lids. “Of course baby. I know.”

“Mama?”

“Hmmm?” She did not open her eyes.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, my boy.” Her lips curled up slightly. “My sweet, sweet, baby boy.”

“Mama?”

“Hmmm?”

“Do you need anything?”

“Just you.” She opened her eyes and tried to move her head.

“Mama. What do you want? What are you trying to get?”

“Where did Brother go?”

He looked confused.

“It’s his birthday. Twenty-three years old.” She stated proudly.

“He called and told me to come. Maybe he stepped out for a moment.”

“Good.” She said and cleared her throat. “I need to talk to you alone, anyway.”

A feeling of dread filled Kenny’s chest. He wasn’t sure he was ready to hear anything she had to say to him without Brother there.

“This thing. It’s ugly, baby. Takes your happiness,” She paused to breathe. “Your soul.” Her eyelids fluttered and she inhaled. “I fought. I prayed. Every night. For it to just disappear.” She paused between each phrase. Kenny waited patiently.

“I wish I’d wake up. And it’s gone. Ya know?” She turned to

Kenny.

A small nod came from him. He listened, focused on damming the tears behind his eyes.

"You..." she continued, "...be the strong one. Brother's older. But you know how he is 'bout me. He won't survive. Without me. Without you. Understand?" Her finger twitched and her eyes followed, silently instructing him to reach out and hold it. Kenny complied. He felt the warmth of his mother's blood through her fingertips and he bent to kiss the top of her hand.

"He's not built for this. He need you. More than ever."

"Mama, what are you saying?" Kenny asked, puzzled. A knot formed in his throat as a weight started to press down on his heart.

"Look after Brother. Promise me. He's not gonna be right when I..."

"...Mama, stop." Kenny cautioned. He had to catch his breath. He didn't want her to finish that sentence because he wasn't ready to hear that. Where was Brother? He didn't bear thinking of his Mama not being around.

"You gonna beat..."

"Kenny!" Her voice wasn't loud, but her stern tone was unmistakable. "Baby boy. Look at me. I'm dying."

Her words released the dam. Kenny's face scrunched up and a river flowed quickly and silently down his face. Her own eyes glistened.

"This disease...cancer. I'm tired. Worn out. I need you..." She paused, wincing in pain. "...to be strong. Hear me?"

Kenny nodded yes, which released fat droplets from his eyes to dampen his pants. He knew she was right. And if anybody knew Brother better than he knew himself, it was their mother. Those two were one and the same.

She continued. "I've been waiting. Tried to make it. To his birthday. But baby..." Her voice cracked and Kenny saw the first tear slide down her cheek. "I'm tired." She sighed. "So tired. Ugly disease!" She rolled her head on the pillow to face him. "I'm not

young no more.” He felt a slight squeeze on his hand. “Be your brother’s keeper.” She inhaled but stopped talking. It had taken all her strength to say that much that slowly.

Kenny continued holding her hand as he patiently waited for her to rest and gain some strength back. He knew that it took a lot of her energy to do the simple things most people took for granted, such as talking, breathing or even smiling. A few minutes passed.

“I love you,” she whispered with her eyes closed.

The door opened and Brother blew into the room, bringing in an air of upbeat energy with him. He was carrying a bag with snacks and a couple of magazines. His presence made the corners of Evie’s mouth curl upwards and she slowly opened his eyes.

“Hey, Mama!” Brother said brightly. “Sup, Ken. Mama, you dozed off.” He held up a bag. “I bought you some magazines.”

She smiled. “*Travel and Leisure*?”

“You know it! I got the Hawaii edition.” He grinned.

“It’s your birthday and you buying me gifts!” Her attempt at a chuckle came out in a dry cough.

“Mama, your smile is my gift.” He leaned down to kiss her forehead. “That’s the best gift I can ever ask for.”

Brother reached for a small towel and gently began to wipe her lips. Slowly, he circled it around the sides, careful to linger on areas that seemed to soothe her. Kenny watched them together. The two of them were peas in a pod.

Kenny cleared his throat. “Um, I’m here too, you lovebirds. What about me and my smile?”

“Your smile is like a present too.” Brother said laughing. “It’s like the gift that keeps on giving.” He said sarcastically. “Haunts me at night.”

Evie looked over at the end table at a bowl with water residue in the bottom. “Kenny, ring the buzzer. Ice chips.”

Kenny did as he was told. A nurse sauntered in, nodding at the two brothers. Kenny recognized her from previous visits.

“Gentlemen, good to see you again. Mizz Harold,” she said,

stretching out the zzz sound in a southern drawl. "I must say, you sure do keep the best company 'round here." Her smile was wide and flirty. Her long, thin braids were pinned up neatly into a chignon bun at the nape of her neck today. She was an attractive woman in a "girl next door" type of way. Evie made a hoarse sound from the back of her throat in succession. Kenny realized that it was supposed to be a giggle at the nurse's comment. Shards of pride did their best to beam through Evie's cancer-stricken face.

"I tell you what," the nurse continued, fluffing and lightly punching the pillows behind their mother, "...how's that dear?" she asked before continuing. "You did one heck of a job raising these men, Mizz Harold! They dote on you something!" She gave Evie a genuine smile and smoothed out some wrinkles in the comforters. She eased by Kenny sitting in the chair to check the IV's on the pole at the head of her bed.

"It might be time for some more medicine soon, huh? How you feeling, hun? Think we need to jump on that pain soon?" Evie slowly nodded.

"Alright," the nurse responded, looking at her watch. "I'll get you some after I get you another fresh bowl of ice chips." She motioned for Kenny to hand her the bowl and he passed it to her.

As she walked out, she tossed a sultry glance in Brother's direction. But he was completely unaware, unaffected, or just plain didn't care; his full attention was on Evie. He stood and reached into one of her drawers and pulled out a Chapstick.

Brother held his mother's head gently. "Mama, let me get your lips." He smoothed the wax over her bottom lip first as he protectively held her head. Brother was as gentle as an eyelash flutter. The scene was so touching and moving. For a split second, it was almost as if Kenny wasn't even in the room with them.

The nurse soon came back with the ice chips and handed them to Kenny.

"I'll be back in a few hun to check on you and get you that medication," She said and left the room again.

Without a word, Brother walked over to Kenny and took the bowl from him. He returned to his mother's side and proceeded to gently rub a cube on Evie's lips. She parted them, savoring the wetness. She never took the entire cube into her mouth.

"How that feel, Mama?" Brother asked.

She nodded, a wave of gratitude washing across her face.

Convinced she was comfortable, Brother picked up the TV remote control. He changed the channel to reruns of *Good Times*. The three of them watched in silence and laughed for a little while.

Kenny decided he wanted to stay the night with his mother.

"Hey Mama, I'ma stretch out on this couch here and keep you company tonight. That alright with you?"

"Actually, it's time for her to rest." Brother interjected.

Kenny shot him a look. He knew that tone in Brother's voice. It meant that he wasn't trying to leave his mother or give up control of the situation. He only got bullish when he felt threatened. Or seriously scared.

"I got this," Kenny said.

"Nah, you don't."

"She's my Mama too." Kenny raised his eyebrows.

"So what?"

"Brother." Evie's stern whisper halted any further conversation. She reached for him and he went to her. "Go. Please. It's your birthday."

"Not with you up in here like this, Mama." He shook his head.

"Please. For me? Enjoy your birthday. Live. Just for tonight. I'll be here. Tomorrow. Let Kenny stay."

"But Mama..."

"Sweet pea..." Evie used his childhood nickname. It always stopped him in his tracks. "For me."

Brother paused. Then, reluctantly, he plastered an appeasing smile on his face. "Okay, Mama. I'll go home and get some rest. I'll see you in the morning."

He kissed her on her forehead. Brother continued gently hold-

ing her hand. It didn't seem that he would let go. Finally, Kenny got up, walked over, and placed his hands over Brother's. He gave it a gentle tug and softly prodded him towards the door. They both walked outside the room, strolled past the nurse's desk, and exited the building, going a little ways past the main entrance. Brother pulled out a pack of cigarettes and leaned against the side of the building.

"I thought you stopped?" Kenny probed.

"I did." He hit the pack, tipped out a cigarette and lit it. "I only smoke when I come here."

"So, the cigarettes know when you here or not?"

Brother ignored him and took a long drag.

"You don't smoke around mama do you?" When Brother didn't respond, Kenny continued. He chose his next words carefully. "Mama's in a lot of pain."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"She's tired."

"Uh, huh."

"She's, um, tired..."

"You said that already." Brother took another drag from his cigarette and looked directly into Kenny's eyes. "She tell you all this? Or you figured it out on your own?"

Kenny could tell Brother was incapable of having a rational conversation. His emotions would not allow it.

"I don't know why I said that. I forget..." Kenny trailed off.

Brother turned to look at him. "Forget what?"

"You are the prodigal son."

Brother ignored the comment and took another puff from his cigarette.

Kenny continued, "Could never do any wrong in her eyes..."

"Mama loves us just the same." Brother finally said.

"Keep telling yourself that lie, Brother. I do."

"Yo, stop acting like a little bitch!" Brother didn't bother hiding his irritation.

"Me? Your Black ass act like you can't leave her in my care for a second!" Kenny blinked rapidly. "She's my Mama too. I know you don't think so, but I have just as much say as you."

"Oh yeah?" Brother pushed off the wall and stepped towards Kenny. "You got say, huh? What kinda say?" Brother pulled the cigarette out his mouth with his left hand, while his right hand unconsciously balled into a fist.

"You been here every day, Ken? Huh? Nah, you haven't," Brother said, answering his own question. "You got time to be up there with that girl on that campus, trying to pretend that this doesn't exist. You be here helping her eat? You ever watch her throw up when she can't keep shit down? Tell me, Kenny! You ever wipe up your mama's vomit filled with blood?"

Brother was up on Kenny now, glaring down a few inches at him. Kenny didn't move. Brother chuckled sarcastically. "What happened, no answer?" He paused a moment longer.

"I thought so. So don't tell me shit about your rights. 'Cause you can earn your rights when you here everyday like I been!"

Kenny bristled. Brother was right. He hadn't been there lately. But he was here now. Didn't that count for something? He loved her just as much as Brother did.

"I'm here now." Kenny finally managed to say aloud.

Brother blew air from his mouth. Kenny could tell that he was trying to calm down.

"You're right." Brother paused. "You're right," he agreed again. "I'll let you take care of her tonight. But tomorrow, I'm back."

"Going home?" Kenny asked.

"Going to someone's home." He took a long drag and looked up into the sky, then blew a long stream of smoke into it.

Kenny sighed. "Need a ride?"

"I'll walk."

Kenny pictured the distance from the hospital to Brother's complex. "All the way home?"

"I've got thoughts for every step. I'm good. I'll holla at you later."

He popped his neck and rolled his shoulders then flicked the tiny bud on the ground and snubbed it out with the tip of his shoe.

“Okay. I’ll check on you in the morning.” Kenny patted Brother on his back. “And by the way, happy birthday man.”

“Yeah. I wish it could be.” Brother’s eyes misted as he walked away. Kenny returned to his mother’s room.

Nurse Braids was back, adjusting Evie’s IV. She glanced up when Kenny walked in and although she tried to hide her disappointment, her face betrayed her. “There you go,” she smiled at Evie. “This ought to help you feel better soon.” She turned back to Kenny. “It’s a little something for her pain. It will make her more alert, more focused, more present.”

He smiled. She smiled back. “Thank you, nurse.”

“You’re welcome.” She touched Evie’s arm and straightened up. “I guess your um...” she cleared her throat. “Your brother was really upset?”

“He’ll be a’ight.”

“So, I guess he won’t be making it back this way, this evening?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Kenny saw one corner of Evie’s lips lift. The drugs were kicking in because she gave his hand a little squeeze, much stronger than the first squeeze. They exchanged knowing glances. This was something they were both used to being around Brother. People always missed his presence. They wanted him to be around, regardless of his actions, moods, or behavior. His presence was a gift to many people.

“He’ll be back tomorrow. He’s gone for the night.”

“Oh, well okay. I just overheard that it was his birthday. I hope he had a decent day.”

“He’s fine.”

“Um, hmm,” she said as she left the room.

Evie let out a slight giggle. “Think he knows how much attention he gets?”

“I have a feeling that he has a clue.” Kenny shook his head.

“Always got admirers.”

“Always!”

“Speaking of,” Evie looked straight at Kenny. “Who this new girl you got?” She paused. “Brother told me.”

“Her name is Mennette.”

“Mennette? Unusual.” She thought for a moment. “I like it. What’s she studying? Where’s this going?”

Kenny blushed slightly. “It’s too early for all of that, Mama. We really just met. Still getting to know each other.”

“You’re young,” she said in a wistful whisper. “Don’t let life pass you by, baby.” She stopped to catch her breath. “Go after all your dreams. If you like her, go after her.”

“I do like her a lot, Mama.”

“When Brother was born, he was so beautiful.” She smiled and something in her face softened. “Everyone wanna look at him. Hold him. Be around him. Just like now.” A cough of a laugh escaped her mouth then she turned to look into Kenny’s eyes. She blinked a few times before continuing. “But then I had you. And I said to myself, ‘How in the world can one woman be so lucky, hmm?’ To have the two most beautiful brown babies that God ever created.”

Kenny reached for her hand. He bent down and kissed her on her forehead.

“He go home?” she asked.

“He went to somebody’s home.”

“Give him space. He’ll go walk. Think about things. It’s hard for him.”

“Mama,” Kenny said with hurt in his voice. “It’s hard for me too.”

“I know,” She replied. “But you’re strong. The strongest. You always make the right decisions about things.” She paused, giving his hand a squeeze.

“That’s why,” she started slowly. “I need to trust you with something. I got a letter. Deliver it for me”

“A letter?” Kenny asked, confused.

"For your father."

Kenny frowned. "I don't wanna talk about that sorry bastard."

Evie frowned too and slowly shook her head from side to side. "No baby. We don't talk about loved ones like that. Especially the ones who gave you life."

"But Mama, he left us! He ain't never been no father to us. Ain't never been no husband to you. Why would you want to write to him?"

"Words that I need to get off my heart."

"He don't care about nothing on your heart. He's a druggie!"

"Wasn't always like that. We were young once. He was so handsome and smart. Like you. I was just a 'Bama country girl." Kenny saw a little twinkle in his mother's eyes. "I was serious about my learning. But when I saw your father. I knew what I wanted. To be a part of his life." She shyly ducked her head. "You know, his wife."

Kenny slowly shook his head. "Mama, I don't even know this man. I don't even know where to find him. Remember? He left us. Ain't never looked back."

"He came."

"Ma'am?"

"He came. He wasn't in no shape to be any good to y'all."

Kenny was stunned by this revelation. "Mama," he said, choosing his words and tone of voice carefully. "Don't you think we should have made that decision? Or maybe you could have given us the opportunity to tell him how we felt?"

"You were kids. Your daddy had demons. Drugs had him in a bad way. Time y'all were grown, I didn't know where he was."

Kenny watched as his mother pulled her other hand from under the blanket. It was shakily clutching an envelope.

"Please. Find him. Give him this."

"A love letter?" He couldn't hide his disappointment or confusion.

"No. A closure letter. I'm letting him go. After all these years. Letting him go for all the things he did to me. The time he lost with

you boys. I'm setting my soul free." She paused. After a little while, she continued.

"I really loved your father. Probably more than a woman should love a man. I never got over some of the things he did to me. But now. I release him from my heart. I don't wish him any ill will, but he holds no more room there."

Her words moved him. "I'll do my best, Mama."

"Promise me, baby. You'll finish your education." She glanced up at him.

Why would she ask him that, of all things? Did she sense something was wrong? He didn't want to tell his mother about his financial problems or lack thereof. One would actually have to have finances in order to have problems with them. And in his case, he was all out of money for school and was on the verge of dropping out. But how could he tell his dying mother that he couldn't finish college because he couldn't contribute to her hospice stay and his tuition? But then, maybe somehow, she already knew.

"I'll do my best, Mama," he answered honestly, slipping the letter into his pocket.

"And please don't tell Brother about the letter. He wouldn't understand."



Kenny drifted in and out of sleep on the couch as Evie rested peacefully through the night. He got up often. Sometimes, he stared at her as she slept. Other times, he'd leave the room to get some air, then rush back to be at her side. He now knew how Brother felt. It was like holding his breath, not knowing when he should breathe again.

The next morning, he went out to get breakfast and coffee while the nurses took time to change, clean, and feed his mother. Kenny walked down to an IHOP and ordered breakfast for both him and Brother. He had already spoken to Brother who said he was on his

way.

The three of them spent the day together, laughing and enjoying each other's company. Evie was in the middle of telling a story when she suddenly stopped. At the same moment, the machine she was hooked up to went from soft, gentle beeps, to loud, blaring warning sirens.

Kenny had been looking down at his feet as his mother was speaking but now he popped up, alarmed. Evie's eyes had rolled to the back of her head. Her tiny body was tense. Then, it started jerking, lurching upwards.

Kenny was frozen, his mind trying to process what he saw. But Brother moved swiftly and calmly to his mother and leaned over her. He whispered softly into her ears and rubbed her head, smoothing out the scarf on top of her head. He slipped the scarf off. It revealed a bald head with patches of hair that looked like a badly mowed lawn. The sight took Kenny by surprise. Brother was unfazed. He rubbed his palms over her head and whispered in her ear. Slowly but surely, her thrashing body started to relax.

Brother leaned in closer and kissed each fluttering eyelid until they slowed, and finally stopped. "Mama. Mama. Mama. I'm here. It's gonna be okay," He kept whispering into her ear. The sirens stopped blaring and returned to the soft string of low beeps. That's when Kenny noticed the nurse standing in the doorway.

"Keith?" she inquired, looking from Kenny to Brother to Evie. "You got her?"

"Yes, I got her Nina, thank you." He never took his eyes off his mother. He placed more soft kisses on her eyelids even though the fluttering had stopped. Tears slipped from the corners of her eyes. Nina lingered at the door a little. Kenny saw her glance at the IV pole and the monitor. She started to come in but stopped, glanced at Brother's strong back as if she trusted him with Evie.

Kenny assumed that they had been through this before. He almost felt guilty. Brother was right. He hadn't earned the right to judge how his Brother cared for her. He had been spending time

with Mennette, avoiding the inevitable.

Brother was still leaning into Evie. His face was so close to hers, their noses practically touched. The two slowly breathed together. In and out. When Evie took in a breath, Brother let one out. Inhale. Exhale. The action was so intense, it was as if Brother was trying to breathe the cancer right out of her body.

Then, slowly, the scene switched. They were breathing together. Both in. Both out. Just the two of them breathing, in harmony. Evie's body relaxed more. Her little fist unclenched, throbbed open and shut like a little heart. Her fingers stretched out, stiffened into straight pencils and then relaxed. She opened her eyes.

"Mama. I'm here. You okay now. You need to rest. Those seizures take a lot out of you."

Except for the low beeps, the room was still. Kenny exhaled before he even realized that this whole time he had been holding his breath. It was so quiet that Kenny could hear background television noises from the adjoining room. He heard faint conversations from the nurse's station which was right outside the door. He could hear Nina's voice and laughter and could have sworn that he heard Brother's name come out of her mouth with a small giggle.

Brother was oblivious to all of it, even to Kenny. He was breathing with Evie. Kenny watched almost like a stranger. He felt like he was in the audience, watching a movie. Always in the audience.

The afternoon slipped into the evening and yawned into the next day. Both Kenny and Brother stayed at their mother's side. Her health quickly deteriorated after the seizure with each passing hour. Brother paced the floor while Kenny stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. She smiled, the smallest smile Kenny had ever seen on her face.

"Sit down, Brother," she requested. "All that pacing's making me nervous. Relax, Sweet Pea." She tried patting the pillow next to her but Kenny could tell that she was too weak to even accomplish this small feat. "Come. Sit next to me," she said to Brother. "Touch my face. Rub my hair for me like you did when you was a little boy."

“Will that make you feel better, Mama?”

She smiled as if it would, but Kenny knew better. He could tell she was in a lot of pain. Nothing could ease the pain, not even the stroking fingers of her firstborn son. There was only one thing that could take the pain away for good, and it would happen soon. Kenny realized this fact and Evie did too. But Brother did not.

“Yes, Sweet Pea,” she said. “Nothing would make me feel better.”

Brother obliged. Evie didn’t exactly lie. Seeing Brother relax put her heart at ease, but not her body.

Anxious, Brother stroked his mother’s hair for a few minutes. Then, he abruptly excused himself. He said he was going outside to get some air but Kenny suspected he was going to smoke. Kenny could feel how off things were. Brother typically held it all together. However, all morning he’d been jumpy, anxious, and agitated. Maybe he did know.

“Brother is cranky today.” Evie managed in a small voice.

“Mama, Brother is scared.”

She sighed and closed her eyes, then whispered, “I know.”



Death is alive. It is fluid and flowing. It has a weight to it. It’s heavy and thick, like velvet drapes. Its oak smell and sour taste hits the back of your throat, suffocating you until you have no other choice than to relent. Evie slept while Death hovered in the room. Kenny had reluctantly made peace with It, determined to at least be present the moment It would claim Mama as Its own.

Several hours passed before Brother came back. Kenny assumed he had gone for a walk to clear his mind. It must not have worked because as Brother stepped into the room, his nervous energy clashed with the calm resolve that was in the air. Brother sat in the chair, then popped up less than a minute later and started pacing. His was a bundle of anxiety, fear, and anger. His pacing was more determined than before. Kenny couldn’t understand what

was going on with him today. Kenny looked at his mother. Evie's eyes were closed but her face was twisted in agony. Kenny couldn't take it anymore. He just wanted her pain to stop for good. Kenny leaned forward and took one of Evie's hands in his.

"Mama. I know you're in a lot of pain." Kenny swallowed. "We're okay. Brother and me. We gon' be fine." He looked up at Brother who had stopped pacing and folded his arms. The look on his face was unreadable. Kenny focused back on their mother and continued.

"You ain't got to hold on for us. You can let go."

"THE FUCK?!" Brother erupted and flew into Kenny's face "Why would you say some shit like that? She young! She can fight this!"

"She's in pain, Brother! Don't you want it to stop?" Kenny said, determined, wiping at his tears. He didn't want to see his mother go, but he knew she was only holding on because of Brother. Her pain was too evident on her face. "She's holding on for us. We got to let her go."

"I don't wanna hear that shit! She young! And I can't believe you saying that. NO! HELL NO! I ain't letting her go. She still got too much living to do. She can fight this. We need her here. I don't know about you, but I need my Mama here with me." He jabbed his thumb into his chest and tears gushed from his eyes.

Kenny didn't respond. He just stared at Brother. Watched his Brother shroud himself in denial. Their mother was at the end of her life and his brother could not handle it. Couldn't accept this undeniable fact. The doctors, the nurses, and even Kenny tried their best to ease this information to Brother.

Evie coughed and Brother jumped to her side. He got on his knees and leaned into the bed. Caressed her hand. Her eyes found Brother's face.

"Mama." Brother said, his voice coming out in a croak. "Mama. You believe in God, right? We God-fearing people. You taught us that, right?" He started to sob along with his tears which were

flowing fast and desperately. He cleared his throat before the next words came out in a croak. "With Christ, all things are possible. Even beating this."

"Sweet Pea. You're so special. I love you." She whispered. Brother leaned in to hear her better. She brushed the back of her hand across his face and he leaned into it. "More than life itself."

"If that's so, Mama," his erratic voice was low and rash through gritted teeth. He could barely get the words out, "...then fight. Fight this!" He gripped her hand.

"Baby, death is a part of life. We ain't got no choice. 'Cept to tell each other we love one another while we can." She smiled. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head and she squeezed them tight. A tear rolled down her face. A frown etched on her forehead. "I love you both."

"Mama. I love you more than you even know." Brother said.

Evie attempted a smile but instead of her beautiful lip curl, her eyelids fluttered. The machine started its wailing siren sound again. Instantly, Brother was in her face, speaking into her eyes, kissing her. His fingers stroked and rubbed Evie's ears and hair. Kenny watched. Brother's techniques were not working.

Nina appeared in the doorway in response to the machine's alarm. Kenny could see fear start to creep into Brother's shoulders, and his back started sloping. He rubbed and kissed with more desperation and determination. Slowly, Evie's eyes stopped fluttering. Kenny wanted Brother's ways to help, but he already knew. The machines continued wailing until there was one long, low, continuous beep that echoed throughout the room.

Nina stood in the corner with her hands to her mouth. The other nurses gathered behind her. She stopped them from entering, giving the brothers their space. Evie's grip on Kenny's hand loosened and his fingers were free. The anguish on her face disappeared. For the first time in a long time, she looked at peace. They both notice this change at the same time and Brother's shoulders collapsed. A tortured, painful wail escaped his throat as his entire

body slumped over her. His fingers desperately gripped the sheets on top of her like he was trying to hold on to her soul and stop it from escaping her body.

Kenny knew it was coming but he still wasn't prepared. He stared in shock for a while at Brother's quivering back and listened to his anguished crying. Breath was caught in a lump in his throat. Then, suddenly, a wave crashed over him and he finally realized this was real. His mother was gone.

Chapter 18

MENNETTE

The whirring of the ceiling fan resonated in the church basement. Everyone's eyes were focused on Angela as it was her turn to speak. She wrung her fingers together and Mennette could tell that she was uneasy with her words to the Affairs to Remember support group.

Huddled in a circle made up of metal folding chairs, Angela, Mennette, Kim, Bryon, Ted, and Mark can all see from their vantage points that Angela was sweating. Her red hair hung to the middle of her back and she gathered a strand to twist on her finger. Her green eyes were intense and the red freckles looked like flecks of red chili peppers on the bridge of her nose.

"And when I look at them, I think to myself, 'Whose ugly little babies are these?'" Angela sighed. She was talking about her 18-month-old twin girls. She looked around the room sheepishly, embarrassed by her personal thoughts but relieved to have gotten them off her chest.

"Their heads are quite large and one of them has this mean resting baby face with a lazy eye and weirdly shaped pouty lips. Just a set of ugly kids, ya know? And sometimes when they cry, it's like nails on a chalkboard to me, in unison! I mean, I know they're mine because they look just like my husband. But I feel bad because I just don't seem to have a connection with them anymore, ya know? Like a mother should. Hell..." she giggled nervously. "...I

don't even remember having them."

No one knew what to say. They had all seen pictures of Angela's twins. So far, nothing she said about them was untrue. It was a delicate tension no one knew how to break.

"Maybe you never had a connection with them." Ted offered. He was the pessimist of the group. His conversations were typically peppered with sarcastic overtones and little sensitivity. In his early 60s, he looked as if he stepped right out of an old hippy magazine, complete with a tie-dye shirt and a brown jacket with tassels. His long white hair and pale leathery skin spoke of a hard life.

"How would you know?" He finished his thought with a shrug of his shoulders, arms crossed over his chest.

Angela nodded her head while listening.

"I mean, maybe deep down inside, before you lost your memory, you always thought they were ugly. If you say they look like their father, well..." Ted raised his hands and hunched his shoulders up higher. "Cause you're an attractive woman." Angela blushed and smiled at Mennette who was sitting next to her. They had become the closest of the group. "I mean if your kids are ugly, then they're just damn ugly." Ted chuckled, really digging in as if no one understood his point.

"Uh, thank you for that, Ted," Mark interjected. As the group facilitator, it was his job to keep the meeting moving in a positive, nurturing, and supportive direction. His thinning blonde hair was proof that he couldn't tolerate the stress levels of his responsibility as a facilitator. He chewed on his pen and everyone could tell that Ted made him dig deep and really work for his pay. "Angela, anything else you want to add?"

She shook her head.

"Okay. Mennette? You were telling us last time how you continue to have violent dreams. And how your husband doesn't seem to understand what you are going through. Do you want to talk more about that today?"

"Sure." Mennette leaned forward in the chair and rubbed her

palms up and down her thighs and sighed. “Umm, the other day, he kept asking me if I really didn’t remember anything. It was like he was trying to catch me in a lie. He’s always switching stories around. For some reason, he seems suspicious of me.”

“Did he tell you this?” Mark asked.

“No, but he’s always sneaking around me. It feels weird to ask him about it. I know he’s on some kind of leave from his job but he goes out of the house for hours at a time doing God knows what. And when he comes back, his emotions are all over the place. Yesterday, he didn’t even talk to me. I could tell he was avoiding me on purpose.

“He really doesn’t get it. I just wish that for once, he could understand what it’s like to be me. To just...not...know. I truly don’t remember. And sometimes, I can tell that he’s mad about something that has to do with me.” She inhaled deeply. “But I can’t figure out what the hell he’s mad about.”

Ted shifted in his seat. “Maybe you did something to him before you lost your memory. Like cussed him out or maybe you cheated on him. That could make any man suspicious. Or maybe that man that shook you around that day. Maybe he was someone that you was having an affair with? Possibly.”

“Ted, let’s not be judgmental or make assumptions,” Mark said as firmly as he could, with a twitch in the corner of his lips.

“Not being judgmental. It’s true.” Ted retorted. “That actually would make someone look at you suspiciously. Janice cheated on me for years...”

“...there’s a surprise...” Kim muttered, leaning over to Bryon. They both did a low high-five and chuckled.

“...and it became hard to forgive her. Even after she died. I think that was part of my memory loss. The trauma of it. When they found me unconscious after my drug binge, well, that erased a lot of those memories.” Ted finished. He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest then looked at Mennette. “I’m not telling you to try drugs, but...”

"Ted." Mark inhaled sharply and his fist clenched by the side of his chair. "Let's be respectful of each other's time and beliefs. Mennette hasn't had a chance to finish." He turned his attention back to her and softened his tone. "Anything you want to add Mennette?"

"I just know..." Mennette started but then stopped. Something inside of her was sad. "I just know that I want to get back to something. I'm not sure what that something is though, Mark." She cocked her head to the side. "Normalcy?" Her look was deep. "Whatever that is! But I'm ready to get my life and my independence back."

All of the members shook their heads in agreement. Even Ted held a mellow look on his face. Mennette suspected that they all in the room could relate.

"People." Mark stood and clapped his hands twice. His rainbow flip-flops hinted at his preference in mates. He walked the outside perimeter of the circle. "Don't be afraid to explore the world. You have all the knowledge you need at your fingertips." He held up his cell phone for all to see. "Google something. Anything. Get... that...independence...back!" He pounded his fist into the palm of his other hand with each word.

"Wanna learn about an area? Google it. Wanna know what something does? Google it. Wanna know how to get somewhere? There's an app for that. You can get anywhere you want today with the click of your finger. Normalcy is out there. Whatever your definition of that is. Your new normalcy, your perceived normalcy? Doesn't matter. You make up your own terms. Your assignment for this week is to explore." He spread his fingers out and wiggled all ten of them in the air. "You will start to get your memory back when you start familiarizing your brain with your surroundings. So we'll end on that note. Anyone else have something to add before we end today's session?"

He looked around at the group. Angela timidly raised her hand. "Yes, Angela?"

"Ted..." Angela turned to him, her freckles blazing. "Don't ever

call my babies damn ugly again!”

Chapter 19

MENNETTE

*H*e's been upset about something. Mad. I've seen him frustrated before, but never this angry. And never this long. He's actually been avoiding me, ever since he came home in a foul mood Thursday night. I heard him slinking around the house on Friday, but I only saw the back of his head once. Saturday he had to see me because he had to take me to my meeting. I don't think he said more than five words to me all day: "You ready?" when it was time to go, and "You hungry?" when he picked me up.

Today is Sunday and I'm tired of it. I've decided I'm not going to live my life by his up and down emotions... especially now, after yesterday's meeting. I caught him in his office this morning and asked if I could have some money. I told him Tamara wanted to take me shopping with her, but that was a lie. I just really wanted to go out and be by myself.

He damn near bit my head off. Said I had a lot of nerve asking him for money. I don't know what his problem is, but I do know that it's working my nerves! I've just been hanging out in the bedroom with the door locked or in my painting room, trying to avoid him as much as he's avoiding me. I'm tired of being stuck in this house, trying to remember a life I'm not sure I want back.

I've started to look forward to my meetings. Funny, because I was so nervous about going at the beginning. It's not just because it's the only time I leave the house. It makes me feel like someone

else out there understands what I'm going through. It is a unique situation. How many people can honestly say that they've lost their memory? I still don't even know how I lost my memory. Nobody does.

Most of the meetings, we journal. I write about my feelings towards The Husband, now known as Kenny. I also write about his brother who seems to come around quite often. He's attractive, but I suspect that our previous relationship might not have been an admiral one. After we journal, we discuss our lives and the parts of them that we do remember.

There are five of us. I've grown to expect the different stories from each person. I think I'm making progress. I keep getting these visions of a little boy. Cute and crying. I give him a bottle, hold him and comfort him. And then that is it. The vision disappears. Kim says she also has memories of children. Mark, the leader of the group, preaches about regaining our independence. Not being afraid anymore. Said Google is our friend.

So when Kenny said no to my money request and then left the house, I decided I was going out too! I need to get some fresh air. On my own. I'm not afraid of creating a new life if I have to. I am reclaiming my independence!

Inside of my closet, I found a little plastic box with my laptop, cell phone, and my wallet... and it has credit cards in it! I think Kenny was trying to hide them from me, but I found it the day before Tamar's party. At the time, I didn't bother looking through any of it because they contained information and connections to a life I can't remember. But with Kenny making it impossible for me to breathe in this house, now they will be the tools for my freedom. They are mine, aren't they?

I power up my cell phone and let it charge while I open up my laptop. Mark tells us to use Google so we can start relearning about the world around us. I Google shopping malls near me. I notice Scout on my phone. I Google what Scout is. Turns out it can help me find my way to the mall and back. I'm excited!

Mark would be so proud of me. I got my purse, check! Cell phone, check! I check my face in the hallway mirror and a scared woman looks back at me, but that's okay. I am determined. I take in as deep a breath as I can and pull my shoulders back. There's no better time than the present. I heard Kenny drive away about 30 minutes ago.

Now, ten toes with pink polish wiggle at the threshold of my door. I remind myself that I can do this. *In through the nose, out through the mouth.* I have to breathe and talk myself into this or else I will never gain my independence back. In my mind, I picture myself as a cheerleader with big bright pom-poms, a cute cheerleader skirt on, and leaping in the air. Go Mennette, go!

I'm ready! And if I'm ever to get back before Kenny comes home, I need to move expeditiously. He rarely leaves me home alone. But today, when he peeked his head in my room, I was laying on the bed. He mumbled something about how he and his brother were going to "take care of business" for a few hours. I mumbled back I had a headache and rolled over. But the minute I couldn't hear his car anymore, this idea popped into my head and I sprang into action.

I look down again at those toes: all lined up and ready to go. I am doing this! I am going out! By myself! I should be fine. I have the directions on Scout. It can get me there and back. I have the printed copy of Google's Sunvalley Mall map. And before I knew it, five of those painted toes are pressing down on the gas pedal of the car in the garage and I'm off on my adventure!

I don't remember the last time I drove. I didn't even remember the car or buying it. But I'm determined. They say the body has muscle memory so I'm trusting that it will kick in. I backed up quickly and knocked over the mailbox. It crashed to the curb. Before I could straighten up the car, I ran clear over it, smashing it like it was a Coca-Cola can. I didn't care, I would have to deal with that when I got back. I was on a time limit. Kenny would probably only be gone a few hours. I hit the road fast.

I was feeling pretty good. Something about driving felt familiar and I started to relax. Scout told me where to turn, when to turn, and when my next turn was ahead. This was the first time that I've felt independent since my accident. It was exhilarating. I pumped the radio up so loud that I almost missed my turn a few times. I arrived at the Sunvalley Mall in Concord at 11:15 AM. I remember that because I looked at the clock on the dashboard before I entered the mall.

I wander through the mall, in and out of stores with the credit card burning a hole in my wallet. I don't know what my limit is. I don't know my balance. I just know that I am going to spend a little money today. I'll use it until the sales lady tells me it's been declined.

I'm having a good time with myself. I tried on some skirts and blouses. I bought myself a pair of shoes and treated myself to an ice cream cone in the food court. I sat on one of the benches and spent the next hour people-watching. You learn a lot about people from the stores that they shop in. For instance, lots of young girls carried Victoria's Secret bags. Some of the men have Footlocker bags. I looked down at my own loot. Victoria's Secret, Macy's, and Bath and Body Works. I learned a lot about myself today too. I giggled to myself. I was feeling really good about things.

When my stomach rumbled, I realized the ice cream wasn't enough. I got a sandwich and drink from Subway and found a table to eat at. Halfway through my meal, I noticed a thin, older man in a janitor's uniform, wiping down the tables a few feet away from me. I glanced up at him, our eyes met briefly, and then I looked back down at my sandwich. But from the corner of my eye, I saw all movement cease. He'd stopped wiping the tables and was standing still, just staring at me with his eyes wide open. I looked back up at him and smiled and he quickly walked off.

Strange. But then again, not any stranger than all the other weird things that have been happening to me. Maybe I knew him or worked with him or something. I didn't trip. I just dug into my

bag of chips and kept eating, lost in my thoughts. Soon, I saw him again out of the corner of my eye. This time, he was wiping tables on the opposite side of me. He eased his way over to me and wiped down the table directly next to me. I slowly chewed a few more chips before I brought my eyes up to meet his.

"Hey there, young lady," he finally said a little cautiously, blinking like he couldn't control his eyes.

I smiled at him and kept chewing.

Now, he was standing off to the side of me, staring like he'd seen a ghost.

"I'm almost done," I said, thinking to myself that it was rude to try to wipe down a person's table before they were even done with it.

He wiped at it anyway, then walked around me slowly and stood right in front of me. "Do you know who I am?" He asked.

I gave him a tight smile this time, the kind with no teeth. "Um, I don't think so. Should I?"

He sat quickly right in front of me. "You really don't remember? My name is Junie."

"And where would I know you from?" I tried not to make it too much of a habit of telling people that I had amnesia.

"The night of your accident. We found you."

My heart quickened. "You did?" I thought for a quick moment, scrunching up the rest of my sandwich in the bag and tossing it onto the table. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Can't tell you, 'cause I don't know." His flippant answer surprised me. "You was out in the street. Lita brought you in and we called the cops for you. And that was that. Don't know what happened to you."

I shoved the last chip in my mouth and wiped my hands on my jeans before I covered his hands with mine. "Thank you. Thank you so much for helping me."

He nodded like he understood and stood up, twisting his wash towel into a coil. He turned to walk away but then he turned back

like he forgot something. "Do you remember the money?"

"Did I leave money?"

He looked at me suspiciously. "Uh, yeah." He dug deep into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash which I'd assumed earlier was something else initially in his pants.

I looked away embarrassed at my thoughts but I heard him peel off a bill from his stash. I don't know where a janitor would get so much money but it wasn't my business.

He held up a \$20 bill. "Lita can't say I didn't keep my word." He mumbled and placed the bill in my hand.

"Excuse me?" I said confused, looking down at it strangely. "Thank you. I left this?" He could have kept that. "What an honest man."

He blushed. "At the house where we found you, we help people. We feed folks who are down on their luck. We house a few here and there but it's never enough money to go around to help all the people who need it."

"Oh," I said, handing him back the bill. "Well, you keep it then. Put it back in the pot for the house."

"Bless you young lady." He took the bill back. "Lita gon' think you mighty nice. But I did what I promised her," he prattled on. "I said if I ever saw you again, I'd offer you your money back. But I'ma let her know you declined and wanted to be a blessing. Bless you, dear," he said.

I fumbled, shifting the many shopping bags, almost embarrassed that there were people hungry in the world and here I was with bags full of frivolous items. "I wish I had more cash on me but I only have my credit card," I said, pulling it out for him to see.

He reached for it like he was going to accept it. "Well, every little bit helps. We take credit cards too," he said quickly.

"But it's no good." I pouted truthfully. "It's maxed out." I had reached my limit in Victoria's Secret.

He retreated his hand. "That's too bad." He stood. "Well, I better get back to work. You take care, young lady."

"I will. And thanks again, for your help."

He hesitated like he wanted to say something, took a quick glance at all my bags then nodded his head. "You're welcome. Take care and happy shopping."

I browsed the mall some more after finishing my lunch. I felt so good about my accomplishment! As I passed one of the digital displays, the time flashed in front of me in jumbo numbers: 1:57. Shit, shit, shit! I needed to get home before Kenny. I headed for an exit, then a chilling thought made me freeze in my tracks. Where did I park the car? Then, another thought... what kind of car is it? Color?

Panic washed over me. I stood there, concentrating, trying with all my might to remember what type of car I'd rolled up in and where it might be. I was so excited to get out of the house that I really didn't pay much attention. I never wrote it down or took a picture. All I remember was that it was a dark color. My breathing turned ragged now. I look around for someone or something familiar, but nothing. I turn in frantic circles.

I grab my bags and head straight for the nearest exit. Outside the air is so thin, it's suffocating. Then I remember Mark and my mini cheerleader from earlier. I vow to not be defeated and marched back inside the mall to see if I could get some help. After explaining to the seemingly uninterested security guard at the customer service booth about my brain injury and my car, he agreed to drive me around in the little golf cart to find where I parked. But after taking 20 minutes to drive through each section of the lot, him pointing at different cars and me shaking my head no, he was done. He mumbled something about getting back to clock out for his break, wished me luck and dropped me off. He left me back where I started: on the curb in front of the Red Robin restaurant.

The afternoon sun felt menacing. I look up and the buildings appeared to grow taller, like I'm being closed in. My head swirled in a dizzying spin and I can't breathe properly. My chest tightens from the rapid thumping of my heart. My eyes are swollen with

tears and I crumple right there on the ground, dropping all my bags. All I can do is cry. The people move in faster blurs of motion and loud sounds and colors fuse together. I don't know what to do. I'm so overwhelmed that I'm hysterical. What was I thinking? Venturing out into God knows where? What made me think I could go out into this big old world not being able to remember a damn thing? It's too much for me!

"Dear?" I heard. And looked up into a pair of crystal-clear blue eyes set in a pale, wrinkled face that is shrouded in a halo of snow-white curly hair. "Are you okay? Did you need some help?"

I couldn't answer her. I just stared at her. She looked like Betty White. She clutched her J.C. Penney bags close to her hip. Her green blouse and pleated skirt reminded me of spinach.

"Sweetie are you...lost?" She hesitated when she said the word lost like it was impossible for someone my age to be lost.

"I suffer from amnesia. If you could just help me please." I watched her features soften as she looked at me. I have to admit that I was almost embarrassed to tell her. But honestly, she was the only person caring enough to stop and ask a middle-aged, hysterical African-American woman having a nervous breakdown on the curb in front of Red Robin if she needs help. So I accepted.

"Do you own a cellular phone?"

I blinked at her with realization. Why hadn't I thought of that? "Yes ma'am."

She reached her hand out to me and I dug into my purse and handed her my phone. She scrolled through to find "Home" and dialed. "There's no answer at the home number." She thought, tapping her wrinkled finger against her wrinkled cheek. "Are you married?"

I nodded. That I did remember. And that I was trying to spend a day without his help. But at that moment, I truly appreciated all he had been doing to take care of me. The kind woman scrolled through more contacts on my phone and found "Husband" and dialed. After a few rings, she began to speak.

"Hello? My name is Myrtle. I'm here at Sunvalley Mall in Concord. Your wife is here. I think she is lost." She paused. "Uh-huh. That's right. Sunvalley Mall in Concord. Uh-huh. By the Red Robins." Then Myrtle turned to me. "Dear, is your name Mennette?"

All I could do was nod my head in between embarrassing sobs. She handed the phone to me.

"Mennette! I've been looking everywhere for you!" His voice boomed in my ear. It was strained with fear, tension, stress, and irritation. "Why haven't you been answering your phone?" I had no answer to his question. I didn't hear it. I think it was on vibrate. "What were you thinking?" I felt his relief and exasperation.

"I just wanted to get out. I was trying to prove to myself that I could remember things. Be independent." Even though we had been giving each other the silent treatment, it felt good to talk to him.

"Mennette. You have amnesia. It's not like you just forgot to get eggs from the grocery store or you forgot where you put your keys. You had a serious head injury. This was really dangerous. What if that lady never called me? What if some crazy person decided that they wanted to take advantage of you? What if that man from the meeting came around?"

"I'm so sorry!" I sobbed more, thinking for the first time how he must have felt to come home to find me gone.

Kenny sighed. "I have to tell you Mennette. This has not been easy for me. I know Dr. Cardoza said not to add extra stress on you but I've been running around here finding out things about you that I'm not happy about."

I wiped my nose. "Like what?"

"Like you have a P.O. box clear across town that I didn't know about. Your job. Someone named V. Turner. Ring any bells?"

"No. What was in the P.O. box?" Is this why he's been funky to me these past few days?

He fell silent. I imagined his temple was throbbing right about now. Finally, he said, "Stay where you at. I'll be right there to get

you.”

I sit on the bench and Myrtle sits with me too, but just for a few minutes. She excuses herself to shop for her granddaughter’s 16th birthday. She informed me with a few pats on the knee that she was getting a diamond-encrusted necklace with her initial. I thanked Myrtle for her help and wait alone.

After a little while, a car stopped in front of me. Kenny exited the vehicle up in a huff with Brother in tow, who hopped out the passenger side. Instinctively, I rolled my eyes. Suddenly, I didn’t feel guilty anymore about my little excursion. But I am glad to see Kenny.

Kenny asked me for my car keys and I tried not to give attitude when I handed them over. Kenny handed them over to Brother and instructed him to find and get my car home for me. Brother disappears. Kenny sits on the bench next to me and exhales. He looks off into the distance. All I could do was focus on the sounds of traffic and the people walking, talking, and shopping.

“What were you thinking?” Kenny finally said, kneading the back of his neck with his knuckles. He doesn’t sound angry, but I know he is.

“I...” I shook my head. I couldn’t finish my sentence or my thought for that matter. I steadied my eyes at the top of his sneakers as I waited for something. I didn’t have a reason. And the fact was that I wasn’t thinking. I just wanted to get out. I just wanted to belong somewhere and feel like I was a part of this life. I let my mouth hang open and hunched my shoulders, feeling pitiful.

His long stare was filled with something I couldn’t read. Sympathy? Disgust? Pity? It was hard to tell. After all, I didn’t really know this man’s ticks or tells.

“If you really wanted to get out somewhere, you should go where you usually go to get some peace.” He said matter-of-factly, as if I remembered where that was. “Let’s go.” Kenny gathered my bags with a quick glance of disapproval, but then I saw it melt from his face as he led me to his car. During the ride, I was silent and he

didn't utter a word. So I just turned up the music that was playing: Skip Marley. The clock on the dashboard read 3:14. I looked down at my distressed jeans, my sandals with those damn independent pink toes, and my comfortable T-shirt.

He caught me looking and said. "I bought that for you. On our first date. It was the Prince concert at the Coliseum. It's your favorite shirt."

I snapped my head up in surprise. "It is?"

He folded his lips into his mouth and nodded. From this angle, I guess I never appreciated his one dimple that poked out of his right cheek only when he brought his mouth together like that. I looked away and focused on the cars driving next to us when he hopped on the freeway. Thirty minutes later he stopped the car and started to get out. I guess we arrived at our destination.

"The beach?" I asked, already leaving the car, the pull of the water beckoning me as I traipsed through the tiny tufts of wild grass onto the grainy part of the land. Instantly, my feet sank and I duck-walked at a slow pace to the middle of the area. Joggers jogged by with dogs on leashes. A few other people milled around, but not too many, just enough. I inhaled, tasting the salty breeze against the back of my throat. I turned around to see Kenny reaching into the trunk of his car. He pulled out a blanket and trotted towards me, duck walking also once his feet hit the sand.

"Always keep a blanket in the trunk. You never know." He stood smiling. A few flips of the fabric and we had a comfortable place to sit.

We sit in the sand and he takes his shoes off and looks out into the water. I do the same. Then I close my eyes and feel the breeze kiss the contours of my cheekbones. I can feel the afternoon sun lap at the tip of my nose and my forehead and the ridges of my ears. I inhale and allow the salty smell to enter my nose as I hear the squawking battle of the seagulls, one louder and more boisterous than the others in a crescendo of protest.

My mind is finally clear. I focus and everything stills. I have to

admit that I can finally think. The usual raging and jumbling of my confusing thoughts is no more. In the darkness of my mind, there is comfort. It is soothing as I inhale and exhale over and over again. *In through the nose, out through the mouth.* Slowly. And although I am in my head alone, I can still feel his presence there next to me, hovering, somewhat comforting and protecting me.

The grains gather and fall away under my feet. I dig them deeper until I can feel the coolness of the deeper grains on the tips of my toes. I am feeling good and I smile. I've allowed my eyes to roll into the back of my head and I bring my chin up, to better hear the sounds of the waves whooshing and crashing.

Then I feel his fingers: one at first, then two. Until there are three of his fingers on top of mine, stroking, so soft and gentle that I can tell that this is how we are when things are good. Under different circumstances, I guess we were in love. Which is important. I'm okay with the stroking. It adds to my new serenity vibe and mixes well with the sun and the breeze. The waves crash into each other as if they are cymbals. In my mind, I can picture the color of the water, not blue, not clear, but a dirty brown with crests of white colliding back onto the sand. I want to paint this vision in my head. It becomes all so surreal. And nice.

In my mind, I am floating and I can feel the clouds like cotton puffs against my body. I roll my head slowly, but then something happens. A memory? A dream?

The scene in my head changed. All of a sudden there is blood, and lots of it. Everywhere. A struggle. And echoing screams. Not mine, not at first. A terrifying crimson scene played out like a movie filled with so much blood that I can't make much out. A sharp breath caught in my throat and a scream escapes me before I even realize it's me. The fingers grip my hand and when I open my eyes Kenny has this haunting look on his face.

A few beachgoers look our way. Two men throwing the frisbee stop their game to stare at me. The waves and the seagulls now mock me and I am embarrassed because my mind is playing these

tricks on me. I'm exhausted.

My throat is dry and I look at Kenny terrified. He reads my eyes without me saying a word. "You've had a long day," he said with genuine concern in his voice. He pulls on his sneakers, stands, brushes the sand from his pants and offers me his hand. "Let me get you home."

I slip my sandals back on and accept his help, but I can't look him in the eye. I've seen something horrifying. And I don't know what it is.

Chapter 20

KENNY

Kenny focused on the words coming through the phone. Brother was talking in his loud animated voice. Half laughing, half serious, Brother rattled off words that Kenny was ultimately grateful to hear.

“Repeat after me: ‘Brother, I owe you my life!’”

“And why do I owe you my life this time?” Kenny asked dryly. He lay on the couch, clutching the phone.

“‘Cause when you look this good, you just gotta jump back and slap yourself! Good looks plus great personality equals no shortage of women! Damn good brother! Sheeet! You owe me your life, baby brah!”

“And don’t forget humility.”

“Sheeet! Fuck humility. When I do what I do, I DO what I DO! Your brother came through for you! My girl work at the bank all this week from 8 to 4:30. Her boss on vacation so she running thangs. She said if you got the key, she’ll let you in the safe deposit box.”

“You shitting me!” Kenny sat straight up.

“But wait! There’s more! Hold on to your panties! Ole girl at Southwest said she could get you a ticket as early as tomorrow!”

Kenny inhaled and let out a heavy sigh of relief. It was Monday afternoon. After yesterday’s emotional ordeal with Mennette, he could use a break. But, obviously, he couldn’t leave her alone. He

would need a day or two to make arrangements for her. Plus, he wanted to get into the safety deposit box before he left... it could hold a clue to what he was about to walk into in South Carolina.

"She said you'd have to fly stand-by though. Could possibly get bumped. Said that's a risk you'd have to be willing to take. Don't know how many layovers you might have, either."

"I don't give a damn about the layovers. It's a free flight!" he said with an almost laugh. "I'm just glad you could do that for me."

"Now." Brother teased. "What was that you was saying?"

Kenny laughed and caved in. "Brother, I owe you my life!" Kenny knew Brother's crazy behind was grinning on the other end because he forced him to say it. But Kenny didn't mind because Brother had really come through. He hung up the call. There was so much to do.

Just then, he heard Mennette walk through the upstairs hall, pause, then go back into the bedroom. In a few moments, he heard the faint sound of the shower running. She hadn't spoken much since they returned home yesterday after her mall fiasco and freaky beach incident. Whatever spark of life she had regained since the New Year's Eve party was now totally gone. She was as distant and defeated as the first day she'd come home after the hospital.

Mennette moped around the house last night and this morning in the same flannel pajamas, not even bothering to comb her hair. Her bare face held gray undertones and subtle dark bags looped and appeared under her eyes. Tamara had come by without calling him first. Maybe she thought she could do that since they had a visit last Wednesday. Tamara had threatened that she'd be coming by more often. But when Kenny went upstairs to let Mennette know, she refused to see her so-called best friend.

Now that he thought of it, Kenny found it strange that Mennette had gone out by herself yesterday after saying she and Tamara would be going together. Now today, she refused to see her. Maybe Mennette had lied yesterday morning. Apparently lying to him wasn't new behavior for her, memory loss or not. Whatever.

Kenny was never in the mood for Tamara so he was happy to escort her back out the front door.

Kenny's hand lingered on the knob, his thoughts swirling. Slowly but surely, they were drifting apart. Before Christmas, Kenny wanted nothing more than to get back the life he and Mennette once had. But now, he had begun to question if what they had was real or not. With each new secret and lie he uncovered, the Mennette he knew slipped further out of his reach. And there was nothing that he felt he could do about it.

Now, his quest for the truth pulled at him much more than nostalgia for the past. He shuddered as he wondered what he'd learn in South Carolina. Would it tear them apart for good? It didn't matter; he needed answers. Real ones. He'd have to see how he felt once all was said and done.

The next morning couldn't come fast enough. Kenny left early to grab a cup of coffee at Starbucks then drove back towards the bank at 18th Street. It was 7:30 AM and the employees hadn't clocked in yet. He sipped his steaming beverage and watched the door like a hawk. On the passenger seat next to him were Mennette's bank statements and the safe deposit box key.

He caught sight of the male teller, with whom he had an altercation a few days ago, entering the building around 7:40. In another minute, two more employees walked in, locking the door behind them. Brother had given him a description of Candace Jones and he believed he spotted her.

Kenny waited impatiently. Finally, it was 8:00. The male teller came and unlocked the door. Kenny waited til he disappeared back into the branch to exit his car. He walked in and headed straight to Brother's friend. She was behind the counter, busy counting money at a rapid rate, focused on her task. Candace stood tall and straight. Her skin was dark and smooth, just like a piece of glass. Her painted lips were positioned in a pout, like she had been practicing selfies all night. When her eyes came up to meet Kenny's, he could see why she had been on Brother's team. If Brother were

ever to settle down with this woman, they would make a handsome couple.

“Yes, may I help you?”

“Brother sent me.” He nervously fumbled with the stack of statements.

Her eyebrows slowly rose to the top of her head and a sexy smile eased on her face as if she were thinking of Brother at that precise moment.

“Please have a seat over there and I will be with you as soon as I can.”

Kenny sat, rolling the key around in his fingers and nervously bouncing his knee up and down. Every time he thought Candace was coming his way, she ended up taking care of a “real” customer. But each time, she would send him a gorgeous, reassuring smile. Candace was a woman with confidence. She moved around the bank in long strides. Anyone watching would know that she was in charge. Finally, she eased up to Kenny, bent slightly, placed her hand on his shoulder and smiled.

“I’m ready for you now, Mr. Young.” She smelled of Beyonce’s Fire perfume. Kenny instantly remembered that it had been too long since he’d been intimate with a woman. He had to focus. Besides, she was one of Brother’s women.

Candace punched a keypad and led him through one door. They came to another door with another keypad. When it unlocked, Candace opened the door into a room whose walls were lined with locked metal boxes. She let him in and stopped in front of the appropriate box. Together, they each put their keys in and twisted. The slot sprung open. Candace reached in and pulled a large 15" wide box out of its slot.

“Follow me.”

They walked further into the giant vault. A hidden, slight walkway led to another door. It opened into a small, back room with a solitary table and two plush chairs. She handed the box to Kenny.

“Take your time. When you are finished and would like for me

to return, just press this button and wait.” She pointed to a small, glowing button next to the room’s light switch.

“Thanks.” He sat and took in a deep breath. “What if I want to take some of this stuff home?”

“That’s your prerogative, Mr. Young. You had the key, right?” She raised her eyebrow, knowingly.

He nodded.

“Then it’s your property.” She eased out and the door closed soundlessly behind her.

Kenny placed the box on the table and sat down. He pulled out three large envelopes which were wrapped together with numerous rubber bands with the word “private” written on the front in black letters. Flipping the stack over, he noticed that the envelopes were sealed tight with thick tape. Somebody didn’t want this “private” information to be seen by just anyone.

He set the three envelopes aside and pulled out the last of the box’s contents: a large framed photo of a family on the front steps of a house. Five children and two parents. Something in Kenny’s heart lurched. Menette stood the tallest, in the middle of the kids, smiling. It was definitely her. Kenny could have picked those beautiful eyes out in a line-up, no matter her age.

Kenny stared at the picture for a little while. When he and Menette first started dating, she told him she didn’t have a family. Any time he pressed for more details, she’d clam up and change the subject. He finally stopped asking and just accepted the love she offered him, grateful that there was no one else that he needed to share her with. Now, staring at the people who were obviously her family, he felt dumb, selfish, and confused all at the same time. Why, in all the years they were together, had she never once made an effort to reach out to them, talk to them, or see them?

After a long while, Kenny finally put the picture aside and turned his attention to the envelopes. He picked up one and opened it, using the key to break the tape’s seal. Out slid some old black and whites. He flipped through numerous pictures of people

that he didn't recognize. They looked like they were taken around the same time as Mennette's family photo. A few had Mennette in them. There was also an old newspaper clipping; it was a picture of a burned down house. The clipping showed a side-by-side of the house's before and after. But there was no article attached.

Kenny grabbed the framed photo and compared it to the newspaper picture. There wasn't enough of the house showing in Mennette's family photo to tell if it was the same as the one in the newspaper. Plus, the family photo was in color while the newspaper was in black and white. Whose house was that? What happened? Why would someone save the picture but not the article? And why was Mennette guarding all this stuff in a safe deposit box like it was an ancient Chinese secret? Yet again, more questions arose than were answered.

He put the first envelope aside and carefully opened the next one. More pictures, some in color. It was a series of snapshots of Mennette developing from a little girl into a teenager. Kenny had never seen this side of his wife. Now that he really thought of it, he knew absolutely nothing about Mennette's life before he first laid eyes on her on campus. It instantly dawned on him that she purposely wanted it that way.

Kenny sighed out loud, placed the pictures back in their envelope, then set them aside. He was getting nowhere. Besides a young Mennette, he didn't know any of the other people in those pictures. Kenny picked up the last envelope and realized that this one was secured by much more tape than the other two. The tape was wrapped around it numerous times to ensure its contents were hard to get to. He had to buzz for Candace and asked her for a pair of scissors. She supplied them and slinked back out of the room. Kenny cut along the edges of the envelope carefully so he wouldn't damage the contents inside.

Once opened, he tipped the envelope over. A few black and white 8x10 photos fell out. He sifted through the pictures. They were semi-nude and nude photos of a woman and man in different

sexual positions. Some of them looked like they could have been stills from a porno flick. Shocked, Kenny carefully looked over the images.

Even though the pictures weren't in color, he could tell the two people were Black. One image was of them in a steamy position; it showed the man's back and the woman's aroused breasts as he gave her pleasure down below. Her head was tilted back, chin pointed up, so her face wasn't visible. In another one, her back was to the camera. She was topless and had no panties on. She was straddled on top of the man's midsection, with her hands on either side of his shoulders on the bed. She looked like she was riding him cowgirl style. The next picture showed the man's face clearly. He was nude. His eyes were closed and a happy, eager smile was plastered on his face as she pleased him, presumably with her mouth. Again, only the back of her head was seen. Kenny wondered if that was on purpose.

In all the photos, the woman wore a long, curly wig. Mennette wore enough of those for Halloween's past for him to know. Because the photo was in black and white, he couldn't tell exactly what color the wig was. It wasn't dark enough to be black, but it wasn't light enough to be blond. Maybe a honey brown or a red? Kenny concluded it was most likely a red wig.

He looked closely at the man's face and frowned. Something about him felt familiar. But since the guy's eyes were closed in the one clear picture of his face, Kenny couldn't tell who it was. He looked back through the pictures and focused on the woman. It wasn't Mennette. He knew her body with his eyes closed. Eyes open, he knew the shape of her chin, the slope of her shoulders, plus every mark, dip and bump on her front and her back. That wasn't Mennette's body in those racy pictures.

Kenny kept flipping through the pictures again and again, trying to make sense of it all. Why would Mennette have nudes of this couple? Why was it wrapped up so securely? Nothing he uncovered in this bank made any sense: not the secret money, not

the secret pictures of her childhood, and certainly not the strange nudes. Furious and confused, he pounded a fist on the desk, making the contents jump out of place. He rubbed his temples. How much more of this could he take before he exploded?

It was getting more and more difficult for him to keep this information to himself. Every time he discovered something new, he would go home and ask her about it and demand to know if she remembered anything yet. The rest of the time, he avoided her or gave her the silent treatment. He could tell that he was stressing her out, but he was beginning to feel like he was up against a rock and a hard place.

He raked through the nude pictures again, trying with all his might to recognize this couple, but kept coming up empty. Was this how Menette felt, trying to remember anything before the accident? The walls of the tiny room felt like they were closing in. He had to get out of there.

Kenny pushed the buzzer to call for Candace again. He jumped when he heard her voice behind him.

"All done, Mr. Young?"

"Yes, thank you so much for your help."

Candace stepped in, closing the door most of the way. She moved closer to him, bent down towards his ear and almost whispered in it.

"Do you also need to gain access to this account? I noticed that you and your wife have another joint account with us."

Kenny's eyes widened. "You can do that? Add me to this account?"

"Not exactly. The person who opened the account is the only one who can legally add you. But Brother told me that your wife suffered a brain injury and has total memory loss. Is that correct?"

Kenny nodded in agreement.

"Well, I've seen cases here before when someone was basically unable to make decisions for themselves, a conservator was appointed. Then, they got access to the person's account legally. Since

your wife is mentally incapacitated, you can be appointed as her conservator.”

Kenny’s eyes opened wide in shock. He’d never heard of that before. The thought of having access to the money got him excited. Underneath all the mysteries he was uncovering about Mennette, he was genuinely worried about money. Even if he was working full time now, he couldn’t pay all the bills by himself. It would only be a matter of weeks before their house was foreclosed on and their cars got repossessed. This was the best news he’d received since the accident... hell, in his life! Access to half a million dollars? Yes, please!

“Really? That would be a God-send!” Kenny exclaimed out loud. “What do I need to do?”

Candace smiled and straightened up. “I took the liberty of gathering the information for you here.” She handed him a manilla folder she’d been holding behind her back, still speaking low. “You’ll need to file a petition with the courts. They’ll need proof of her medical condition. If you file for emergency conservatorship, they should complete the process in about one to two weeks. I don’t see why they wouldn’t approve you. Once you have that documentation from the court, bring it back to me on a day when I’m the only manager on duty and I’ll get you on the account.”

This was the first real ray of hope Kenny experienced since the whole ordeal began. He beamed a bright smile at Candace. He stood up, gave her a grateful hug, and quickly released her.

“I could kiss you right now! Thank you so much!”

“No need, Mr. Young!” Candace laughed. “But... you can tell Brother to give me a call.” She winked at Kenny before leading him out.

When Kenny made it back home, it was only 11:30 AM. He and Mennette moved carefully around each other. He knew questioning her wouldn’t reveal anything so he didn’t bother. Besides, she hadn’t gotten over the mall and beach incident. She was still in the funk she had slipped into Sunday night. That was fine. It was

best they didn't engage in any conversation because he was a time bomb ready to explode. Afraid he might put his hands on her, he purposely hid away in his office while she planted herself on the living room couch. He used the time to find the correct government site to download and fill out the necessary paperwork to file for the conservatorship. He also looked up hotels in or near Greenwood, South Carolina.

Later on, Kenny made dinner. He fixed a plate for Mennette and left it in the microwave. She had moved from the couch up to their bedroom to watch TV there. Kenny contemplated taking her spot but returned to his office instead. He leaned back in his chair and swiveled around to look out of the window. Tree shadows and the late afternoon sun dancing between the leaves greeted him.

So much had happened since the night of her accident. November 18th was the day his world flipped upside down. The last two weeks alone were almost unbelievable; they felt like they were straight out of a movie. Kenny could barely decipher what was real and what was not.

He loved Mennette but at that moment, he didn't know how he felt about his wife. He hated to be played, especially by someone that he loved and he thought loved him. The only thing he could think was maybe she was having an affair and that's how she got the money. That thought enraged him so he tried pushing it out of his mind each time it entered. He needed to stay focused. He needed to get to South Carolina and get some real answers.

Kenny called Brother. He asked if he could get his girl to put him on a flight the following evening. He also asked if Brother would come over in the morning and stay with Mennette for a few days. Mennette was in a mood and wasn't likely to try and escape again, but Kenny couldn't be too sure. Plus, she needed to get to her meeting on Saturday.

Brother agreed. "What's your plan? Just show up in South Carolina and do what?"

Kenny didn't really have an answer for Brother. "Yep. I don't

know what else to do. But I know doing nothing is not an option.”

Brother hung up to call his girl and called Kenny back 20 minutes later with the flight confirmation number. They talked over their plan. Once Brother got there in the morning, Kenny would take an Uber to the courthouse so he could file the conservatorship paperwork. Then, he would take BART to San Francisco International Airport to avoid the massive East Bay traffic. The arrangement was ideal because it ensured that Brother didn’t have to leave Mennette or be caught driving without his license. They were lucky he wasn’t stopped while getting Mennette’s car back home from the mall on Sunday.

Once they hung up, Kenny hopped on his computer and returned to a web page that was already open on his screen: Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott in Greenwood, South Carolina. He contemplated making a reservation for Thursday through Sunday. He felt four nights should give him enough time to make progress.

Kenny hated that he was using his emergency credit cards, but in his mind, this was an emergency. It had an \$8,500 limit that was now down to \$5,500. He’d put a mortgage payment on it in November. Then he started using it to pay the bills Mennette used to pay since she stopped contributing once she had the accident.

Kenny paused and thought. That damned bank account must have been the way she was still paying household bills for months while hiding the fact she had lost her job.

“Ain’t that a bitch.” Kenny mumbled under his breath. After he handled business with the court in the morning and had access to Mennette’s account in approximately two weeks, he wouldn’t have to worry about what he was charging on the card today. He’d actually be able to pay the whole balance off before the next due date. Kenny hit confirm on the screen and booked his hotel room

Chapter 21

KENNY

NOVEMBER 18, 2018

Kenny walked into the house and headed straight into the kitchen, dropping his keys on the counter. It had been a long day. He was hungry and tired. But the thought of satisfying either of those needs instantly vanished as he heard Mennette stomping down the stairs. He turned and saw she had a pink duffle bag in one hand and the crumpled divorce papers in the other. Just over her shoulder he now noticed another suitcase with wheels parked by the door.

Earlier, before work, she had left the papers waiting for him on the table. His mood immediately soured. He violently crumbled them in his fist and tossed them toward the trash can. He left them on the floor when he missed the shot.

"She's crazy if she thinks I'm signing this shit," he thought to himself as he made his way out the door to his car. He drove to work in a foul mood which set the tone for the rest of the day.

Now, here she was, parking her bags at the door with one hand and holding the papers she had smoothed out to the best of her ability in the other.

"What the hell is this?" Mennette spat at him, shaking the papers at him. She took the other hand off her luggage handle and planted it on her hip.

"You tell me," Kenny retorted smartly. If it was a fight she want-

ed tonight, it was a fight she was gonna get, especially after his shitty day that started with her nonsense. He didn't mind getting down to the root cause of it all and working out his frustration. Kenny assumed they would argue, which they normally did lately, and finish it upstairs.

"We talked about this, Kenny. You said you would sign the papers." She walked into the kitchen and slammed them down on the counter next to his keys.

"No Mennette. YOU talked about it." He pointed to her. "I didn't say I was signing a damn thing. And I don't wanna hear no more bullshit about it."

In a flash, Mennette closed the gap between them and gripped his arm. Kenny frowned. He'd never hit her nor any woman for that matter. But she was getting dangerously close to getting a good shaking.

"I need you to sign these now," Mennette demanded.

"Let go of my arm!" Kenny hissed through gritted teeth.

She snatched her hand away, eyes blazing. "I can't take this anymore, Kenny! I'm not happy." Mennette's arms flailed dramatically all over the place.

"There you go with that 'I' shit again," Kenny huffed. "WE supposed to be in this marriage together."

"This ain't no marriage," she fired back.

Kenny threw his hand up in the air. "How are we ever supposed to move forward, huh?"

"You tell me, Kenny!" Mennette turned and stomped up the stairs. Kenny was right on her heels.

This is moving in the right direction, he thought.

"I have tried and I have tried. But this?" Mennette stopped just outside their bedroom door and wagged a finger back and forth between them. "This isn't working. Did you pay the mortgage yet?"

Kenny stopped short on the top step, hurt she would throw that in his face. One mistake. Last month, he took the mortgage money to buy into what was supposed to be a sure investment that would

triple his money in 30 days. But the only person whose money tripled was the scam artist to whom he gave his hard-earned cash. It was one of Brother's friends touting some hair-brained, get-rich nonsense. When it was time to see a return so he could pay the bills, dude was nowhere to be found. Kenny regretted the whole situation. He'd been working overtime for the last two weeks to try and play catch up.

"Just what I thought!" Mennette nodded in disgust when Kenny didn't respond. "So I guess it's up to me to save us? That little pyramid scam thingie with Brother didn't work out and here comes good-ole Mennette to save the day. Well Kenny, if you'd listen to me sometimes, we'd probably wouldn't be in this position."

"It's because I listened to you that I got involved in that mess! You keep barking about me not making more money, so I tried something and it just didn't work! Damn! You keep yappin 'bout how I lost my ambition! You don't think that shit is stressful?"

"Well, if you had talked to me before you gave that idiot your money, I could have told you not to do it." Mennette folded her arms, then unfolded them, pointing at him. "And you HAVE lost your ambition! When are you going to finish your degree? It's literally been over 20 years, Kenny! Did you know you can do it online now, from the comfort of your couch? You'd TRIPLE your salary if you finish your engineering degree, guaranteed! No scams required!" Mennette's voice kept pitching higher as she punctuated her words with wide, sweeping arm gestures.

"Listen to me..."

"No!" She got close to him and poked a finger right into his chest. "You listen to me! You promised me you'd finish... you promised YOUR MOM!" Mennette knew he wouldn't have a comeback for her sucker punch to his heart.

"At 43 years old, I expected to be in a better position than this! Not still living from paycheck to paycheck. Gosh, Kenny!" She threw her hands up in the air. "We damn near live like we're still in college. I didn't sign up for that. I'll be damned if I live a life of

poverty. Everybody is ahead of us. EVERYBODY!"

And there it was. The rims of his nostril flared as he tried to contain himself. Their circle of friends was small and there was only one couple whose lifestyle was dramatically different from everyone else's. He knew this was about what the Edwards had and what Mennette believed they did not. Quite frankly, Kenny was tired of the same old excuse that Mennette used.

"You're so fucking dramatic! We're nowhere near poverty. I know what this is about. You always been worried about Tamara and what she has. I'm living for US!" Kenny paced away from her, then walked back.

"This is all about you and what you want. But what about what I want, huh?" Kenny got close and gently cupped her folded arms at her bent elbows. "The only thing I want more in this world than you, is to start a family with you." Mennette rolled her eyes, puffed out air, and slipped away from under his touch.

"You just want me chained to a house raising snotty-nosed kids? I've got goals I want to accomplish! I didn't complete my master's degree for nothing!"

"Mennette, I'm not saying you can't work just because we have kids, but damn! We haven't even talked about it in years and we ain't getting no younger!" Mennette sucked her teeth and turned her back.

"Look," Kenny continued with a forceful tone. "You can't say I'm not a man and I don't take care of you. You got a damn roof over your head. You got food to eat. We ain't fancy, but you ain't never wanted for a necessity. But you have the nerve to stand here in your little, what's that... Louboutin's? Those red bottom boots that you didn't think I noticed?"

Kenny walked up to her back and spun her around to face him. He had noticed her newest purchase in the last week; she claimed Tamara bought them for her as a gift.

"Every time you want something, you let Tamara buy it for you! She your man? As hard as I work, you have the nerve to complain?

We s'posed to be in this together, but you letting your best friend get between us. I know what marriage is all about, Mennette," Kenny said, passionately thumping his chest. "Do *you*? Huh? I know that it ain't easy. But you work hard for the ones that you love! You make sacrifices."

"Speak for yourself," she scoffed. "I'm tired of sacrifices. My whole entire life has been a sacrifice! And I'll be damned if I gotta keep living this way. I can do bad by my damn self!"

Kenny took a step back, visibly hurt by her words. She briefly glanced away, like she regretted what she said.

"Kenny, come on." She blew air out of her mouth. "Don't play me. You ain't happy either."

Kenny narrowed his eyes at her. "Speak for yourself!" he spat back at her. "The only thing that makes me unhappy is you complaining about how unhappy you are. I love you, Mennette. You are my whole world. You know that. But I guess that's not enough for you. So if you so damn unhappy, then leave. But I ain't signing no motherfucking papers."

"Fine!" She tried to spin to leave when he grabbed her and pushed her against the wall and tried to lean in for a kiss. "Get off me!" Mennette yelled. She furiously yanked her arm out of his grip and bounded down the stairs. In one swift movement, she grabbed her suitcase and pink bag, then flung the front door open.

Kenny stood frozen for a moment, shocked that she ran out of his attempt at an embrace. Then adrenaline jolted through him. He ran down the stairs and stormed out behind her. Mennette had already hurriedly thrown her suitcase in the trunk and her pink bag in the passenger's side and was slamming the driver's door shut by the time he caught up. Mennette clicked her seatbelt and turned on the ignition. She backed up and out past the driveway by the mailbox. She was about to put it in drive when he ran and jumped in front of the car. Mennette punched the button to let her window down automatically.

"Move, Kenny! Move the hell out of the way!"

He banged his fists on her hood. Mennette's eyes widened in angry surprise. In all their time together, he'd never behaved like this. But then, neither had she.

"Do you love me?" Kenny demanded.

Her eyes changed and softened a bit. The sweat around her temple caused her hair to curl and stick to her forehead.

"This ain't got nothing to do with love, Kenny. And you know it." She shook her head like she was trying to make sure he didn't get to her and make her change her mind... because he could. "You said it earlier... love isn't enough for me." Tears welled up in her eyes but never fell.

"Mennette! You know deep down in your heart that you're wrong!" He yelled. "We can fix this!"

She sighed. One hand was still on the steering wheel, the other poised over the gear. She watched him for a moment, her stare giving him a little hope. The love was there. He could see it. But somehow, over the years, they'd lost their way. She'd given up, but he wasn't willing to. He'd tell anybody that he loved his wife. Even during these impossible times when their relationship was strained, he still believed they could get through it.

"No, we can't. I need more, Kenny, and you know it!" She shifted into drive. "Now move out of the way!"

Repeatedly he banged his fists on her hood. "Get out of the car Mennette!"

"No!" She screeched. "Stop banging on my car!"

"Get out of the damn car NOW!" He insisted. He hit the hood a few more times. His knuckles felt like they were on fire. "Get out of the damn car!"

"NO!" She shook her head defiantly. Her fire, willfulness, and stubborn nature were qualities that initially attracted him to her. Now, they were a thorn in his side.

His jaw twitched. "I'm not playing, Mennette. GET THE HELL OUT OF THE DAMN CAR!"

Lights came on in two nearby homes. Their neighbor to the

right opened his front door. The elderly white man squinted into the darkness at them.

“Kenny? Hey buddy. Everything alright over there?” He asked, tying a knot in his evening robe.

“Yes, Stan.” Kenny waved an assuring hand at Stan. “We were just going into the house.” There were only a handful of Black families in the neighborhood. The last thing he needed was for someone to call the cops so they could throw him in jail. Or worse.

Feeling like the whole neighborhood was watching, Kenny stepped back towards the sidewalk. Mennette immediately sped off into the darkness, careening up the street. Frustrated, Kenny went back into the house. Within a few hours, he would regret his decision not to go after her.

Chapter 22

MENNETTE

NOVEMBER 18, 2018

Kenny stepped back onto the sidewalk. It was now or never.

Mennette slammed her foot on the gas and tore off down the street. That look in Kenny's eyes and his question almost melted her resolve. If she didn't leave now, she never would.

The answer was 'yes.' She did love Kenny. Very much. She also loved his pure love for her. It had come to her at a time in her life when she needed it most. It's why she stayed this long; she wasn't so sure she'd ever find that again. But Mennette had finally come to a place where she admitted that love alone wasn't enough for her anymore.

Mennette rounded the corner at the end of the block. The tears which defiantly refused to fall in Kenny's presence now formed slick trails down her cheeks. Quickly, she swiped them away. She hated what her decision to leave was doing to him. She also hated everything she'd kept from him since the beginning of their relationship.

At the time, she didn't want to taint his image of her or risk him not loving her because she was damaged goods. Nineteen-year-old Mennette thought if she hid her past from him, they could create whatever future they wanted together. Now, 43-year-old Mennette had enough sense to believe that if she had let him into her darkness then, he would have loved her anyway.

She had made her fatal mistake quite literally on the day she met him. And now, here they were, 24 years later...a place where neither could continue to live under the suffocating weight of her deceptions. Kenny had no idea why things were the way they were. Mennette saw no reason to fill him in now. Admitting her every lie and duplicitous act would crush him. Leaving was the only way she could see to fix things and give both of them a chance at a life they both deserved.

"I'm doing this for both of us," Mennette mumbled under her breath to the retreating images of her stagnant life in the rearview mirror. She was still trying to convince herself that this was the right thing to do.

Mennette didn't exactly know where she was headed. She just absentmindedly turned corners that led her away from her old neighborhood. She had packed her bags two weeks ago and had just been waiting to summon the courage to take them somewhere. Maybe she'd go to a hotel for the night. She had more than enough cash on her person to keep her satisfied until she could figure out her next move in the morning.

Mennette rubbed her eyes with her fingers and sighed. She thought about the sight of Kenny as she drove away. She truly loved him. She was really going to miss him. A sadness washed over her. That's when Mennette noticed irritating bright headlights in her rearview mirror, bearing down on her.

She rolled her eyes to the back of her head and blew hot air from her mouth. She made a right at the next corner, hoping they would continue straight and she could get back to her thoughts, but no such luck. They turned right too.

"Dammit!"

Another street was coming up quickly. Mennette took the swift left turn. They remained on her tail.

"What the hell?" Mennette made two more random left turns. The same bright lights swung wildly around the corner, then straightened up again in her rearview mirror.

“Shit!” she gasped as panic gripped her.

They were following her.

The skin on Mennette’s arms prickled. The road widened a little bit and she sped up. The vehicle behind her quickly closed the gap.

Sweat from her palms slicked the 2008 Toyota Camry steering wheel. Mennette gripped it until needle prick pains shot through her forearms. Panic swelled inside of her and a wave of nausea washed over her as she struggled to swallow the sour bile threatening to come up.

Mennette narrowed her eyes and pulled the rear-view mirror down a bit to shield her eyes from the beams which grew larger and brighter as they careened towards her at an alarming speed. She checked her odometer. Sixty-five miles an hour. The long stretch of road ahead of her seemed endless. She knew this neighborhood. It was known for its broken street lights and lengthy, eerie streets. She steadily pressed her red bottom towards the floor, pushing her sore calves to the limit and her car up to 75 mph.

The vehicle behind her immediately closed the gap and got even closer to her rear bumper. She was now able to see that it was a white van following her. Mennette punched it to 82 mph. The van matched her speed and got so close, she was certain they would crash. That’s when she realized they weren’t going to stop. Her heart quickened. She was in real danger.

Mennette looked for a corner to turn but she didn’t want to risk it. If she slowed down to turn, they’d definitely hit her and if she tried to take it at this speed, she’d probably lose control of her car and hit something. Or someone. The street opened up into two lanes so she tried switching. The van switched too, veering down on her at breakneck speed. She pressed harder on the pedal but not in enough time. The van slammed into her.

Horror seized her mind and she locked her arms and legs. The impact snapped her body forward and sent a scream clawing from her throat. A loud, crackling boom echoed in her ears. Her car careened left and right, leaving wild, dark tire streaks snaking on

the road.

The seatbelt locked and jerked her from side to side, then snapped her back into place. The immediate pain took her breath away. She squeezed the steering wheel tighter as it fought back against her wrists. She refused to take her foot off the accelerator. She kept spinning the wheel until she regained control and saddled the car straight on the road.

"What the hell?" she yelled from inside her car. The van sped up, swerved and veered off to the side, rolling up next to her. Its tires screeched and she could smell the rubber on the road. When she turned to look, Mennette's heart almost stopped.

"Oh, SHIT!" Her head whipped around, forcing her eyes back on the road. Her heart pounded hard in her chest and her breath hitched in her throat. She was well aware of what despair he was capable of inflicting.

It was the face of her nightmares.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!" she whined. Terror gripped her as the hair lifted on the back of her neck. His dangerous face had haunted her for too long, stealing her power and making her succumb to a horror she could not escape. Many nights, she could not close her eyes to sleep for fear of him dominating her mind. That same face from her nightmares was now glaring at her through her car window, ready to strike her car again and run her off the road.

Mennette knew him to be a very dangerous man if provoked and she had definitely provoked him. Well aware of what despair he was capable of inflicting, her blood ran cold and made her body tremble. Successful in eluding him for years, he had now caught up to her.

Mennette knew what he was after. Her eyes shot to the pink leopard print bag snuggled in the passenger-side seat. She floored the accelerator, creating some distance between them. Her mouth hung open in shock as her mind raced. How long had he been following her? Had he been staking out her home, hoping she'd leave? Suddenly, she regretted the argument, leaving her house, and ev-

ery angry turn she'd made since then.

Mennette's breathing escalated. She swallowed, coating her dry mouth with her saliva. Darkness hugged every inch of her car. Her deep, crippling fear took her back to her childhood. She was back in South Carolina, small and helpless, with no one to save her. Not even her father.

The van violently crashed into her rear. The force lurched her forward. He caught up to her car and crashed into it again. Mennette lurched forward again but managed to keep control of her Camry. Each hit felt like it was backed by a powerful surge of anger as if to pay her back for her years of evading him.

Even though now he went by a new name, he was the same arrogant asshole as he was when they were kids. He still assumed he could take anything he wanted in this world and get away with it. It seemed to her like time and more money exacerbated that character flaw. Mennette had provoked him way back then and her life was never the same after that. Recently, she'd provoked him again. But this time, the situation and the stakes were much higher.

A realization hit her like a ton of bricks; she was going die tonight.

He slammed the van into her again. This time, the collision sent her tail spinning. She lost control of the car. Immediately, Mennette slammed on the brakes. The car skidded into a tree, then toppled over and slid down a shallow embankment into a small ditch. The airbag deployed. Mennette thought she blacked out for a second because she caught herself opening her eyes. When she did, she could see him standing up on the side of the road. Even from the distance, she could see him looking down at her with a smirk on his face.

Waves of pain rippled through her body and she winced in agony. The salty taste of blood oozed down the back of her throat and instinctively, she swallowed. She felt the cool, sharp pain of an open gash on her forehead where the warm blood splayed thick designs across her face. She opened her mouth to speak, but only

hoarseness came out.

"Please..." she managed to croak. "Please..." Her head throbbed and she couldn't help the burning tears from falling. She took in a deep breath. Her face tightened as pain multiplied throughout her body.

He glared into her eyes with a hatred that she was familiar with from him. He was probably deciding if to leave her for dead or come down and finish the job himself. But maybe, just maybe, there was at least one decent bone in his body and he might have compassion on her.

"Help..." she uttered, her voice barely above a whisper. "Please help me..."

He glared at her inside the crumpled car. Getting dirty was unthinkable. He had an event to go to in less than an hour and wouldn't have time to change. He'd already spent way too much time tonight chasing her down. Because of his event, he almost didn't go to her side of town tonight. But he was glad he did; it was his third time staking out her house and it was, indeed, the charm.

He narrowed his eyes on her and didn't move. His face remained stoic like he didn't understand the words she mouthed from the other side of her closed window, or couldn't see that she obviously needed help.

He walked back to the van, got in, and drove off, leaving her for dead.

Chapter 23

KENNY

Kenny was nervous. Anxiety coursed through him. Somehow, he wasn't sure if he was ready to take this trip and find what he was looking for. If Mennette had been having an affair all these years, he would explode.

He took out his suitcase from their closet and placed it open on the bed. He started filling it with his clothes and toiletries. Mennette would be back soon. Brother had come over early and taken her to get some personal items at Walmart as soon as they opened at 7 AM. But before they returned, Kenny realized that he needed cash on hand so he left the house to go to the nearest ATM. By the time he made it back to the house, Mennette was upstairs sitting on their bed with his suitcase closed. He was puzzled.

"Where's Brother?" Kenny asked as he opened his suitcase and noticed a few of her clothes inside.

"He dropped me off. Said he would be back soon."

He held a pair of her jeans up. "Did you put this in my suitcase?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"Dunno," she shrugged. "It was out so I packed my stuff. I assumed I was going somewhere."

Kenny found this comical. "No," he said, starting to pull her things out. "Actually, I'm leaving."

Her body stiffened.

“How long and where are you going?”

“Ummm... a few days. Business trip,” he half-fibbed. It was business, Kenny justified to himself. Personal business.

Worry etched across her face. “Who will take care of me while you’re gone?”

“Brother will.”

“Brother? I don’t think so!” She shook her head. “I’ll just go with you,” Mennette said matter-of-factly, standing up to fling her jeans back into the suitcase. She closed it and turned to face him with her arms crossed.

“You can’t. You can’t go.”

“Well, I’m not staying here!” she said defiantly. “Not with him. And that’s that.” She walked out of the bedroom and down the staircase and into the front room.

“Whatdya mean not with him?” Kenny followed behind her and stood by the living room couch. He hadn’t expected her to refuse to stay with Brother. Fluffy appeared and Mennette mindlessly picked up the cat and stroked it.

She stopped and turned to face him and said calmly. “I don’t know him.”

“You do know him!” Her reaction was confusing Kenny. “He’s my brother! Your brother-in-law.”

“Well, I don’t trust him.” They stood in the living room, facing off. Fluffy tumbled from Mennette’s arms as she unfurled them and started ticking off points on her fingers.

“For one, I don’t know him. Two, I don’t trust him. And three...” Her voice trailed off and a frown creased in her forehead. “And what is so important about this business trip that I can’t go with you?” Fluffy meowed loudly, as if demanding to be picked up and stroked again.

Kenny couldn’t say that he was going to spy on her and try to dig up a past she’d kept hidden from him for as long as they’ve known each other. She didn’t trust Brother? Humph! That was

rich, because he didn't trust her!

"You can't come with me. That's the end of this discussion. And after your little excursion on Sunday, you obviously can't be here by yourself."

Mennette exhaled and her shoulders slumped, her fight abandoning her. Kenny knew she couldn't argue so he continued.

"Brother is the only one who is available to watch you. And he's the only one I trust so you can trust him too."

"Watch me? I'm not some child! He may be your brother but he is no relation to me." She jammed her thumb in her chest. "He could be some serial killer, rapist, or child molester!" Her voice shrilled.

"Really Mennette? You're being ridiculous and dramatic. You literally just got out of the car with him!"

"And I didn't trust him then either!"

Kenny ran his hand down the back of his neck, his vein throbbing again. This wasn't going as smoothly as he'd envisioned.

"Oh, I don't bite!" A male voice came from the kitchen and Brother appeared in the doorway, a half-eaten biscuit in one hand and a KFC bag in the other. He eased the rest of the biscuit up to his mouth, shoved it in and chewed. "But I have to tell you, that's the first time I ever heard a woman say she didn't want to stay with me." He chuckled, then winked.

Mennette snatched her eyes from Brother to Kenny and gave Kenny an incredulous look.

"Brother." Kenny sighed.

"Huh?"

"Can you give us a minute?"

"Sure. But you outta milk."

"Thanks," Kenny said, exasperated.

Brother turned to go back into the kitchen. "And eggs!" He called from the kitchen.

"Listen." Kenny turned to Mennette. She turned away to gather Fluffy from around her leg and absently stroked the kitty, her back

to Kenny.

"I have to go," he continued. You can't come. It's as simple as that. I wouldn't leave you with someone that I didn't trust. I'm not discussing it anymore."

He left both her and Fluffy brooding while he went upstairs to unpack her clothes and finish packing his things.



Once Kenny finally got out of the house, everything else went smoothly. His courthouse visit to file the conservator paperwork took less than ten minutes. He was on a BART train speeding towards the airport in no time. His flight left around noon and he had one layover. Kenny arrived at Charleston International Airport in the wee hours of the morning so he parked himself in a seat at one of the gates, put his feet atop his carry-on bag, and took a nap until morning when the car rental counters opened.

By 8:30 AM, Kenny was pointing his rental towards Greenwood. Now that all the drama of actually getting there was past him and the open road was ahead, Kenny had time to catch his breath and think. He couldn't believe that he had flown across the country practically on a whim. He needed the 3¹/₂-hour drive to focus his mind and develop a real plan. It was Thursday morning. The last night of his hotel reservation was Sunday the 14th. He only had four days to make something happen.

As he drove up west across Interstate 26 and up Highway 34, he watched the landscape roll past. It was kind of soothing. It was Kenny's first time in South Carolina. Even though it was still winter, lush evergreen trees seemed to march for miles on either side of his car. They mixed in with naked branches that stretched towards the sky, praying for spring. The crisp 45° breeze flowing through his cracked window made him feel optimistic about his decision to make the trip.

By the time he arrived at the Fairfield Inn & Suites by Mar-

riott in Greenwood, it was early afternoon. But the exhaustion of traveling across the country for over 24 hours, plus the time change, came crashing down on him the moment he stepped into the room. Kenny laid down atop the bed, intending to take a quick nap. Instead, he fell into a sweet, deep sleep that lasted several hours. It was after 7 PM when he woke up.

After a quick shower, he dressed in a fresh shirt and jeans. He placed a quick call to check in with Brother. Next, he transferred all of the pictures and clippings into one large envelope, then headed down to the lobby. He wasn't quite sure what he was looking for but he figured he would start wherever the people hung out. The front desk pointed him towards Carolina Tavern, a bar and restaurant across the street. Good thing it was a five-minute walk because Kenny was going to need a good stiff drink or two in order to face what was ahead.

Within a few minutes, Kenny found a bar stool to perch on. A friendly voice greeted him.

"First time in Greenwood?" The bartender smiled at Kenny as he pulled out his money to order a drink. He was an elderly, light-complexioned Black man. Dots of freckles and moles peppered his face. His gapped-tooth smile was welcoming and soothing all at the same time. He was the type that you'd sit down and tell your entire life story to.

"Is it that obvious?" Kenny chuckled, shifting on the barstool.

"Nah! It's just that I know all the regulars." He laughed, wiping the counter down in front of Kenny. "And I saw your California ID when you opened your wallet. Dead giveaway! Now, what can I get cha, eh?"

"Hennessey."

The bartender poured Hennessey into a glass. "Here on business?"

"You can say that. Personal business. Doing some investigating."

"Investigating, eh?" Bartender raised his eyebrows in interest.

“Investigating what?”

Kenny pulled out some of the pictures. “Do you recognize any of these people?”

The older man dipped the towel in a bucket behind the counter before accepting the small stack Kenny handed him. He shuffled through the pictures thoughtfully, then shook his head. He handed the pictures back to Kenny and resumed wiping down the counter.

“What about these? Any of these look familiar?” Kenny pulled out the pictures of the naked couple.

The bartender paused when he saw them, raised his eyebrows at Kenny, then reached for them. He took longer to examine these pictures, but eventually, he handed them back to Kenny.

“Can’t say that I do. Wait... let me see them again?” He shuffled through them slowly again, almost savoring the images.

“Nope,” he said emphatically, once he had his fill. “Nice wig though. I like redheads. Say, man... what exactly you looking for, eh?”

“Trying to put together a mystery.”

“Ya don’t say. A mystery, huh? What kind? Murder?”

“Nah.” Kenny shook his head.

The older man tapped the nude pictures knowingly.

“Infidelity mystery?” he prodded.

Kenny’s jaws tightened.

“Possibly. But for his sake, I hope not.”

“That your girl?” the older man asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Nah.” He took a gulp and chuckled. “Hell nah.”

“Must be some mystery if you traveled all this way.”

Kenny slowly nodded his head. “Does the name V. Turner ring a bell?”

“Nope. Can’t say that it does. You wanna menu?”

That’s when Kenny realized that he hadn’t eaten all day. He took the man up on the offer, getting a burger and fries. The bartender moved away to place the order with the kitchen staff and attend to other patrons.

Kenny finished his meal and sat for a while. He watched people come and go. Whenever someone sat next to him, he would ask them a few questions, and then show them his pictures. He hoped that something would spark some information. But nothing did.

He looked at his wristwatch. It read 7:49 PM. He knew that couldn't be right so he pulled out his phone from his pocket. His iPhone, which had automatically adjusted for his new time zone, displayed 10:49 PM. Kenny decided he'd done what he could for the night. He waved the bartender over to settle his tab.

"Find anything interesting?" the older gentleman asked as he wiped a spot on the bar, then slung the dirty rag over his shoulder while leaning into the counter.

Kenny sighed heavily, "Not a damn thing." He tossed a few bills on the counter. "I'ma call it a night. Keep the change, uh..."

"Lou." He flashed his gaped-tooth smile. "Everybody calls me Lou."

"Thanks Lou. I'll probably see you tomorrow."



The next morning, Kenny's body had adjusted to the time change. He naturally woke up shortly after sunrise. He took his time showering and getting ready. Kenny went downstairs and grabbed a complimentary cup of coffee from the lobby, then returned to his room. It was too early to call back home and check on things so he turned on the local news.

Last night was a bust. So Kenny decided today he'd simply drive around and scour the streets. For what, he wasn't sure, but he had to do something to try and make progress.

Just after 10 AM local time, Kenny pointed his rental toward the mall and stopped random people to show them his pictures. He went into grocery stores. The more he turned up nothing, the more frantic he got. But it was all he could think to do. As the 5 PM hour rolled in, Kenny's stomach roared angrily at him for not

feeding it all day. He had enjoyed the burger from the night before so he headed back towards the hotel and the Carolina Tavern.

Tonight, Kenny chopped it up a little more with Lou as if they were old friends. A burger, fries, and three drinks in, a man came in and sat down next to Kenny. He ordered a brandy. Kenny waited till the man had a few sips in him before casually striking up a conversation. After pleasantries had been exchanged, Kenny pulled out his pictures as well as the news clipping.

"I'm looking for someone," he said. "Do you know a V. Turner?"

The man looked at Kenny like he was crazy, then turned his head. "Nah man."

Kenny put the pictures back into his envelope and ate some of the complementary dry peanuts sitting on the bar. The stranger next to him finished his drink with a gulp, slipped a \$20 bill under the glass and left.

Kenny tapped his fingers to the beat of the music playing and watched a young, Black couple giggling at each other on the opposite end of the bar. While he watched, he couldn't help but think about Mennette. As mad as he was with her, he had to admit that he missed her. He had checked in with Brother a few hours earlier but didn't ask to speak with Mennette.

"Just what do you plan to do once you find this V. Turner person?" Lou asked, pulling Kenny back to the here and now.

Kenny shook his head. "Truthfully man, I don't really know. Get some answers I guess?" Suddenly Kenny felt foolish for flying by the seat of his pants. He'd traveled to South Carolina and was floundering without a plan. And he was getting nowhere fast.

"Hey," Lou said, noticing the sudden change in Kenny's spirit. "Don't beat yourself up. Whoever your woman is, she's lucky to have a man who cares enough about her to go through all what you're doing."

"Aaarrgh!" Kenny growled his frustration. He scrubbed his palms down his face. "I don't know what I'm doing here, Lou. Chasing ghosts it feels like." Kenny took a gulp of his drink and put

up one finger. "One moment. All it takes is one moment and your whole life changes. If I could take that one moment back..." Kenny shook his head, wishing he could erase that November night from existence. "...I wouldn't be sitting here right now with you, feeling like this."

He drained his glass, slammed it on the bar top and looked up at Lou. The bartender ducked his head and slipped away to take someone else's order. After a few minutes, Kenny was antsy. He pulled out a \$20 bill, two tens, slipped them under his glass, and headed back out into the night to resume his mission.

He walked the chilly night streets of Greenwood around the hotel, catching the people who came in and out of the various shops and restaurants. He asked the same question and showed the same pictures. Many people looked at him like he was crazy. A few times, he thought he might end up getting robbed, but he wasn't too worried. He had his little black "friend" tucked in his waistband. Brother had connected him with a local "friend of a friend" who let him borrow the piece since he couldn't get on an airplane with it.

On Saturday morning, Kenny was optimistic. Today, he planned to hit the nearby mall. More people would be out and about. There had to be one person who could point him in the right direction. But when 1 PM rolled around and his luck hadn't changed, Kenny got desperate. He drove over to Walmart, Publix, and Lowes, standing outside like he was one of those Salvation Army people you see around the holidays. But his efforts yielded the same results. Nothing.

Sunday morning, Kenny didn't even bother rushing out of bed. He knew how to accept defeat. It was his fault for flying in here, hot-headed without a plan. He watched TV all morning. Then he took a lazy drive in the afternoon. He figured he'd at least try to make something of his last night in the hotel before jumping on the plane the next morning to trek back home. By the time it got dark, Kenny steered the car towards the Carolina Tavern and his

new friend, Lou, one last time.

"Hey Mr. Investigator!" Lou smiled as he walked in and took a seat. "Made it in time for happy hour, eh? Any luck?"

"Nah. I'm just gonna head my Black ass back to Cali. I was hoping to find something. Came out here on a wing and a prayer, but that clearly didn't work."

"I hate that you didn't get the answers to your infidelity mystery." He wiped the same spot on the counter that he wiped each night. "First round is on me tonight."

"Thanks Lou!" Kenny smiled genuinely for the first time in several days. "Hey! I think I'll try your famous ribs tonight!"

As he waited for his order, a man came in and sat behind him. After he got his drink, they accidentally turned at the same time and their eyes met. Kenny raised his glass in greeting and the man returned the salute. Kenny felt the urge to take out his pictures and ask him his usual questions but immediately decided against it. He took a swig from his glass. On the other hand, he hadn't asked a single soul his questions all day so he decided he had nothing to lose. Kenny took one more gulp for courage.

"Hey man," Kenny started. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but I'm looking for someone. Do you know a V. Turner? Lives here in Greenwood?"

"Nah." The man said. He turned away and focused on his drink and snacking on the peanuts.

"You mind looking at some photos real quick? It's my last night here and I'm really desperate to find this person."

The guy sighed. "Sure."

In a flash, Kenny pulled the folded envelope from his jacket pocket and slid the photos and news clipping toward the man. The stranger flipped through them quickly, raising an eyebrow at the racy images. "Nah." He said again and slid them back to Kenny.

Kenny gathered everything back into the envelope.

Without looking at Kenny, the man raised his glass to his lips and said, "I've seen that burned-down house, though."

Kenny's heart stopped and all sound in the bar disappeared.

"You've seen that house?" Kenny repeated slowly, making sure he heard correctly.

"Yeah. Everyone who's from here knows about that place. So you must not be from here." The stranger eyed Kenny suspiciously for a moment. He decided that the eager look frozen on Kenny's face wasn't malicious. "It's over there on Townes Street," he finally offered.

Kenny whipped out the envelope again and scrambled for a pen.

"You say you've seen it?" Kenny blankly repeated, ignoring that it sounded dumb to his own ears. "On what street again?"

"Townes."

"Do you know who lived in it?"

"Nah," the man said curtly. He immediately swallowed the rest of his drink in a gulp and quickly waved Lou over. Lou had Kenny's rib platter in his hand and placed it on the bar. The man slapped a few bills in Lou's hand and left.

Kenny looked at Lou with his mouth gaping.

"I know we known for our ribs, but you ain't even tasted one yet!" Lou joked at the astonishment frozen on Kenny's face.

"I finally got a break in my case!" Kenny exclaimed.

"Well, good for you!"

"Do you know where Townes Street is?"

"Yeah, it's in the older part of the city. It ain't exactly a tourist attraction. What you want with over there?"

Kenny ignored his question and pressed. "Can you tell me how to get there?" Lou obliged and Kenny scribbled the directions on the back of the envelope. He scarfed down his rib platter, paid and left.

In less than 20 minutes, Kenny arrived at Townes Street. He drove slowly up and down the street, news clipping in hand, peering into the dark. Not every street had working lights. After a few blocks in, he found an empty lot. He saw the shadow of a house

offset from the street. Kenny parked, got out of the car and walked across the street. In the dim light of the moon and a distant street lamp, the outline of the burnt house seemed the same. He'd found it! Going home tomorrow morning was immediately out of the question.

Kenny jumped back into the rental and drove a few houses down to a house that stood underneath a working street lamp. He took down the address numbers from the mailbox so that he had a reference point. Then, he punched his hotel into the GPS. When he arrived, he went to the front desk and requested to extend his stay for two more nights. He'd deal with extending the car rental and changing his standby ticket with Brother's friend in the morning. With the first piece of good news on his entire South Carolina trip, Kenny slept well.

Kenny woke up in the best mood he'd ever been on a Monday morning. It was a marked difference from the day before. After a hot shower and a strong cup of coffee, he headed towards the address he took down the night before and easily found the abandoned lot. Kenny parked and got out of the car to walk around the property.

There had definitely been a fire there. Many, many years ago. The frame had been demolished. An empty lot was all that was left. Upon closer investigation, he could see old, charred wood chips embedded in the ground. The eerie feel of something terrible filled the air.

After lingering, Kenny walked over to the house next door and knocked. A gangly older man with overhauled answered. He had a completely gray beard and a bald head.

"Can I help you?"

"Hi. I was wondering if you could tell me what happened next door?"

"Excuse me?"

"My name is Kenny. I found this news clipping in my wife's belongings and I'm trying to figure out a mystery. I came here from

out of state to try to get some answers. Does the name V. Turner sound familiar?"

The man narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "You a reporter?"

Puzzled, Kenny stammered. "A reporter? No. I'm just a husband trying to figure out some things. Does the name Mennette sound familiar?"

The man took a step back, hiding a little behind his door. "Where you say you from?"

"California."

"Mr..."

"Kenny. Kenny Young."

"Mr. Kenny Young. Anything that happened over there, happened a long time ago and I don't know nothing about what you talkin'."

"I just have a few questions..."

"Like I said, I don't know nothing."

Kenny paused for a moment. "Did you live here when the fire happened?"

The man rubbed his arm and pulled down his sleeves, but not before Kenny caught a glimpse of burn marks.

"Mr. Kenny Young, I'm gonna count to five. And I need yo ass off my porch by the time I get to that number."

"Yes or no, man. Were you living here? That's all I want to know. I'm just trying to get..." The unmistakable sound of a gun cocking stopped Kenny mid-sentence. The deafening click resonated in his ears and he found himself looking down the barrel of a shotgun, pointing at his chest.

"That girl didn't deserve what they did to her. Y'all keep coming 'round here. Let her have some peace."

"Whoa..." Kenny held up his hands in surrender. "Sir?" Confusion laced Kenny's voice. "I'm just here to get some information."

"Only thing you gonna get from me is some bullets in your ass!" He brought the shotgun up in line with Kenny's face. "Now get off my property before I call the po-leese."

Frustrated, Kenny backed away. He had clearly struck a nerve with the old man. But the shotgun put an end to all questions. Kenny got back in his car and sulked back to the hotel, analyzing how the exchange went wrong. The man must have known something. He had burn marks. He had a weird reaction when he heard Mennette's name. He'd said, 'That girl didn't deserve what they did to her.' Did he mean Mennette? Who was "they," and what did "they" do?

Kenny wished he could go home that instant. He felt spent by this trip. Here he was, all the way across the country, trying to find out what? For all he knew, Mennette could have been having an affair right under his nose in Antioch. But no! He had to be the fool who ran his ass all the way to South Carolina!

"Don't know nobody here," he mumbled to himself, slamming the door behind him. It was still early in the day but he didn't feel motivated to do anything but try to figure out how quickly he could get out of Dodge. He took a long, hot shower. He put on a fresh pair of jeans and a t-shirt and settled onto the bed to watch TV.

At noon, it was finally a decent time to call California. He got out of bed and called Brother so he could check on Mennette. Maybe he should just wait until she regained her memory. At his current rate, he was going to make himself crazy.

"How is she doing?" Kenny asked once Brother was on the line.

"Fine. Been painting, mostly. Sleeping a lot. Walking around, quiet. Eyeing me suspiciously. You got a butcher knife missing from your collection." He laughed. "She has it hidden under her pillow. She asked about you a few times. Wants to know when you coming back."

"Uhhmm, hmmm."

"Any luck?"

"It's been strange, man. First I was striking out. Then I finally caught a break today but that didn't work out. Honestly, I am ready to come home now. Besides, I've gotta talk to my boss. He's been

holding on as long as he can for my job. I think maybe it's time for me to give this up."

"You sound tired brother. Don't make yourself sick over this."

"Yeah, you're right. I been here five damn days and I keep coming up against dead ends. I guess it's time to throw in the towel. Just wait til she gets her memory back like everybody keep telling me."

"Did Dr. Cardoza say she would ever get it back?"

"No. Maybe. Maybe not. Says brain injuries are complicated. But this shit here, what I'm doing, is starting to wear me out." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Alright bro. Let me know what other hookups you need. "

"If you can call your shortie and have her get me a seat for tomorrow, any time after 10 AM is cool."

"Bet. Want me to pick you up from the airport?"

"Nah," Kenny replied. "I don't want you to press your luck more than you've been doing. I'll take BART. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow."

Kenny laid back down on the bed and turned the TV on. His thoughts clashed with the volume of the talking heads on the screen that helped him drift off to sleep. A solid, persistent knock pulled him out of what felt like several hours of sleep. But the sun was still bright. In reality, he'd only been asleep for 45 minutes.

"No housekeeping right now, thanks!" His eyes fixated on a crack in the ceiling that ran from one side of the tiny room to the next.

Another knock. This time, more insistent.

"I said I'm good!" He yelled. The knock persisted. Then he heard some shuffling by the door.

"Who is it?"

No answer. An uneasy feeling swept over him. Kenny popped up, grabbed his borrowed gun and eased to the door. He waited, then gripped the doorknob tightly and slowly turned it.

No one.

He stepped out and looked up and down the empty hallway. As

he stepped back in, he heard the crinkle of paper under his foot. It was a handwritten note. He picked it up still looking around to see signs of who might have left it. Kenny unfolded the note. In black ink, large letters spelled out: "V. Turner moved to Abbeville."

Kenny sprang into action, running down the hallway, then around the corner. But no one was there. He ran down the stairs and out into the parking lot, hoping to see someone getting into their car. But nothing. He ran back inside to the front desk.

"Did you see anyone just leave here?"

The clerk's eyes widened in fear. She stared at the gun in Kenny's hand. She slowly shook her head. "I don't have any money on the premises."

That's when Kenny realized he was still gripping it and how crazy and scary he must seem.

"Oh my bad, I'm sorry! I'm not going to rob you. I'm actually checking out." He quickly checked the safety and tucked the gun into the waistband of his jeans and pulled his t-shirt over it. He clearly needed to leave immediately before anyone could think about calling the police. He didn't exactly have a plan, but that was nothing new.

"Can you tell me how long it would take me to drive to Abbeville?"

"About 20 minutes," the clerk said hurriedly.

Kenny pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and presented his credit card to pay for his stay.

"I just need a minute to grab my things and I'll bring the room key right back." Kenny rushed to the elevator and the clerk seemed relieved.

Finally some progress on V. Turner! He didn't have much stuff so packing took all of two minutes. He returned downstairs, slipped the room key to the clerk and rushed out to the parking lot to jump in his rental and make a few calls.

First, he called Matt to start the paperwork for an extension of his FMLA. Kenny assured Matt that he was okay with not getting

paid while he figured some things out but that he did want his job when he was done. Next, he called Brother to tell him to scratch his last request because he was going to be staying on longer. Finally, he typed in his next destination city into his GPS. He headed west on Highway 72 and 20 minutes later was in the heart of Abbeville, South Carolina.

Chapter 24

BROTHER

I ain't no dumb motherfucka. Far from naïve. So, all this bullshit that got Kenny running around the globe like he crazy ain't sitting right with me. He been gone almost a week now, trying to figure out a mystery that ain't no damn mystery if you ask me. I never did trust or like Mennette. She wasn't never right for my brother. I know Kenny. I know him like I know myself. And I know me pretty damn good!

Now she got this fool flying all over the damn globe chasing a ghost. He ain't gon' find nothing. Cause whatever dirt she been doing has been done right here in the Bay. And I'd hate for him to spin his wheels, come back here and find out that she sleeping with some fool in Cali.

I've been watching her closely. Each day, I make her some breakfast, lunch, and dinner and leave it in the microwave. Then I go about my business. We walk on eggshells: she watching me and I'm watching her. It's all kinda comical to me cause she don't have me fooled like she got Kenny. Walking around here like she's lost, hair all over the place, acting like she don't remember shit.

I on-know. I'm suspicious like a mutha. How somebody forget their whole life? I mean their whole, entire God-damned life? Huh? I know what the doctor said trauma to the head and all, but how? How do you forget everything about you? I ain't really buying it. But I just gotta be here for my brother. Whatever he need

me to do, I'ma go all out to help. Only thing I can do is be there for him.

I been protecting Kenny all his life. Back in the day, all we had was each other and Moms. And when she was gone, it was just us. For a while, I was out there on my own, all by myself. Learned a lot about Brother. That was when me and Kenny wasn't talking. Three years. Three long years. And I'll tell you, those were the longest three years of my life!

After my mother's funeral I couldn't even look at Kenny without wanting to kill him. I mean fo' real kill him. And I didn't like feeling that way about my brother. I loved my mother more than anything I have ever loved in life. When she died, it was too much for me to handle. I blamed Kenny for her death for so long. In my mind, he gave her permission to die, and she accepted. I literally went crazy. I started staying out in the streets. Drowning my pain with countless nights of lost memories. I jumped from bed to bed. Homeless is what I was. I became a real womanizer.

I had a woman for every day of the week. And had their names to match. Mondays at Marquisha's. Tuesdays at Tiffany's. Wednesday was with Wanda. Thursdays was Teresa's. Fridays, Freida. Saturdays, Sonya, and Sunday I actually rested. Usually out at a park in the grass where I slept out in the sunshine. It really went like that. That's the only way I knew where I was going every day. I was a real ass.

Ended up depressed. I just couldn't pull it together. I had tried drugs and got strung out. One night I was about to get high. Had just scored and was on my way to smoke. None of that hard shit like crack or heroin. But I did indulge in pills and hallucinogens. Back then, I was just always high, trying to dull the pain I felt on a daily.

One night, right when I was about to light up, I saw Mama. Now, I don't know if it was a dream or a hallucination. But it couldn't be, cuz I hadn't even lit up yet. And I knew it was a Wednesday because I was at Wanda's house. She'd just cooked spaghetti with

these big fat meatballs. I remember laughing at the meatballs, telling her that I had some big meatballs for her to lick on later. It was my reward for the meal. When you have control of what's between your legs, and I got total control, it ain't hard to find a woman that will let you sleep and eat when you want.

But like I said, I saw Mama. She was sitting right across from me. On the chair at Wanda's house. Wanda was in the kitchen, so I couldn't ask her if she was seeing what I was seeing. I wanted to reach out and touch my Mama, but if I'm being honest, I was scared. Scared as shit. The last time I saw Mama was at her funeral and I could barely make my way up to the casket. As a matter of fact, I held back most of the service cause I just couldn't bear to see her like that. All shriveled up by that cancer. Small and weak. That wasn't my Mama. When I was younger, she was bigger than life: stronger. I had watched her wither away enough in that hospital.

On that Wednesday, I wanted to reach out and touch my Mama sitting in that chair at Wanda's, but I couldn't. She just sat there wearing her favorite green sweater and a brown skirt that she used to work a lot in. Her hands crossed in her lap. But what struck me... what got my heart pounding was that my mother had this really sad look on her face. Like the weight of the world was on her shoulders. Not that glow and smile that most people associate with their deceased loved ones that come to visit them from the beyond. No. She had the saddest look on her face that I'd ever seen. I was trembling. I could tell because I was still trying to light up and the damn lighter was shaking, the flame flickering out of control.

I did try to speak to her, though. I said, "Mama, what's wrong?" But she didn't move. Just blinked with that scary-ass sad look on her face. "Mama, you ok?" Still didn't move. I swallowed so hard, I just knew Wanda heard the spit go down my throat from the kitchen. I wanted to yell her name and have her come rushing in the front room to tell me that she saw my Mama sitting there, plain as day, just like I did. But I couldn't call Wanda. I couldn't move. But I managed to speak again. "Mama? What's wrong?"

That's when a single tear slid down her face. Scared the hell out of me. Made me want to toss that shit right out the window. I almost shit my pants. Then I asked her, "Is it me?" And she slowly nodded. Then I said, "Is it Kenny?" And she nodded again, real slow and spooky-like. I said, "Mama! What am I supposed to do?" She didn't answer. And then, just like that, she was gone.

Wanda walked in, saw me looking crazy and I was like, "You see someone in that chair?" She looked at me and whined. "You hit that weed already without me? You was supposed to wait!"

I shushed her. "Did you see that?" I repeated.

"See what?" She asked, eyeing me. I could tell that she was thinking about using that bat she had hidden behind her front door.

"In that chair? What you see?"

"Nothing."

"No lady?"

"Nah. Brother, what's wrong with you? You get ahold to some bad stuff? Only thing I saw was that gust of wind that just blew through here and knocked all them cups off the table."

I remember the look on Mama's face. I hadn't talked to Kenny in three years. I knew what that sad look was. She woulda never approved of us being apart. She raised us to always have each other's backs. She used to tell us that we were all we had in this world and that after she was gone, we had to take care of each other.

I had failed Mama. I'd failed her more than I could imagine and it hurt almost as much as losing her. I asked Wanda to take me to Mountain Vista Rehab Center that night. Next, I checked myself into a 30-day rehab center. And when I left, I vowed to never touch the stuff again. I put that on my Mama. Then I got some training. They offered a program to teach you how to use your hands, construction work, so I can make my own money and get my own place instead of living off these women.

I grew up. A lot. I finally manned up. And that's when I called Kenny. After three years of being apart, I called my brother and

told him that I needed him in my life. And we've been inseparable ever since. Occasionally, I wish that I could see that vision again of my mother, but this time with a smile on her face. She's never visited me again. So, I figured that I'd done good. And I'd done what I was supposed to do.

Chapter 25

KENNY

*A*bbeyville was a small town with beautiful historical buildings. Kenny slowly drove through the square, looking at the people and the business. If he handled things properly, he might not need to stay overnight at a hotel. His plan was to drive back to the airport and Charleston and be available to hop on the first plane possible. He saw a Chevron station up ahead and pulled in to get some snacks.

“You not from ’round here are you?” The chipper ghetto-fabulous cashier asked as he moved towards the sour cream and onion potato chips.

Did he really stick out that badly?

“Naw,” Kenny acknowledged quickly. “I’m not from here. I’m visiting.”

“Well, hello, ‘Visiting,’ I’m Gina,” she said, with a cheeky grin. She eyed Kenny like he was a plate of neckbones. “Came out for the wine tastings?” she asked in a flirty tone. Gina was eyeing him but pretended to be busy filing and inspecting her extra long and extra colorful acrylic nails.

“Nah. Here on business,” Kenny said curtly as he dumped his snacks on the counter so he could reach for his wallet. “I’m looking for someone.”

“You found her!” Gina giggled, throwing her arms wide open. “I’m right here in front of you!”

"No. I'm looking for a man."

Gina's face fell and she rolled her eyes. "You're in the wrong part of town then, sailor. You need to be in the downtown area."

"No, not that!" Kenny was annoyed. "What I mean is, I'm looking for someone who lives in Abbeville."

"If they live here, then I bet ya I know 'em! Shoot." She said pointing the emery board at him.

"Does the name V. Turner sound familiar to you?"

Gina's face sobered. "Are you a reporter?" She eyed him suspiciously.

"No." The old man with the shotgun asked him that too. "Absolutely not!"

"Well, okay then!" Gina brightened back up. "Vee. She's a sweet old lady that lives about three miles from here. She come in here a lot. Always buying big bags of sunflower seeds. Real sweet. She's like your grandmama!"

V. Turner was a lady? She was old? Kenny didn't have time to ponder this new information.

"Does she live alone?" Kenny asked, with flashbacks of the shotgun dancing in his head.

Gina stopped fake filing her nails. Her sparkle dimmed a little again.

"Why you ask that for?" She stared boldly into Kenny's eyes.

"I'm not trying to hurt her or anything. She's a friend of a friend. They wanted me to check on her for them and I just wanted to know what I'm up against." He tried to give her a reassuring smile but could tell from her frown that she wasn't buying it. Her guard was staying up.

"You said you was looking for a man." Gina crossed her arms like she was cross-examining a witness, trying to poke holes in his story.

Kenny sighed. "Forget I said that. I didn't mean it."

"I don't know who she live with," Gina finally said. "I just know she buy a lot of sunflower seeds."

"You say about three miles from here? What did you say the name of the street was again?"

"I didn't."

"Well Miss Lady, I appreciate the information anyway. By the way, I love your hair." He said, speaking of her two-toned blonde and black bob. He needed to butter her up. He never knew when he would have to question her again. "It's sexy."

She smiled at him, exposing a gold tooth that he hadn't noticed until now.

"Really?" Gina asked innocently.

"Sure." He lied. "It's kinda giving me that Cruella de Vil-type vibe."

She blinked for a moment confused, then smiled wide. "Thank you!"

"No problem, beautiful." He watched her blinking increase to a rapid blur. "And thank you for the information. But I guess I have to let my friend know that I couldn't get in touch with their dear Aunt Vee."

"He gon' be mad?" She asked.

"Sad." Kenny pouted, exaggerating his mouth into a clown-like frown.

Gina thought for a moment. "You promise you a friend of a friend?" She asked, pointing the file at him and cocking her head to the side.

Kenny held his left hand up and placed his right one over his heart. "Scout's honor."

Gina hesitated.

"You can trust me." Kenny smiled at her. "I mean, who doesn't trust a scout? Troop 437." He lied.

"I guess..."

"Don't guess. I'm trustworthy. Always in the presence of a beautiful lady."

This time Gina giggled, almost purring. "Well... okay! She lives at 512 Maple Street."

"Thank you so much. And those nails, nice." Kenny winked.

She brought her eyes up from her nails and lowered her voice to a sexy tone. "Thanks. And no problem. Come back and see me before you leave town. I'm single." She batted her eyes.

"Oh really?" Kenny said in mocked surprise. "Surprising. If only I had the time."

Kenny got back to the car quickly, typed the address into his GPS and drove directly to Maple Street. He pulled up about two houses down from the address. This time, he decided not to go in guns blazing because someone might have a bigger gun than he did.

From where he parked, he had a clear view of the rundown shack that was Vee Turner's house. All the houses on the block were old; they looked like they were built in the early 1950s. The neighborhood was quiet. After a while without anything happening, Kenny finally got out of the car.

He ducked into the yard next to Ms. Vee's property and stealthfully approached his target. On her porch sat a rocking chair with a dirty worn down pillow in the seat. A bag of sunflower seeds sat next to the rocker and a newspaper, with a pile of discarded seed hulls, piled up like a tiny tower. He walked up the dirty steps and crouched down to peek through the window. From that angle, he could only get a glimpse of an old worn-down table with two rickety chairs.

Kenny straightened up and felt it was safe enough to knock. Kenny rapped on the door with his knuckles, then stepped back a few steps so that whoever was inside could get a good look at him. He waited. When there was no answer, he rapped harder.

"Hello?"

Kenny called loud enough for someone to hear. He felt for his gun inside his waistband but decided he didn't want to be threatening. He tried the doorknob but it was locked. Then he trailed through the wild grass around to the back of the house. He tried to look through the back window, but since the house sat on a small

hill, the window was too high for him to get a peek.

Kenny went back around to the front and got in his car. He sat for a while like he was on a stakeout. When waiting got boring, he looked up the nearest Walmart and drove a few minutes to the location. He walked around the supercenter to kill time. It gave him time to hatch a plan. He decided to go back and stake out the house until evening. If he turned up nothing, he'd go to the hotel he passed, get some rest, and try again the next day.

When Kenny returned to Vee Turner's house, it was just shy of dinnertime, right when the sun was hanging on to the edge of the earth's horizon. Kenny carefully surveyed the house from his car a few houses away. Lights were on in the house. He kept watching. Eventually, an old woman came out onto the porch with a bag of sunflower seeds and sat in the rocking chair with the dirty worn-down pillow in the seat.

For a short moment, she rocked and ate sunflower seeds, adding the soggy shells on top of the tower of hulls. Then, as if she forgot something, she shuffled with a slight limp to the mailbox at the end of her yard, checked the empty mailbox and resumed her position back in her chair. She rocked slowly and fanned herself with a flap from a cereal box.

Kenny watched her rock and fan for about 15 minutes before he decided it was time to approach. From what he could see, he didn't observe any other threatening movements from within the house. Slowly, he rolled the car up to the side of the dirt road and looked again at the address to make sure it was the right house. He got out, shielding his eyes from the last bit of sun with his hand and smiled at her. She didn't return the gesture.

"Ms. Vee Turner?" he called to her.

She stood, nodded and gestured for him to come, then disappeared into the house. Kenny looked around before following her up the dirt, wooden stairs and into the small kitchen. He watched her motion for him to sit at the table and he did.

"Ms. Turner?" he said again once he entered the house.

"Since I was born. Velma Turner, but everyone calls me Vee. I 'spect you might as well too." Her slow shuffle took longer than he thought needed to get to the table. She flopped down across from him, then grimaced like she had forgotten something.

"It took you long enough to get here. In my day, young folks moved fast. Not like today. Y'all move like y'all ain't got no purpose in life. Coffee?" She asked and attempted to stand. She leaned against the table heaving, slightly wheezing.

"Uh... sure," Kenny said, listening to her labored breaths. Kenny quickly stood up, "Sit," he offered, motioning towards the chair. "I'll get it."

He took a scan of the small, dirty kitchen to get a quick inventory. She dropped into the chair with a heavy thud, like her joints were hurting or her bones were too old to sustain her weight any longer. The hem of her dress rippled with the harsh movement. He turned to look at her, studying her face.

"Coffee's in the left cabinet." She commented, snapping him out of his trance. "I like mine black. Cream and sugar in the drawers if you need them." Ms. Vee scanned what she deemed his fancy name brand clothes. "They ain't no fancy-type store bought. Just some I had left over from the Chevron finna station."

Kenny started the coffee brewing and looked in the cabinets for two clean-looking mugs. Ms. Vee looked over at him and said, "Crazy weather we been having. First, it rain, then it's sunny. Other night, it lightened so hard, thought the devil was beating his wife!" She cackled at her own joke. She swatted the air with her towel and smoothed it out on her knee. "So what you plan on doing 'bout my sit-chew-way-shun Mr...?"

"Young." He said and waited for the pot to fill. "Kenny Young." She paused and looked him up and down cautiously.

"I, uh..." Kenny sat quickly, realizing that he was surprisingly nervous. He'd been wondering about this person for weeks, assuming it was a man Mennette was having an affair with. But she was like someone's sweet but spicy grandma. Yet he had a weird feeling

that meeting her was about to change something in his marriage.

“My name is Kenny Young.”

“Is there an echo in here? You said that already!” She snapped sarcastically, suspicion growing in her eyes. Kenny thought her skin was surprisingly smooth for what he imagined was her 60 or so years. Was she 65? 70? You could never tell with Black people. Just then, the coffee finished brewing. He got back up, filled the mugs and placed one in front of her before he sat back down. Without further words, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his envelope. He sorted till he came to the old black and white picture of Mennette as a child and a recent photo.

“Do you know this woman?”

She squinted, then frowned at the picture. Ms. Vee stood up and shuffled with the pictures to the kitchen counter. She rummaged through the drawers until she pulled out a pair of broken reading glasses. She fumbled, then finally perched them on her nose and narrowed her eyes at the pictures in front of her.

Her eyes widened in shock. She whipped around as fast as her old body would let her. “You ain’t the welfare man!” she declared sternly.

“No ma’am...”

“Who are you?” She said searching the kitchen with her eyes for something sharp.

“Kenny Young, ma’am...”

“You already said that!” she snapped again.

“Ma’am.” Kenny pursed his lips tightly together. This wasn’t going the way Kenny had envisioned it would.

“I thought you was the welfare man. You ain’t here to talk about my food stamps and disability?” Alarm filled her voice and he watched her free hand inch closer to a butcher knife on the counter.

“No ma’am...”

“Well, what you here fo’? I ain’t got no money or nothing worth nothing. Mrs. Jamison next door stuff better than mine. Go rob

her!”

“Ms. Vee, I’m not here to rob you. I’m here about Mennette.”

“Mennette? What choo, a reporter?”

“No ma’am. I found some things in her belongings...”

“Belongings? Lawd! She ain’t dead, is she?”

“No ma’am. She’s alive, but...” His voice trailed off. How could he begin to explain the accident and memory loss? There wasn’t time for that, he quickly decided. This woman clearly knew who Mennette was and he needed to know what she knew.

“Jesus, I need to sit down!” She waved an agitated arm away from Kenny when he tried to help her sit. “My pressure!” She pressed her hand to her chest. “You gon’ have it through the roof and you just got here!”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Vee. I’m not trying to scare you. Mennette is my wife.” He cautiously sat back down once Ms. Vee seemed to settle. “I found those pictures and this news clipping in her belongings.” He placed the clipping of the burned-down house onto the table.

Instantly, her hand went to her mouth and her eyes welled a bit.

“Is that you?” He asked slowly, pointing to the picture of a woman standing in front of the house before the fire.

After a minute, she finally recovered, then shook her head no.

“It’s Mennette’s mother.”

Puzzled, Kenny gave her a look. “Ma’am?”

“It’s Mennette’s mother. She repeated with a sigh. “Mennette and her family were my neighbors when I lived in Greenwood. Where did you get these?” She said sifting through the rest of the pictures.

“She had them hidden in a safe deposit box.”

“Hidden?” She narrowed her eyes at him and placed the stack of pictures on the table. “Exactly what are you after Mr. Young?”

“She’s my wife. I’m just looking for answers.”

Ms. Vee looked him up and down with a frown.

“I found these things in her stuff, along with empty envelopes from you.” He slid the envelopes to Ms. Vee. She picked them up

slowly, looked at them and placed them back on the table. Kenny continued.

"I was trying to find you or anybody here who knew her."

"Oh, I know her."

"Have you been sending her large amounts of money? Or know where she would get large amounts of money?"

Vee laughed a hearty laugh as if he'd just told her a good joke.

"Look around you, Mr. Young! Do it look like I'm living in the lap of luxury here? Where and how would I be able to send anybody large amounts of money?"

"Well, when was the last time you saw Mennette?"

Ms. Vee's face changed drastically, her jovial sarcasm turning serious. Obviously, this question caused some alarm because Kenny could almost literally see the shutdown in her face. She slid the pictures and empty envelopes back to him.

"And what is it that you want again Mr. Young?"

"Just some information."

"I'm sorry Mr. Young. But you gon' have to get whatever information you need from Mennette herself."

"I can't. I mean, I tried. But Mennette is..." Kenny's voice trailed off. He knew she must have thought he had a thick head already so he could only imagine how what he was about to say next would sound.

"Mennette can't tell me. She had a bad accident a few months ago and she's lost her memory"

A look of concern appeared on Ms. Vee's face, then disappeared as quickly as it came.

"Mmmm, hmmm. And how long y'all been married?"

"Ma'am?" He asked, confused. What did that have to do with what he was asking?

"Married," Ms. Vee repeated. "How long y'all two been married?"

"Almost 25 years, ma'am."

A low, guttural sound rocked Ms. Vee's body that was some-

where between a deep chuckle and a snort.

"Well now, Mr. Young. Don't you think that if there was something Mennette wanted you to know, she would have told you already in one of them almost 25 years of marriage?"

Kenny stared at her blankly as the biting truth sank in slowly.

"You 'round here asking me questions, snooping around in that child's stuff. If she wanted you to know anything, she would have told you already."

"I told you, she has amnesia." Kenny tried again.

"I don't care if she's a Jehovah's Witness! Now, Mr. Young, unless you can increase my food stamps, I'ma need you to leave. I'm expecting company."

"Listen, Ms. Vee. I'm desperate here. It seems as if you cared about Mennette. I love her. She's my wife. I'm just trying to understand some things."

She slowly sipped her coffee and then a frown creased on her forehead. "I don't know what you want from me, Mr. Young. Or what you want me to do. Clap my hands and twirl around on my toes?" She was irritated. "That chile ran out on me in the middle of the night. Just took off and left. For years, not a word. Not. One. Single. Word. So, I'm sorry if I don't do the Holy Dance!" She put her mug to her lips again.

He sighed, his hands hanging heavy against the sides of his body.

She sipped more of her coffee and then placed the mug down hard on the table, spilling some of the black coffee onto the table.

"Took off in the middle of the night," she said to no one in particular. "Didn't know whether she was alive or dead." She turned her head back to Kenny. "You know how long I searched for her? I was so worried. Lost many a night o' sleep. Then after months, I figured she didn't want to be found. You know Mr. Young, a person who don't wanna get found, won't. So you'll have to excuse me Mr. Young if I ain't leaping through the air right now. Then, outta nowhere! Three years after she disappeared, I get a letter... a thank

you letter and a \$100 bill!" She said, flailing her arms up, then letting them flap to her side.

Kenny felt the sting of her pain. He knew what it was like trying to find someone you loved who didn't want to be found. He thought about the letter that his mother gave him so many years ago to give to his father. He'd carried that letter in his wallet until it was worn and faded. He never did find his father. And he never did open the letter. It lay somewhere in an envelope in one of the many boxes in the garage.

Ms. Vee's eyes were downcast. She sighed, then continued.

"First, I was so excited to finally hear from her, I wrote her back a few times. Got one letter from her claiming she was doing great. She was in school and 'bout to get married."

"But when I started inquiring about Cecil, the letters stopped." Ms. Vee's glow faded from her face. "After a little while of not hearing, I figured the worst. I wrote some more, but no response. I had to figure that if everything was going so great, maybe she didn't want to be reminded of something not so great. So eventually, I caught the hint and stopped reaching out. You know Mr. Young, a person who don't want to be bothered, don't."

"That's where all those empty envelopes came from. Cecil? Who is that? A boyfriend or something?"

"Cecil, Mr. Young. Cecil!"

"I don't know no Cecil."

Ms. Vee reared back, shooting him an accusatory look. "You been married to her all this time and you don't know who Cecil is?"

He slowly shook his head.

"A dog?" He shrugged his shoulders in confusion.

Ms. Vee looked at him in amazement.

"Mr. Young." She crossed her arms. "When Mennette left here, she had a baby with her. *Her* baby. A little boy named Cecil."

Chapter 26

MENNETTE

Every eye was on Mennette in the Affairs to Remember meeting. Kim and Angela had their mouths open in slight shock as if neither of them had ever thought of Mennette's question. Ted's smirk reassured Mennette that he'd thought of it constantly.

"Well, let's see," Mark said, taking one more sip before placing his cup of Starbucks on the floor next to his chair. He stood with his rainbow-colored crocs and began pacing the perimeter of the circle as he always did when thinking out loud.

"I'm sure many of you have probably thought of this secretly. What if you decide not to go back to your old life? What does that look like? Who in your life will be affected by your decision? Husbands? Wives? Children? Siblings? Older parents that may have relied on us to care for them before our memory loss? Or as I refer to as 'BML,' before memory loss." His fingers made air quotes.

"What about jobs and how you will financially care for yourself? These are things that need to be thought of. As Mennette has stated, she's pondered the question often. Has anyone else thought about not returning to your life BML?"

Angela looked around, then shyly raised her hand. She brought her shoulders up to her ears and looked apologetic. "The twins..."

Slowly, Bryon followed. Then Kim scanned the eyes of the other group members before she raised her hand too.

"Shit, I wish I could. I think about that shit every single day!"

Ted responded, crossing his arms over his chest.

Mark clapped his hands two times. "Okay, everybody, close your eyes. We're gonna do a little exercise!" He walked over to the wall, turned around and pressed his back into it.

"Imagine yourself in a new life. What does it look like? Are you happy? Are you sad? Who's with you?" Mark pushed off the wall and resumed his pacing, his voice and steps the only sound.

"I want this to be our exercise for next week. Think... really think about your life BML. Would you change it? Would you keep it the same? Write the scenarios down in your journal and really be detailed and intentional about your words. Don't be afraid of saying or feeling truly what's on your mind about your life. Current and past." Mark took a breath in and looked around at the group. "We're gonna stop right here. End a little early today. Kim brought some Krispy Kreme donuts and coffee for everyone today. Grab some on the way out and I'll see everyone next week."

Mark smiled as everyone gathered their things and then he motioned for Mennette to meet him in the corner where he was headed.

"I just wanna let you know that it is perfectly okay for you to feel the way that you do," he said when they were out of earshot from the group. He crossed his arms in front of his body and let his chin rest atop a bent finger. "I don't know if you remember why I started counseling..." Mennette shook her head and he continued.

"My twin brother suffered from memory loss. And I saw the struggle he went through which piqued my interest in the mind. The biggest thing he struggled with was fitting back into our family. One night, he confided in me that he didn't want to try anymore. Told me that he would rather go out and start all over." Mark sighed with a sense of sadness. "I couldn't understand it at first. I even fought against it. But once I understood the situation he was in, trying to do what we wanted him to do, I just had to accept it."

Mennette blinked. "Did your brother ever get his memory back?"

Mark shook his head no. "Sadly, he passed away from a heart attack. But he went out and lived his life on his own terms though. For the last few years of his life, he was happy. And that's all I cared about." Mark's lips thinned into a tight, sad smile.

"I said all that to say this Mennette: live your life, hon. Whatever is going to make you happy, go for it. Do it. I didn't understand what my brother was going through and I'm sure a lot of people in your life probably can't relate either. But I did enjoy seeing my brother happy and at peace. So do what makes you happy, m'kay? Because time is something you can never get back. With or without your memory. I'll see you next week, dear."

Mennette grabbed a cup of coffee on the way out as she walked with both Angela and Kim. The three stood on the curb talking while Mennette waited for Brother to pick her up. Angela and Kim chattered about Ted's bad breath and rude manners. As they talked, Mennette wondered where Kenny was, what he was doing, and how long he planned on being away.

Kenny had been acting so distant and cold to her over the last week. She thought they had a great time at Tamara's party two weeks ago and things seemed okay for a few days. Then in a snap, it all changed. No, she didn't help matters by going on her solo trip to the mall. But damn! She couldn't live with his hot and cold emotions, never knowing what would set him off. And she for sure couldn't keep waiting around for memories that may never return. She wanted to start living now.

Mark's words stuck in her head as she sipped the coffee and chatted mindlessly with the girls. Time was of the essence. She would never get those moments back from her prior life and she realized that she would be happier if she just went out and made fresh, brand-new memories.

Many nights, Mennette fantasized about running out of the door and not looking back. The stress and strain of trying to be the Mennette that everyone expected weighed heavy on her each day. If she were being totally honest with herself, the old Mennette's

life didn't seem so exciting to her. In fact, it seemed quite cumbersome. Having to cater to The Husband and the co-dependent materialistic best friend tired Mennette out just thinking about it. When Brother rolled up in Kenny's car, he jumped out to open the passenger door. Kim and Angela stopped chattering and paid attention to Mennette's driver.

Kim tucked a strand of hair from her cute bob behind her ear and leaned into Mennette. "Is that your brother-in-law?" Her eyes fluttered as she took a deliberate sip from her cup.

"Yeah, is that him?" Angela asked, her freckles twinkling on her nose.

Mennette rolled her eyes up to the sky and put one finger up. "No!" she said in a warning tone, then got in the car.

She shook her head as she watched the two women ogle at Brother as they drove away. *Not on my watch!* Mennette thought to herself and chuckled.

Chapter 27

KENNY

The swelling was only around his knuckles. Kenny stretched his fingers on his right hand out, then clenched his hand into a fist. In his other hand, he swirled the glass, listening to the ice clinking. He narrowed his eyes and focused them on the wall.

From the chair he was sitting in, he could see that the hole in the hotel wall matched the circumference of his fist. He knew he would have to pay for that. It didn't matter. He'd have access to the money Mennette had been hiding and that would be the end of that bill. He took his foot and kicked over one of the empty bottles of Hennessy on the floor.

Minutes after Ms. Vee dropped the baby bomb on him, she kicked him out. He deserved it. Kenny had smashed his fists down on her table in anger. Then he popped up from the table and put a hole in her wall. Ms. Vee threatened to call the police so he left. He would have to fix that also before he left South Carolina.

He regretted his reaction inside the house. He didn't intend to scare the old lady, nor did he want to hurt her. But that had seemed to be the only definitive thing that he'd accomplished on this trip. So much frustration filled his chest, he thought he would explode.

Mennette never mentioned having a family. Ever! Never mentioned a burned down house. Never mentioned the bank account. Never mentioned having a baby! She certainly never mentioned having a baby!

Ms. Vee's words from earlier rang in his head. "Don't you think that if there was something Mennette wanted you to know, she would have told you already in one of them almost 25 years of marriage?"

He had come to South Carolina on a whim and by luck, he actually found V. Turner. But, as usual, every answer to his existing questions caused new ones to kept popping up. Mennette was getting more mysterious by the day. It was like the more he learned, the more he questioned if he really knew his wife.

Kenny felt like he was going to lose his mind. He needed to stop destroying property. The only thing that could calm the storm in his mind was answers. Real answers. He needed to know what Mennette never bothered to tell him. And the only person who had those answers was a few miles away.

It was late but he decided to Uber back to Ms. Vee's house and try to smooth things over. He didn't know if it was the alcohol talking or his ego, but he needed to talk to her again.

When he arrived, the lights were out all over the house, except for one. Kenny instructed the Uber driver to wait right there for him. But as soon as Kenny turned his back, the car skidded off. Kenny gave a dismissive wave and his middle finger to the retreating car, then stumbled up Ms. Vee's walkway.

Just like every other aspect of this trip, he did not have a plan. He hoped that showing up would be enough. Maybe she would see how desperate he was and take pity on him. Tell him all that he needed to know so that he could get his Black ass on the first plane smoking back to California.

He didn't want to startle Ms. Vee, so he gave three quick knocks on the door and paced back to the yard so she could have a full view of him being peaceful from her door.

"Ms. Vee!" He steadied himself, trying his best to not look and sound as intoxicated as he knew he was. "Ms. Vee! I know you in there!"

The living room lights came on and he saw her look out through

the curtains at the front of the house. He waved and tried to smile. Instantly her face dropped into a frown.

“Get away from my door, Mr. Young!” She yelled through the window screen. “You crazy or something? I’m a call the cops on you!”

“No, no, no, no, no, no, Ms. Vee! Please no cops. No cops. They’ll kill me. I don’t want to die here, in South Carolina. Please, no.” He took a deep breath in, filling his chest, then let his shoulders drop. “I’m begging you to tell me about the baby! I need to know what happened!” He was slurring. He could feel it. In his mind, his words were coming out articulate and clear. But the look on her face let him know that this was not true.

“Go back to your hotel Mr. Young. It’s almost midnight! This ain’t the time or place for this conversation.”

“Well, when? When is the right time, huh? When I get my ass back to California? I’m her husband! Twenty-five years! If I don’t deserve to know now, then when? Huh? She’s my wife! *Onlywant-thebreastforher*. Breast for her. For *her*. I love her.” At least, that’s what Kenny thought he said, but Ms. Vee heard “lub ha.”

“Pleeeeeeeassssseeee?” Kenny pleaded. He thought he saw the sharp lines in her face soften but she didn’t move. “I love her. I love my wife. I just need to get to the bottom of this.”

“You been drinking!”

He didn’t respond, just pursed his lips tightly together.

“Mr. Young, go away! Go back to your hotel and get some rest!” And with that, she yanked the curtains closed and the house went dark.

He sank to the grass, his head in his hands, his head swimming. He pulled out his phone and ordered another Uber. He waited right there in the grass till it came.

Back at the hotel, Kenny was agitated and paced the floor. He couldn’t identify the funny feelings he was having, he just knew he didn’t like them. He called Mennette’s phone, but it went straight to voicemail. Then he remembered that he kept her phone turned

off, tucked in the closet. So he called Brother. As soon as Brother answered, Kenny started barking in his ear and demanded to speak with Mennette.

"Put her on the phone!" Kenny yelled.

"Whoa, brah! Bring it down! What's going on?"

"I need to talk to her now!"

"What's going on out there?"

"Man, I'm losing my mind. Finding out some shit. Shit you wouldn't believe!"

"Brah, you can't let nothing 'bout a female make you crazy, even if she is your wife. Break it down for me. What happened?"

Kenny slumped into a chair and began recounting the last five days since his arrival, starting with Lou, through the whirlwind events of the day: the strange note at the hotel, the shotgun in his chest, meeting the flirty girl at the gas stop, staking out Ms. Vee's house and learning about Mennette's baby, Cecil.

"Damn, brah! You right. That is some shit!"

"Tell me about it!"

"You said she a older woman?"

"Yeah, 'bout 60, 70, 80 years old. Hell, I 'ont know! You can never tell no Black woman's age! She clammed up on me. Won't say nothin else. She knows more, I feel it! It's like she wants to tell me but she won't. Stubborn ole bat." Kenny said.

"Well, dumb ass, you scared her, so whatchu 'spect?"

Kenny snorted into the phone and didn't say anything.

"Skinny or big?"

"Huh?" Kenny replied, irritated.

"This Ms. Vee lady. Is she skinny or is she big?" Brother repeated.

"Ummm, big."

"Did she have on a modern dress or an old frumpy dress?"

"Old. I think they call 'em mu-mu's."

"Uh, huh." Brother said, reflectively. "Would you say that she..."

"Damn man! What does this have to do with the rice and peace

in China?”

Brother paused. “What the hell you just said?”

“You heard me!”

“Nah. Say it again?”

“Rice and tea damn! Rice of tea!” He said slowly, trying to correct himself. “Of...China.”

Brother paused again. “You been drinking, haven’t you.” It was more of a statement than a question.

Kenny looked down at the glass in his hand, then glanced over at the first empty Hennessy bottle and the second half-filled one.

“Probably got a glass of Henny in your hand right now! Now you know you can’t handle that brown liquor like that!”

Kenny snorted. “Sheeeet! I can handle anything.”

“Well, make that your last glass. And stay your ass in that hotel room til morning.”

Kenny didn’t respond.

“Kenny!”

“Yeah man, yeah. I hear you...” He leaned back and rubbed his temples. “Get back to what you was talking ’bout.”

“Check this out!” Brother sounded excited, like when he was about to tell one of his stories. “When you dealing with women, you gotta have some kinda game. And you ain’t got none.”

“Whadya mean?”

“Being married all these years made you lose touch. You soft. You don’t know what to do with women anymore. You only been dealing with one pussy fo’ eva!”

“Excuse me?”

“Look! Each woman has a soft spot. A need. As a man, you just have to know how to identify and then fill that need. Just like I was telling you about before. Love language. That book talks about five. Well, I think there’s a hellova lot more than just five.”

“What the hell you talking about?”

“Check it out. I’m gonna help you out. You in luck tonight!

“How so?” Kenny replied dryly.

"I happen to have a Ph.D. in women."

"Da fuck?"

"Womanology. The study of women. You talking to a professional." Brother laughed. "I specialize in all types. White, Black, Asian, young, old, ex-cet-tera. They all the same once you learn what makes them tick.

"This one you dealing with is a breeze. Older woman. Lives in the country by herself. Dirty kitchen. Waiting on food stamps. It's simple. Tomorrow, once you good and sober, you take your ass to the local grocery store. Buy her some steak, potatoes, rolls, gravy. All the stuff you think she can't afford on her own. Then you plan a meal. A complete meal with appetizers and dessert, drinks and everything. Bring her a brand new can of coffee, Folgers. Everybody in the South like Folgers. Get some fancy cream and sugar and shit.

"Then go back to her house just before dinner time. And cook her a good meal. I mean, you got to put yo foot in it. Once she bite into that steak and taste them potatoes Mama taught you how to make, she'll damn near have a orgasm trying to tell you everything you wanna hear!"

"How you know?"

"Ph.D., my brotha. Ph.D.!" He cleared his throat. "To understand women and make them do what you want, you gotta get to the core of them. Understand their psychic. Food seems to be at the core of this one. A good steak would do her some good."

"And sunflower seeds. I can get her a few big bags of sunflower seeds," Kenny said, perking up.

"Uhhh... I think the steak would be better, but whatever floats your boat. Get her the seeds."

"I'll get the steak AND the seeds!" Kenny said, sounding proud of himself.

"Food. That's the only way you gonna get her to open up."

"Damn, Brother. That's a real good idea!"

"Don't forget dessert. Southern women like dessert."

“Nah, I ain’t doing all that. With the steak and them damn sunflower seeds she like, she’ll be singing like a bird. And then I can get down to the bottom of this Cecil shit.”

Chapter 28

KENNY

A strong cup of black coffee and the Tuesday morning sun helped Kenny start the next day in a better mood. He visited the hotel gym, showered and actually took a good chunk of the day to lounge. He had to get his mind right and stay calm.

Just before he dressed to head to the local grocery store and head back over to Ms. Vee, his phone rang. He was tempted to let it go to voicemail but he glanced at the screen. Chocolate. Why was she calling?

“Hello?”

“Hi Kenny, it’s Carolyn Tanner. From Mennette’s old job?”

“Yeah. Hey.”

“How are you? How is Mennette?” she asked, being polite.

“Doing alright.” He paused. “How are you?”

“Good, good.” It was her turn to pause. And then she sighed. “Listen. The reason I’m calling is, well, I wasn’t totally honest with you. There are some things I didn’t tell you when you were here the other week. But I feel you should know.” The skin on the back of Kenny’s neck prickled.

“I’m listening.”

“This is something that needs to be said in person.”

“Well, I’m out of town right now.”

“Oh. Okay. Ummm. Well, I have to attend a cocktail party for work on Friday evening, the 18th. If you are back in town by then,

can you meet me at La Pinata Mexican Restaurant in Concord afterward around ten?"

"I should be back by then. But what is it that you need to tell me?"

"In person. I can only tell you in person."

"Is it about Mennette?" Kenny asked, but the line went dead.

Kenny had almost forgotten that there were still puzzle pieces back in California that still needed to be fit together. Although he was intrigued, he couldn't worry about that now because there were still mysteries in South Carolina that needed solving. Kenny left the hotel to hurry to the grocery store so he could intercept whatever dinner plans Ms. Vee had.

An hour and a half later, with groceries in the trunk, Kenny pulled up in front of Ms. Vee's house. The older woman was working in the yard, pulling weeds while the daylight lasted. Her butt was raised high in the air. Her skirt was up so high, he could see the backs of her thighs. Her beige knee highs were sagging; the left one had settled loosely around her ankle.

She didn't hear the sound of the car pulling up. Kenny thought that when he got out and shut the car door, she would turn around at the sound. But she continued pulling weeds and stuffing them in what looked to Kenny like a potato sack.

"Ms. Vee?" He said, stepping from the curb into the yard.

"Since I been born," she retorted, not stopping her work. "What you want this time, Mr. Young? I hope you had a strong cup of coffee this morning."

"Ma'am. I did."

"You had a rough night last night."

He rubbed the side of his arm. "Yes, ma'am I did. And I apologize for..."

"Oh..." she chuckled, straightening up and turning to face him. "I'm ma'am, now, am I? Last night I was all kinda old bats and witches." She turned back to bend over and continued yanking the weeds from the ground.

Kenny felt ashamed. "I didn't call you an old bat," he said. "Or a witch."

"You didn't." She hoisted the bag over a few inches and kept yanking, not even bothering to turn around. "But you was thinking it!" She chuckled to herself.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am. Last night was completely out of character for me. I was extremely frustrated..."

"And then you came back here drunk as a skunk!"

He sighed. "And drunk."

"Brown liquor don't never do right by you Black men. Don't know why y'all jes don't leave it alone."

"Who said it was brown liquor?"

"Was it?" She stopped moving but didn't turn to him with the question.

"Yes'um. I'm afraid it was."

"Hmph. I've knowed a lot of Black men in my life, Mr. Young. Been dealing with them probably longer than you been alive." She chuckled to herself. "If I said it once, I said it a thousand times. Brown liquor don't 'gree with no Black man."

"Duly noted."

He stood in silence for a moment, watching her tussle with a thick weed.

"Need any help?" Kenny offered.

"Nope. None that you can provide." She dug her heel into the dirt and with one final pull, yanked the stubborn weed from the ground and tossed it into her bag as she moved to the next dandelion.

He looked up the street at the other yards and then again at hers. With the amount of weeds that had sprouted, she was going to be out there for months. He cleared his throat.

"You eat steak?"

This time she straightened up to look at him, her eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"Steak?"

"Not in a long time, but what I wouldn't give to have a juicy one right now."

"A good rib-eye? You ain't had a steak til you've had my world-famous Mr. Young's Rib-Eye Steak with Gravy. And some fancy coffee with fancy creamer." He trotted to the trunk and pulled out one of the grocery bags.

Her eyes lit up and she cackled at him. "Mr. Young, are you trying to bribe me? It's gonna take way more than some steak to bribe me." She bent back over and tugged on another stubborn weed. "You gon' need at least some potatoes and something to drink to go along with this bribe." She turned her head and looked in his eyes. Kenny thought he saw a smile creeping across her face. "To bribe me. That is what you trynta do? Right?"

"Nah! I wouldn't do that to you." He joked, feeling the tension in the air dissipate. "You just looked hungry yesterday. Now..." he paused for dramatic effect. "I can take my juicy rib-eye steak..." he looked into the bag. "...and my potatoes, these vegetables and coffee, and all this good food here back to the hotel with me. Cause you really don't look like you ready for what I got going on in here," he teased. He made like he was about to close the trunk.

She straightened up. This time there was an apparent smile on her face. "Hate to see all that good food go to waste at that ole stinky hotel."

"Or these two big ole bags of sunflower seeds."

She clapped her hands in delight and giggled. "You bought me sunflower seeds?"

"Compliments from Gina at Chevron."

Her smile quickly disappeared and she wagged her finger at him. "I'd be careful if I was you. She'll try to marry you. Little hussy been trying to marry anything walking since she was 18. Jezebel."

"Nobody says Jezebel anymore."

"Tramp?" she asked, swatting a fly off her arm and picking up her bag again.

"Nuh-uh." He shook his head. "Thot."

“Thot?”

“‘That hoe over there.’ That’s what the kids say these days.”

“Humph. Well she’s a hot thot!”

“She sent an extra bag for you. For free.”

“For free? For me?” She smiled a fake smile. “Such a sweet girl. I always did like her. No need letting free bags of sunflower seeds go to waste either. Would be a shame. I guess you can come in. Since you got seeds and all.” She dropped the bag of weeds in the dirt. “Yesterday, I thought you was the food stamp man. Well, today, I guess you are!”

He actually felt warmth from her laughter. Maybe he misjudged her. She led the way and he followed her into the house with his bags of groceries. Brother was so right. Food was the way to Ms. Vee’s heart. Kenny smiled to himself. That man really did have a Ph.D. in women!

Once inside, Kenny went to work. First, he cleaned the kitchen, then he prepared one of the best meals he’d cooked in a long while. The aroma must have awakened Ms. Vee’s personality because she sat at the kitchen table, relaxed, telling jokes, and swiping the towel over her shoulder at invisible flies.

“Mr. Young, you must really love Mennette to have traveled all this way just to get some information.”

“I do love her,” Kenny mused as he sliced tomatoes for the salad. “We met in college and I’ve known her half my life. She’s my wife. My world. But now, she has amnesia.” He brought the bowl over to the table and looked directly into Ms. Vee’s eyes.

“You must love her too if you’d go to such lengths to protect her. But I assure you, you don’t have to protect her from me.”

“Well, I started thinking about it after you left and I figured you not one of those reporters trying to make her look bad. You was her husband and you must care a heap about her if you came all the way here from California. You got family, Mr. Young?”

“One brother. That I know of. Mother died some years ago. Old man skipped out on us when I was about five. Ain’t seen him since.

I heard on the streets that he died a while ago..." Kenny paused. He never got the opportunity to tell the man who gave him life how he really felt about him. How he considered him a coward for walking out on his woman and his two blood-born sons. It made him want to be a better father. He vowed that when he had his children, he would never leave their sides. There wasn't anything or any reason he could think of that would make him walk out on his own innocent kids.

Kenny went back for the utensils. He placed napkins in front of her and set a fork, spoon, and knife on top of it.

"All this is really nice, Mr. Young. I don't get much company around here."

"It's fine. And please, call me Kenny."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Young."

He handed her the salad and wiped his hands on a towel. Kenny watched her root through the colorful salad with interest and wondered about this woman. How much would he have to woo her to get her to fully open up about Menette? He thought about her right then and realized how much he loved her. He smiled at the thought of her eyes.

"This a fancy type salad." Ms. Vee took a bite-full and then frowned, chewing slowly. "What's this?"

"Arugula."

"Arugula?" Her face twisted in distaste. She spat it out into the napkin.

"Hey, don't knock it till you give it a good try. It's good for you. Expand your horizons, Ms. Vee."

She looked offended. "My horizons is expanded enough, Mr. Young. I don't need nobody to tell me about my horizons."

"I'm just saying," he said, turning back to the stove.

She took another forkful and chewed. "Arugula, you say?" She chewed some more. "Actually, with this dressing, it's not too bad. Pretty good, actually. What else in here? Almonds, oh and small apple slices!"

"It's one of Mennette's favorite salads." He smiled. She smiled back.

He fixed a serving of salad onto his plate and sat across from her. "You married?"

"Nope."

"Any children?"

She shook her head, slowly. "No Mr. Young. I lived in Greenwood with my sister until she passed. Neither of us could bear children."

He chewed slowly, letting the uncomfortable silence take over the room. When she was done, he cleared the table and checked on the steak. He placed the biggest piece on her plate and smothered it with as much gravy as he could fit on the plate.

"I remembered when Mennette and her family moved in next door to me. Her father, oh boy! He was a looker! And the mother was just as handsome. Beautiful woman." She cut her steak into small pieces. "It was five kids. Mennette was the oldest. She was 'bout eight when they moved in." She pointed at him with the steak on the end of her fork. "She was a beautiful little girl. Big brown eyes. Just a gorgeous child. And smart. The family was always together. They were so lovely. Is this Worchester sauce? Mmmm, Mr. Young this is good! What you put on this steak? And so tender, like I was slicing butter. But the taste is really, really good."

"Now, I can't give away the Young family secrets!" Kenny chuckled. "But my mother used to cook this steak for me and my brother."

"Mmmmm." She ate a few pieces in silence, a look of satisfaction spreading on her face.

Kenny prodded the conversation along. "You were saying about the family?" He raised his eyebrows. "Mennette's family?"

"Lovely. Our entire neighborhood, really, was like a big happy family. All the kids loved climbing the plum tree I had out back! Mennette's daddy worked down at the factory a few towns over and the mama used to clean houses over there where the white

folks lived. I would check on the kids for 'em during the day. Mostly well-mannered kids, but from time to time..." she chuckled. "...they'd be over there fighting!"

He watched her closely, trying to read her emotions.

"Mennette was real ambitious. I think she wanted to be a doctor and an artist. Kept saying she wanted to save the world and make it beautiful. Save her people. Be a philanderer."

"Philanthropist." Kenny corrected.

"Yeah, probably one of those too, I guess. But it stressed her daddy out cause he wanted to send all his kids to college but he had too many of them." She slurped her coffee loudly. "Mmmm, sure make a difference with expensive creamer, wouldn't you say Mr. Young?"

Kenny stared at Ms. Vee in disbelief. Her eyes smiled at him over the cup. She put it down, then continued.

"And she could draw. Talented! Used to sit on my porch sometimes just drawing. Fancy little pictures too. Real creative type. Would draw and paint all day if you let her. Once, she saved all the change she could find just to buy one tube of this fancy paint that she wanted. A real go-getter."

"She still paints."

Ms. Vee smiled.

He paused, then chose his words carefully.

"Ms. Vee. I'm desperate here. I really need to find out what is going on with my wife. Last time you said Cecil was with her..." he paused. "I want to be totally honest with you, Ms. Vee. Mennette has never told me about Cecil. I've never seen him. Not a picture, nothing. I don't know where he is or anything about him. Yesterday was the first time I ever even knew he existed. Mennette and I have been trying to..." Kenny stopped. "Are you absolutely sure that Mennette had a baby?"

Ms. Vee chewed the rest of the food in her mouth slowly until she finished. Then she wiped her face with her apron. "As sure as you sitting here in my kitchen, that girl had her baby with her. I

was there when the little angel was born.”

“Do you think you know where Cecil is now?”

“I’m almost ’fraid to spe-ca-late. All I can say is they were together when they left here.”

“I didn’t know she’d ever been pregnant. And all this time we’ve been trying to have our own baby, she never once mentioned she’d already had a child.”

Ms. Vee stared at Kenny. A slow, agonizing moment passed before she carefully spoke. “Well, now you two having a baby? That’s going to be almost impossible Mr. Young.”

“I don’t understand.”

The pause that Ms. Vee let grow between them made the hairs on Kenny’s arms stand up. Her silence and piercing eyes unsettled him. “Mennette, she...” She inhaled before she spoke again. “She had her tubes tied.”

“WHAT???” Kenny bellowed. His forehead furrowed into wrinkles and his mouth slung open in shock. “When?”

“Shortly after Cecil turned one year.”

A vein in his throat throbbed. Not another fucking secret! He brought his fist down on the table hard, spilling the old woman’s coffee. Ms. Vee got up as quickly as her body could move.

“Now Mr. Young! This here table can barely hold the salt ’n pepper shakers on it, let alone your heavy fist. You still gotta fix my wall from yesterday. I know it ain’t much, but you can’t keep coming over here tearing up my house. In this house,” she pointed her finger sternly to the floor, “you got to control your temper or I’ll have to send you back to California. And for good this time!”

Kenny stood up, his hands in the surrender gesture.

“I’m so sorry ma’am. I meant no disrespect. Excuse me for a moment.” He walked out onto the porch into the crisp, early evening sky. He needed fresh air. He scrubbed his face with his palms, then put his hands on his hips. He turned his head and looked up the street at nothing in particular.

News of Cecil was shocking enough. But now, finding out that

Mennette had her tubes tied, this felt personal. Mennette knew the one thing in the world he wanted most was to start a family with her. All that time they were planning and trying, she kept the fact that she couldn't have – or didn't want – children a secret from him. A few hot, angry tears escaped his eyes. He felt as heartbroken and as helpless as when his mother died.

Kenny heard labored shuffling behind him. Quickly he wiped the tears and turned to see Ms. Vee standing next to him. She placed a maternal hand on his back.

"I'm suspecting that information was new to you." She said to the side of his face.

He didn't respond. He just kept staring up the street and blinked.

"Look up the street there, Mr. Young. What do you see?"

He didn't respond.

"People around here ain't got many choices. It's hard being Black. Even harder being a Black woman." She pursed her lips. "Everybody wants to tell the Black woman what to do. What to do with they lives. What to do with they money. What to do with they body. Never asking us what we want." Her voice cracked. "Mennette did what she felt she had to do. What she wanted to do at the time. She probably didn't see you coming in her future. We shouldn't judge her based on what she chose to do or not do with her body."

"But what she chose to do with her body affects my life."

"You wasn't no where near in the picture at the time, Mr. Young."

"But we always talked about having kids! She knew I wanted kids. She never once said that she couldn't. I just can't believe this bullshit!"

"And what would you have done if you knew?"

Kenny blinked.

"Come on, Mr. Young! What would you have done if you knew Mennette couldn't make babies for you. Would you have been married for almost 20 years? Would you have married her at all?"

Kenny's mind went numb. The answer seemed lodged deep in his heart, unable to break free and find its way to his mouth. Ms. Vee looked at him, and gave a solitary knowing nod of her head.

"Calm. Calm, patience, and forgiveness are one helluva combination," she said, blinking a few times more than she probably should have. "Believe me, forgiveness is and was one of the hardest things that a person can do. And the most freeing."

"Forgive her? I don't know if I can do that. She's been keeping so many secrets from me... seems like from the first day we met!"

"Forgiveness is not for her, Mr. Young. Forgiveness is for you. You can't judge. Especially for something that was done in the past under dire circumstances. Believe me when I say, it ain't easy. I had to finally forgive her. She left me. I was helping take care of her and her baby when she walked out my house in the middle of the night without a word. But eventually, I realized, she did what she felt she had to do, right? I can't judge her for that. And you shouldn't either."

"Sounds like we're both in the same boat."

"How so?"

"We both need to forgive her. You because she left you. Me because she's been lying to me."

Ms. Vee seemed to think deeply about this comment. She looked up the street at the spot where the road turned and sighed. Then let out a nervous chuckle. "I guess you're right Mr. Young. Now, I'm an old lady and getting quite tired. I need my rest. Thank you very much for that delicious meal and Mennette's rag-gu-la." She smiled a sweet smile. She started shuffling back into the house.

"I believe you're going to be okay, Mr. Young," she tossed over her shoulder. "Now, what's for dessert?"

Kenny followed her in to clean up. "That's it? Dessert?" He stopped right behind her in the kitchen. "You drop a bomb on me like that and then ask me for dessert?"

"Take your time digesting all of what you just found out," Ms. Vee offered, reaching for a glass of water. She took a long drink,

while Kenny stood confused, watching. She placed the glass down, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and looked at him.

"It will be the key to all your answers."

"I need answers now." His anger was shrouded in self-doubt. If Mennette has been able to keep these secrets from him all these years, what else has she omitted or flat-out lied about?

"Is there anything else I need to know?" He paced the floor, shaking his head. "You think she might of gave him up for adoption?"

"Not sure, Mr. Young, but I don't think so." She wrung her hands and inhaled. "Cecil was born sick."

"Sick?" He frowned. "What do you mean sick?"

"Mr. Young, I ain't no doctor. I don't even remember the long word they used to describe his condition."

"Who was the father?"

"Patience, Mr. Young. I don't know how many times I got to tell you." She shook her head. "You, young people nowadays don't understand how important that is. Information takes time. You need to digest all what you got today. You can't handle no more right now."

If one more person told him he had to have patience in this situation, he would holler. "I don't have time. I got to get back home."

She stood by the kitchen sink. Her empathetic eyes gazed upon him for a long moment. "Go back to the hotel. Digest what I said. I'm getting tired. I'm sure you can afford another day, right?"

"No." He was getting irritated again.

"Ahhh, Mr. Young," she playfully swatted him with her napkin. "You cash in one pair of those really expensive shoes and you could probably pay me and my neighbors' rents for a few months. What's them called? Kobe Bryants? Michael Jordans? I bet you didn't think I knew about them." She smiled at him. "Now what did you say we was having for dessert, again?"

"Dessert?" He snorted. He was already running up his credit card with the hotel and the groceries.

"Dessert!" She stated confidently. "This was supposed to be a full meal, right? That usually means appetizers, an entrée... bet you didn't think I knew that word, huh? And dessert to finish. I'd say, Mr. Young, that with that fist-sized hole in my wall and my now rickety table, dessert is the very least you can do, right?"

"Uh, we don't have dessert. I mean, I didn't get dessert." He stammered. Why didn't he listen to Brother?

"Well, Mr. Young," she stood and reached for his keys. She looped her arm through his and smiled directly into his face. "Seems like you owe me. I guess tomorrow after dessert, I'll be able to tell you what else you wanna know. It's been a long, tiring day for this old woman. I gotta rest my soul. 'Specially with all this information and news you brought to me." She slowly moved across the floor and Kenny was forced to walk alongside her

"See ya same time tomorrow? I really like key lime pie. And that coffee with the creamer would be perfect. Oh and for tomorrow's steak, can you get some red bell peppers to go along with the green ones? I really like the red ones."

"Huh?" He peered over her shoulder at the kitchen. Everything was going well. Why was he suddenly on the porch? What went wrong?

"Don't worry about them dishes. It's the least I can do for the wonderful meal. Now Mr. Young once again, if you can't increase my food stamps, I'm gonna have to ask you to leave." She giggled at her own joke, thinking it was funny. "It was my pleasure and I'll see you tomorrow. It's the least you could do for tearing up my house!"

He stared in disbelief. She let his arm go and moved back towards the front door.

"Don't forget, same time tomorrow!" She smiled sweetly. "And stay away from that brown liquor tonight Mr. Young. We don't want no repeat a last night. And don't go over to that Chevron with that fast-tailed Gina." She wagged her finger towards his face. "Don't want you having two wives you got to figure out." She held two fingers up for him to see. "You can barely handle the one you

got now." She paused and thought for a moment. "Unless she giving away more free seeds. I'll get my good linen out this time. And Mr. Young, you might wanna close your mouth. These some country flies. They'll find their way right to your mouth. Oh and I'll wear my best Sunday dress." She giggled.

He closed his mouth and rolled his eyes. "No need for that." He said sarcastically.

"I'm so excited! Here I was worried 'bout what I was gonna eat for the week and now I get to eat steak two days in a row! It's turning out to be a good week for me. Won't He do it, Mr. Young? Won't He do it?" She gently closed the door behind her.

He stood there dumbfounded. She peered through the curtain, smiled, waved, then closed the curtains. A little upset but impressed with the old woman's tactics, Kenny had to chuckle to himself. He needed to go back to his hotel room to pay for another night. He was finally getting real answers about Mennette's life, so it didn't make sense to stop now.

"Damn!" he thought as he started the car and pulled away from the curb. Brother told him to get dessert!

Chapter 29

MENNETTE

*I*t's amazing what the mind will remember. Not much of my life comes to me, but for some reason, I can remember painting. Not actually me sitting on a stool painting like in a vision. But the strokes of my hand. The color palettes. The easels. The feeling that I get when I can sit and let my fingers freely roam across the canvas and create something beautiful. I imagine this is how I felt before I lost my memory and it is almost all I have to keep me from going crazy these days. So I spend as much time holed up, painting into the wee hours of the night. With my Beats by Dre, I blast my Jill Scott, Anthony Hamilton, and Bob Marley. In that order.

When I'm painting, my mind is swirling. Thoughts jump in and out like it's playing double dutch. Some things are clearer than others and I struggle to decipher truths from lies. These days, I rely on my body's instincts. This is what I remember. Chaos.

One night while laying in bed I had a thought, an epiphany. I pictured a fire but that's it. And of course my beach scene with all the blood. Did I tell Kenny? No. Hell no. He acts weird enough as it is. And his brother running around, constantly eyeing me suspiciously like I stole something from him. I'm not going to tell Kenny about my dreams. I'm not even sure if I can trust my so-called best friend, Tamara. I can't remember what she knows and what she doesn't. She watches me strangely, too, as if trying to figure out what she should or should not tell me.

I got a knife tucked up under my pillow and I put a bat I found under my bed. You never know when you'll need it. I don't know why Kenny is gone. He said he's away on business, but what type of "away" business do you have when you work for Airglass and you've been on leave for weeks? Brother is in charge of me while he is away.

I've watched quite a few Lifetime movies lately. It's always the handsome, charming guy that ends up being the killer. Well, not me. I'm ready if he ever decides to sneak in here.

Today, he has a female visitor. She doesn't seem happy with whatever he is asking of her. I lay on the couch pretending to watch a marathon of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, but Kenya, Kandi, and Porsha don't have my attention right now.

I watched his hand skitter down her back and inch over her butt. He squeezed her butt cheeks and spread them with his fingers so far, I thought he would split them apart in her spandex pants. She turned and looked at me with a scowl.

"And what am I supposed to do with her again?" she asked. Her long blonde braids graced the top of her butt where his hands were. She pulled them back with her fingers and tossed the braids over her shoulder.

Brother turned her face back to him with two of his fingers until she was looking deep into his eyes. "Just watch her." He said. "Can you do that for me?"

She pouted. It was obvious that she'd rather go with him than stay behind and watch me.

"Karen, I know you got me. And you know I'll make it worth your while, baby girl." He said, his voice dipping. I could see the hardness melting from inside of her. It was like watching a snake charmer at work. He's good, I thought. Real good. "Keep an eye on her and don't let her out of your sight. She likes to wander off." He glanced at me and I buried deeper into the blanket that surrounded me.

I didn't know what was going on. All I kept hearing him say was

that he was going to check on his brother. Unless they had a third brother that hadn't come around, I assumed he was talking about Kenny. I hoped he wasn't in any trouble, but nobody ever informed me of anything around here so, I just put my life together like a puzzle with the pieces that I find.

"I'll be gone for one day. I'm just going to hop over there and dig up a little dirt for Kenny. He won't and don't need to know that I'm making this trip. I'll be back before he suspects a thing. As far as he's concerned I'm here. Gonna get there this evening and then fly back tomorrow. One day." He said, holding a finger up to her. He pressed his lips to hers and the kiss was so passionate, I blushed. When he finished slobbering her down, he glanced at me, picked up his large duffel bag, then walked out of the door.

Chapter 30

BROTHER

*M*y poor brother Kenny. For him to be so smart, his ass is dumb as hell! After I got off the phone with him telling me about how he got punked by an old man pointing a shotgun at him and an old lady running him off, I knew he needed my help. But he couldn't know about it; his ego couldn't handle it.

Since he's in Abbeville right now, I figured I'd go to Greenwood and follow his tracks. I know I'll find out way more than he did, and it won't take me five days to do it. Hell, in less than an hour, I had arranged for my girl Karen to come over and babysit Mennette for me. I lined up an early morning flight, and the same dude who helped me hook up Kenny with his piece out there agreed to drive my ass around for the day for \$150.

I left Kenny's place around 10 PM last night to "thank" my two lady friends who hooked me up with the connections and the cash. I had all morning to sleep on the plane.

One thing I had to be careful of is alerting Kenny of my presence in South Carolina. He'd be pissed off and hurt. I wouldn't want him to catch one of his fake leg cramps he always got whenever he was in his feelings. I had to trace his steps, but be one step ahead of him, while falling back and staying one step behind. I know that sounds crazy, but trust me... it makes sense!

Kenny always had the book smarts, but I always had the intuition, or what Mama used to call "mother's wit." Well, my intuition

said that the old man who nearly blew a hole in his chest knew something important. So finding him was my first priority.

I got here around 6 PM on Tuesday. While Kenny was over in Abbeville, busy fattening up the old lady to shake her down for info, I was retracing his steps in Greenwood. I easily found the bar he went to every night and that guy Lou was real easy to spot. Kenny had no reason to backtrack to Greenwood so I told Lou the truth. I told him that I was Kenny's brother. I asked him about City Street? Country Street? I was trying to remember what Kenny had said.

"Townes Street," Lou said, wiping down the counter. I slid him a nice tip for the info and the shot of Hennessy I had. I hopped into the car with my waiting driver and headed to the infamous burned down house.

As I'm standing in front of the house, an old bald man steps out onto his porch next door. This must be the old man that shoved the gun into Kenny's face. I knew that I had to outsmart him. My mind churned. I waved at him and he frowned. Inside, I kinda laughed.

"What you doing over there?" he scowled.

"Was just checking out the lot," I called to him with a big smile. I shaded my eyes with my hands, even though it was evening. "Good piece of land. What type of house used to be on it?"

He looked suspiciously at me. "Why you inquiring?"

"Thinking of moving to the area. Into construction out in California. Looking for a nice piece of land to build here in South Carolina." I looked up and down the street and took in a deep breath like a man who had millions to spend. "Seems like a nice place. How long you been living here?"

"Long before you were born, young man. It's privately owned. Owner wants it to stay just the way it is." The man came down from his porch and stood by me.

"Keith," I said, holding out my hand. The old man hesitated but then extended his hand to shake. I nodded to the man's house. "That built in 1960?"

He looked surprised. "Close. 1962."

"I can tell by the structure. I like a good old-fashioned Cape Cod."

The old man smiled. "Yes sir. That's why I stayed on here. They don't build things like they used to build them. To last."

I playfully slapped the man hard on his back. "Houses *and* women!"

We both roared as he nodded in agreement with me. I was making some progress.

"Name's Carter." He said and shoved his hands into the pockets of his overhauls.

"Mr. Carter..."

"Just Carter." He smiled.

"Yes," I said, eyeing the land again. "I can imagine what I want to put on this. Looks like there was a fire here. Years ago. It still got that eerie burned-down feel to it though."

"But don't let that stop you," the old man tried recovering quickly.

"Depends. I don't like no bad juju. What happened?"

"It's tragic."

I nodded slowly.

"A family. Burned to the ground."

"The entire family?" I tisked and shook my head. I wondered if this was Mennette's family but realized that the man would shut down if I pressed too hard.

"All except one of the daughters and her baby." He shook his head and rubbed his arm. Brother noticed a small area of burned flesh running up into the man's sleeve. "Wasn't in the house when it happened. She was in jail at the time..."

"Jail?"

"Yep. But it was after the murder."

"Murder?" I muffled my gasp.

"Yeah. One of the victim's sister, Gladys, is still around. She used to be married to my nephew but that didn't work out. She never

could get over her brother getting killed. Walk around sometimes talking to herself.” He blinked. “Yeah, my nephew tried his best but I think it became too much for him. She’s harmless, though. Even works up there at the Brown Sugar Coffee Shop.” He pointed up the street.

I had to rub my head on this one. It was more than I was expecting and I’m sure Kenny didn’t know any of this info.

“You said the Brown Sugar Coffee Shop?” I cocked my head and I immediately knew I came off too eager. Something in my body language or my tone changed and it spooked him.

“Right up the...” He stalled mid sentence. “Well, that doesn’t ... that’s neither here nor there. Doesn’t concern you.”

I had already lost my advantage so I figured I’d go for broke.

“Does the name Mennette sound familiar to you?”

At the mention of Mennette’s name, I swore he took in a quick breath. “What type of construction you say you in again?”

“Residential,” I said without thinking.

He eyed me suspiciously and crossed his arms over his chest. “Mmmm. Hmmm.” He frowned. “You starting to sound more like a reporter than a construction guy to me. You here to buy a plot of land or you here chasing a story for your newspaper?”

“Excuse me?”

“There was another gentleman here from California. Come to think of it, he sorta looked like you. He was asking the same questions. Y’all working together or something?” Carter started backing up.

“Ya don’t say?” I rubbed my chin, feigning shock.

“Why don’t y’all just let the girl rest. She’s been through enough.”

“Carter...”

“*Mister Carter.*”

I blinked. “*Mister Carter*, I’m just trying to get some information.”

“There’s no information to be gotten here. Leave her be. Ain’t she suffered enough?” He started to walk away then turned back to

me. "And if you come back sniffing around here, I'll give you just what that other fellow got!" He stomped up the stairs and slammed the door.

Since I got all I could get out of the old man, I needed another source. He'd given me enough to go on, though. If there was any information to be had in this small town, it could be found in the library. It was after dark, and it was probably closed. But I said a hail mary as my driver followed the GPS directions, and hoped I wasn't too late.

We pulled up to the library about 6:35 PM. Just then, I saw a cute honey locking the door. That's all I needed. It was time to go to work! I quickly hopped out the car and performed my magic! In two minutes flat, I had her opening back up for me. Better still, she guided me on how to access the info I needed on the Townes Street fire. While she hovered over me, I flirted with her. But I still paid attention to what I was reading.

Here is what I gathered: The Townes Street fire happened a few days before Thanksgiving in 1991. Flames engulfed the house in a matter of minutes, leaving the structure uninhabitable. I found an article which told the entire story about the family. Mennette and another child, Cecil, were listed as the survivors. Related search names were Ronnie McClure, William Davis, Darius Miller, and Curtis Jones. That was a local surface search. With the help of ole baby girl, I went down the rabbit hole in record time.

The more I dug, the deeper the shit got. This was way more than I believe that Kenny was prepared for. Fire? Murder? Multiple court cases? Jail time? I left the library with a page full of notes which I carefully tucked into my jacket pocket. My next stop? A visit to a popular coffee shop to find Gladys.

Chapter 31

MENNETTE

“Dang Mennette! Ever since you’ve been in college, you been broke! Do you wanna be broke for the rest of your natural-born life? I know I don’t!” Tamara prattled, without gasping for air.

“And you know you need the money for tuition so what’s the problem? I already saved your ass from a Popeyes career, by helping you get into school, but you still work there!”

Tamara’s frown was reminiscent of her frustration with Mennette. She was sprawled over her bed on her side of the room in the one-bedroom apartment they shared. Tamara closed the *Essence* magazine she was flipping through with a slap.

“I can’t keep covering your part of the rent,” she pouted. “So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that I don’t want to sell my body!” Mennette said, feeling self-conscious. She wrapped her arms around her middle and squeezed.

“Hell! You’ve already given it away to some of these broke-ass college boys! Why not get paid for it? Listen! By the time I graduate, I plan on having my BS degree and my ‘MRS’ degree. Better recognize! I’m going to live in the hills in Oakland in one of them big houses, drinking only the finest wine, dripping in diamonds.” Tamara was on a roll and her eyes practically sparkled as she kept sharing her dream life.

“Shopping and traveling. Every day, I’m a eat bonbons and

dance until my legs hurt!" Tamara said, jumped up and flipped on the little portable radio. She started gyrating her hips, dropping it low, and swinging her long hair from side to side. She twirled and giggled as she came up slowly and seductively like she was seducing her invisible dance partner.

"You asked me how I made my money, now I'm showing you. Awwww," Tamara pouted, her lips stuck out mocking Mennette. "Don't worry about that big ole bad tuition. I'ma help you get that money. You can't be scared though. It's a dog-eat-dog world."

Tamara pulled Mennette from her own bed and tried to encourage her to dance. Tamara cocked her head to the side when Mennette wouldn't relent and turned the music off. She sighed. "Don't stress. How much of the money do you have?"

"None."

"What about for this month's rent?"

"That would be none again," Mennette said and flopped back down on her bed.

Tamara raised her eyebrows.

"What! This payment plan is killer. And I refuse to take out loans. My whole check goes to paying it."

"Well, something's gotta give. You can't refuse to take out loans AND refuse an opportunity that will make those tuition payments a non-issue. Both choices are hard but you have to pick one."

Mennette sat back up "Do y'all have to sleep with all the men?" she asked.

"Only the ones you want to. It's not a prostitution ring. It's a high-priced private investment group. Only men of a certain caliber can become members. Besides, most of them are old. I mean really old, like their 30s and 40s. Some of them even have families, but they need a break from all that.

"They just need a nice young lady to take to an event or something like that. Someone who isn't going to embarrass them and can have an actual conversation. That's why us college girls are in high demand. Cause most of these guys don't want to take you

home, glad that you not pressing them to get married or have their little nappy-headed babies! And the established, professional men don't want their business all in the streets and they know you won't snitch. It's a win-win situation for everybody involved with the dating." Tamara shrugged, nonchalantly. As if making over \$100,000 a year was nothing to sneeze at.

"Dating?" Mennette laughed. "Is that what y'all call it?"

Tamara threw a pillow at Mennette.

"I... I don't know Tam." Mennette stretched. Since she started her freshman year at Cal State Hayward that January, Mennette barely had two nickels to rub together. Each month she was struggling to pull money out of her imaginary hat. She'd cut her hours at Popeyes to focus on more classes. But she had to keep up with her installment payments for tuition and for living with Tamara.

"Maybe starting college wasn't a good idea. I've barely made it through this first semester!"

"Girl! After all the hoops those folks put you through to get enrolled? You are not a quitter!" Tamara yelled, wagging her finger at Mennette. "You are the one who asked me to help you get your life together. Remember? You wanted to know how, at 18, I could afford my Dooney bags, my Prada glasses, and all the other things I got? Well this is it! Now, you either in or out. I could set you up with a meeting with Madam TODAY! Popeyes ain't it! The sooner you understand that about this world, the better."

Mennette furrowed her forehead. Oh, she knew about the world, alright. She'd been handed the short end of the stick when it came to that. And Tamara was right. The sooner she got with the program, the better off her life would probably be. Just look at what Tamara had accomplished.

"Come on girl! You can't be shy in this world. With that cute shape you got..." Tamara jumped off the bed and pulled Mennette up. "...you can make a lot of money," she continued. "You could pay your tuition, books, and this rent!" She grabbed onto Mennette's hips and playfully rolled them around. Then she lifted up

her shirt to expose her stomach.

Mennette smacked Tamara's hand away when she saw the shock on her face.

"What happened?"

"Nothing." Mennette landed back on the bed.

"Why your stomach got stretch marks, like you had a baby?"

"It's nothing! Nothing, ok?"

The stretch marks pulled at her confidence. It was a thing that Mennette always felt ashamed of and the reason she never wore cut-off tops. Mennette popped up off the bed and ran out the apartment's front door and headed towards the lobby.

But instead of entering the street the apartment building was actually on, the campus courtyard was suddenly just outside the doors. Mennette blinked several times in the blinding sunlight, confused. She saw a group of students who looked her way, and started pointing. Then, everyone else in the courtyard stopped what they were doing to focus on her and joined in on the pointing.

"We know about him, Mennette!" The group chanted. "What happened to the baby? Stretch marks! Stretch marks!"

"No!" Mennette yelled.

And then Tamara appeared and joined the pointing and chanting. "What's going on Mennette? Where's the baby?"

"No!" Mennette screamed, turning slowly in a circle. The crowd started converging on her.

"I gotta get out of here!" Mennette said, terrified. "I gotta get out of here! Please, leave me alone! I gotta get out of here!"



I gasped and popped straight up, startled to see a female face just inches away from mine. I instantly thought about the knife under my pillow upstairs. How did I let my guard down and fall asleep on the couch? It took me a moment to realize where I was

and who she was. Karen. She was standing over me, a pinched look on her face, her braids hanging practically touching my face. The dream seemed so real, I was shaking.

"You were having a bad dream," Karen observed. She remained looming over me with actual concern on her face. "Kept saying you had to get outta here. Where you got to go?" The look in her eyes led me to believe that she didn't trust me.

"Uh, nowhere." I sat all the way up, wiped my eyes and looked around, bewildered. The dream had my heart racing and my mind confused. Was that an actual memory from my past? Was that just a bad dream?

Sunlight peeked through the curtains. "I made you dinner yesterday, but you fell asleep. It's in the microwave." She sat in the accent chair across from the couch, leaned back, crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes at me. She must have maintained that position from the moment Brother walked out the door last night.

"I hope you eat fried chicken, string beans, and mac and cheese. That's all I know how to cook." She pulled the throw blanket I keep on that chair up over her shoulders. "You not gon' try to go to the mall again, are you?"

I shake my head and got up off the couch to walk into the kitchen. I opened the microwave and removed the cover. The chicken looked good and the mac and cheese smelled good. My stomach rumbled. I covered the food and turned the microwave on. I didn't mind eating dinner for breakfast. I guess in hindsight, I was kind of glad Karen was there. I felt a little more comfortable with her than with Brother, even though I didn't know her from a can of paint. I had sized her up last night. I felt that if she tried anything, I could take her.

Chapter 32

KENNY

*I*t was a lovely Wednesday evening. Ms. Vee had on a lime green dress with broad white starched collars when Kenny arrived. He had to admit that she looked much better all dressed up. She smiled her sweet smile and stepped aside for him to enter with his bag of groceries.

“Nice gloves.”

“They’re my Sunday best! I wear them to church every week.”

“Well then. I guess I’ll get started.” His salty attitude filled the room. He couldn’t believe that he was being played by an old woman. He’d now been in South Carolina a full seven days, and the last two was on account of trying to coax her into sharing what she knew. Kenny moved into the kitchen and she followed, taking a seat where she could watch him cook.

“I don’t get much company around here.” She stalled and looked down at her shoes. “I mean, ever since my sister... and then Menette... well.... I just don’t get too much company is all.”

Kenny watched her for a moment. And it dawned on him, she was lonely. It showed in her body language. He changed his demeanor. After all, he would get more information with kindness. And if he was being honest with himself, he was beginning to like the old girl. They exchanged pleasantries like they were on a date or something. And just like the night before, Ms. Vee loved everything. She gobbled down the steak. She complimented the arugula

salad again as if it were her first time having it.

Afterward, Kenny washed the dishes. She dried and put them away. All the while, she prattled on about growing up in South Carolina. She didn't mention Mennette much, and seemed to be careful with her information when she did. Finally, the pair eased their way to the porch. Kenny sat on the top step while Ms. Vee held court in her chair. She was full and content and started cracking her sunflower seeds.

Kenny looked into the horizon as the sun finished setting. He enjoyed the breeze on his arms. His belly full, he leaned his head back on the porch's supporting post. His left knee was propped up with his arm resting over it while his other leg dangled down by the bottom step. He listened to Ms. Vee as she rocked in her creaky chair.

"I'm glad you came here," she finally said.

Eyes half-closed, he gave her a lazy smile. "It wasn't exactly my first vacation choice."

"Besides you tearing up my house, I'd say this was a good trip."

He found this ironic and chuckled. "I'll come back to fix the wall with some plaster and tighten up the table legs tomorrow morning before I head for the airport."

"What I mean to say is, you seem like a good man, Mr. Young. I'm glad she found someone who takes care of her." The rocking chair's creaking sped up.

A gentle evening breeze grazed his face. Kenny now understood how someone could live in the South. This chill way of being and being a part of nature was something he could get used to. The soothing sounds of the chair groaning over the wooden planks and the rhythm of her spitting out her seed shells was calming.

He cocked one eye open and looked at her. "I'm sure if she had her memory back, she would love to come see you," he said with a bit of a smile.

She smiled back at him. "I would love that too. It would be so good to see her. To see how she's grown." She spit out a few more

hulls. "Promise that you'll bring her when she does get her memory back?"

"Promise." He closed his eyes.

A few moments passed. Kenny tried to imagine Mennette as a young girl, taking care of a baby with Ms. Vee. He could picture Ms. Vee fussing over Mennette, trying to make sure that she was doing right by the baby. He wondered what happened to Cecil. He, like Ms. Vee, was almost afraid to speculate. Mennette must have gone through so much. Kenny opened his eyes and peered at Ms. Vee from his step.

"What happened to her?"

"I should be asking you that, Mr. Young," she said as her eyes stared up the street. "What happened to her on your watch?"

He sighed deeply. If he had to cook one more meal for this woman to get her to give him real answers, he might lose his cool and risk her shutting down all together. At this point, Kenny felt drained. Numb to his feelings, only one thought burned in his brain: *I just want answers. Real answers!*

He stretched, allowing his joints to pop and loosen. "I went to the house in Greenville."

The creaking stopped.

He looked up. Ms. Vee was looking directly at him.

"Greenville?"

"Yes'm. On Townes Street..."

She didn't speak for a moment. Her eyes burrowing into him.

"To the house on Townes Street," Kenny repeated.

"I heard you the first time," the old woman snapped, suddenly agitated. She seemed to stare out into the trees in the front yard. But upon closer investigation, Kenny noticed that she was actually looking out further at something he was sure he couldn't see. She took the bag of seeds out of her lap and placed it down on the porch floor.

"You went to Townes Street? To the burned down house?" She repeated, absently.

“Yes.”

“Was Mr. Carter there?”

“The old cranky man with the gun?”

“Next door to the left?”

Kenny nodded and muttered, “Um hum.”

“He’s still hanging in there.” She chuckled to herself. And then her face changed. Taking advantage of the moment, Kenny shifted positions on the porch to be closer to her.

“What happened that night?” Kenny leaned in and asked gently. “The night of the fire? Mr. Carter had burns on his arm.”

She turned to Kenny. Tears appeared suddenly in her eyes. “I... I can’t!” She jerked her head violently to avoid Kenny’s gaze. He got up to kneel down right next to her chair and held her hand.

“Tell me. Please.” Kenny hated asking her to dig into some dark memories but he needed her to tell him something. He never knew Mennette had a family. He never knew Mennette had a baby. He didn’t know why she felt the need to hold on to a newspaper clipping about a fire. He didn’t know how it connected to the money or the strange Ferragamo Man. But he needed to know now. He needed to learn the truth about his wife’s past and make all the mysterious pieces of her life make sense. He’d finally found the house in the picture and V. Turner and he needed her to tell him everything she knew.

A few sobs rocked Ms. Vee’s body. Kenny stroked her hand patiently. After an uncomfortably long pause, she began.

“Mr. Carter tried. He tried saving them.”

“Save who? How did the fire start?”

“He couldn’t,” she continued, as if she didn’t hear his question. “He tried. And he never forgave himself for it. Harold was his best friend! But it was just too strong. Too hot...” Ms. Vee’s voice cracked. Kenny kept rubbing her hand.

“He tried. He really tried!” She looked over at Kenny. “And Mennette. She was so innocent. So sweet. What they did to her...”

She turned her head away, shoving her other fist to her mouth

as if to stop her flow of words. Ms. Vee shook her head. Her shoulders dropped. Her body heaved repeatedly as she cried.

"Take your time," Kenny crooned. After a few minutes, Ms. Vee seemed to have collected herself.

"What happened?" Kenny asked again, softly.

"All of it was dem boys fault!" Ms. Vee's eyes darkened and venom laced her tone once coherent words finally escaped her throat. "If they never messed with her, none of it would have happened. Not Cecil. Not the trials. Not the fire. Mennette would probably still have her family. And I'd probably still have her." Ms. Vee looked wistfully at nothing in particular over Kenny's shoulder.

"What boys?" Kenny asked carefully. "What did they do to her?"

Ms. Vee shifted her gaze and looked Kenny square in the eyes.

"Nothing proper!" she said angrily.

"Ma'am?" he asked in a puzzled tone.

"They took her innocence, Mr. Young! A gang of them! Next thing we know, we find out Cecil growing big and strong in her belly! All hell broke loose 'cause of it. And then they had the nerve to punish her for it, as if she'd just walked right up to them and gave them permission!"

Kenny's head throbbed, he could feel his blood pressure going up. His jaw tightened. Now, he wasn't so sure he was ready for the truth.

"Mennette was such a sweet child. Her parents were so kind. And her younger brothers and sisters... they didn't deserve everything that happened. She didn't deserve to lose her whole family!"

"Is that who was in the fire? Was that Mennette's family's house that burned?"

"Yes," Ms. Vee squeaked out amidst a fresh flow of tears.

"Were those boys who..." Kenny couldn't bring himself to say the word that Ms. Vee had hinted at. "Those boys who hurt Mennette, did they start the fire?"

"Nobody really knows, but I think one of them was respon-

sible." She pulled a glove out of her pocket and used it to dab at her damp eyes.

"But if they are the ones who did something bad to her, why would they burn down her family's house?"

"Because, Mr. Young," Ms. Vee started, exasperated that he didn't know. "When they did what they did, it didn't stay secret for long. It turned into the talk of our little town." She wiped her face and looked up at him.

"It was a big scandal. They drug her name through the mud so..." she inhaled. "Mennette was devastated. She held her head high and stayed as strong as she could while her belly grew. But some of those boys came from money and one of them daddy was a lawyer. So they all got away with hurting her. Said there wasn't no proof..." She sniffed and repositioned herself on the chair. "Harold, her daddy, couldn't take it. Nearly drove him insane."

Kenny let her hand go and stood straight up. He unconsciously curled his hands into fists as heat flashed through his body and up to his head. He started pacing the porch. He wanted to hurt someone for hurting his wife at her most vulnerable stage in life. He wasn't expecting this information at all.

"Ain't no one to go beat up, Mr. Young. And you already gotta fix my house," Ms. Vee huffed. "I'ma need you ta siddown if you want me to keep telling you what your wife clearly never told you."

Ms. Vee's words of reason landed, but it still took Kenny a moment to calm himself and comply. He finally plopped back down onto the top step and scrubbed his face with his hands.

Ms. Vee swallowed what seemed like a lump in her throat and continued. "When they found out Mennette was pregnant, her daddy snapped," she said, clicking her fingers as she said the word.

"Snapped?" Kenny looked up at her.

"I ain't never seen a man so mad like that before in my life!" Ms. Vee continued. "Harold started going by the boys' houses to deliver his own form of justice. They'd call the cops on him every time but he didn't care. One time, Linda couldn't afford to bail him

out and he stayed there a week.

"Linda did her best. She told him that he wouldn't be no good to her and all the kids if he ended up in jail again. Shame. Such a smart man. Hard worker. To watch him deteriorate like that. But dem boys got off scot-free and everyone was talking 'bout Mennette. Called her everything but a child of God for being pregnant."

Kenny popped up and started pacing the porch again.

"Sit down Mr. Young. Please. I know this is a lot for you to handle but people make me real nervous when they pacing the floors like that."

He did as he was told. But he was restless, shaking his knee, wringing his hands together. The only thing keeping him from tearing that house down was knowing that he couldn't rebuild it by himself.

Ms. Vee dabbed at her wet face and continued. "One of the boys, William, I think his name was, he worked down at the grocery store. Well, Harold saw him in there one day. He waited for the boy to get off work and snuck up behind him. Beat him with a bat within an inch of his life."

"Good," Kenny mumbled, punching a fist into his palm.

"That time, he went to jail for a good little while 'cause the boy ended up paralyzed. Things got real tight for them. Linda could barely feed Mennette and the other little kids. I helped as much as I could by letting the little ones come over for lunch sometimes. But as I said, Mr. Young, I'm not living in the lap of luxury myself. I couldn't keep feeding a whole family of growing babies." Ms. Vee's sad look made Kenny's insides sink.

"What made it worse was all the reporters who kept showing up everywhere. Following Mennette to and from school. Every move she made, there was a boatload of reporters in her face or chasing her down. Always wanting to know what she had to say about the trial. About her daddy being in jail. About if she had anything to say about the boys who'd hurt her. Lawd, they was everywhere. Asking all kinds of people all kinds of questions. That poor girl

couldn't get a moment's peace."

Ms. Vee paused. She inhaled and let out a long low sigh from her gut. "I ain't talk about this in so long cuz it's all too much."

"I hate to put you through this Ms. Vee, but I really do appreciate you telling me."

"Never no mind." She interrupted him. "It's been weighing on my soul and spirit for too long. Now that I know that she survived, I don't have to feel guilty no more. I know that I did everything I could for her that was in my power. I felt like maybe I didn't do enough and that's why she left." She inhaled again and closed her eyes. "Thank you Jesus that she's safe!"

She raised her head and looked over at Kenny and continued with a little relief in her voice. "When Cecil was born, he came so fast, they wasn't even able to make it to the hospital. He was born at the house. I guess he was in a hurry to get into this world to see what was going on." She scoffed. "I don't know why. It was much safer where he came from."

"I helped deliver the little angel, you know!" Ms. Vee beamed with pride. "I still remember his little face. Such a sweet baby! I cut the cord and everything and kept him safe and warm until the paramedics arrived, yes I did. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a beautiful April day. April 2nd to be exact."

"Cecil was the cutest little boy, but he wasn't all the way right if you know what I mean? He was scrambled. Doctor said something about the DNA not working. They didn't quite know which one was the father so no way to know where it came from. They said Cecil would probably not live past the age of five and would not have the mental brains of a one-year-old." Ms. Vee shook her head.

"Uomph, uomph, uomph. Heartbreaking. So much stress for a young girl. Just an added mouth to feed in that already crowded house. She went back to school. Her mama helped out a lot, taking on Cecil like he was her sixth child."

"What happened to those mutha-fu..." Kenny's body was wound tightly like a coil about to snap.

"They were still around. Living their lives like they didn't have a care in the world since Harold was locked up. Well, 'cept for William who was paralyzed."

"How long was her daddy in jail?"

"Almost a year. Got out in nine months for good behavior. He wasn't there when Cecil was born. But when he got out, he was even more protective over the family. Mennette tried her best to stay in school, but you know, Mr. Young, children can be the cruellest creatures on the face of the earth. They teased her every day she went to school. Such a shame, Mr. Young." She tisked. "That these kids would tease her so til she couldn't even go to school to learn."

"One day in November,...I remember it so well....one of those boys tried following Mennette after school. You know Mr. Young, that bastard had the nerve to be mad at Mennette because her daddy paralyzed his cousin. Witnesses said he cornered her, yelling and screaming at her. Said she was hysterical, trying to get away from him but he kept going after her. Well, they say Mennette whipped out a knife from her bookbag and stabbed him over and over and over again. I guess she ain't never felt safe after what they did to her the first time and half the town and strange reporters always harassing her."

Kenny didn't think anything else in Ms. Vee's story could shock him, but there it was. "So what happened to the guy?"

Ms. Vee looked Kenny square in the eyes again. "He ain't make it."

"Wait!" Kenny exclaimed. "You mean Mennette killed him?"

"A heart and lung can't take no stab wounds."

Kenny's face froze with his mouth gaping open. Mennette a murderer? He'd been loving and living with this woman for so long and it felt like he was just finding out who she was for the first time. The vibrant, caring woman who loved him through the toughest point in his life was capable of taking someone's life? He knew Ms. Vee had no reason to lie, but was this really the truth?

Kenny squeezed his eyes tight and inhaled through his nose.

“Mennette has never mentioned any of this to me.”

“You ’spect someone to tell you they killed someone?” Ms. Vee said sharply, snapping him back into reasonable thinking. “She ain’t plan to do it and they said he kept coming after her. Now, I ain’t gonna say that boy deserved it, ’cause I’m a Christian. But if you hurt someone as bad as they hurt Mennette and you keep coming after them...there are bound to be consequences.”

The cool evening air did nothing to lower Kenny’s temperature. He got up and resumed pacing the porch because sitting still was no longer an option.

“Mennette came home hysterical, covered in blood. I left the little ones who were eating at my house to go over and see what all the yelling was about. I helped her get cleaned up. Her parents packed a suitcase for her and Cecil, shoved all the money they had in her hand and told her to get to the bus station. They were gonna send her to a relative’s house across the state.

“When the police arrived later to arrest Mennette, Harold took the blame and said he did it. But there were too many witnesses who saw Mennette do it. Not long after that, they found her waiting at the bus stop. They took Mennette to jail. And poor little Cecil, They took him to foster care. Wouldn’t even let the baby stay with the family.”

Ms. Vee continued. “Not a week or so later, it was around three in the morning and I swore I smelled smoke. I jumped from my bed and I could see the reflection of the flames on my bedroom wall. Their entire house caught on fire. By the time I made it out the front door, I saw Mr. Carter was running towards the house with his water hose. But that didn’t do nothing for those big flames. It was like spitting in Hell. That fire grew so fast that, to this day, I can still see it in my mind. Still have nightmares, Mr. Young, to this day. Can’t get those images out of my head.” Ms. Vee went silent for a few moments. Kenny stopped his pacing when she stopped talking.

“As I said, Mr. Carter tried. Lord knows he did. I called 911 and

that's when Mr. Carter decided that we couldn't wait for the firemen. He was willing to give up his life if he could save at least the children." Ms. Vee's head hung and she paused for a moment. "But he couldn't. The fire was too much for him. He ran out before he could get in there good. By the time the fire truck came, the family didn't make it. Harold. Linda. The four little ones. Everything burned to ashes. If Mennette wasn't in jail and Cecil in foster care, they would have been gone too." Ms. Vee didn't bother swiping at the tears which flowed fast and free now.

"Shit." Kenny said, to no one in particular. "That newspaper clipping must have been all she had left of them." He pondered some more. "Did they find out how the fire started?"

"Said it was faulty wiring. But something in my spirit always told me otherwise. I believe in my heart of hearts one of those boys or their family did that. But it was never proven."

Stars now twinkled in the sky. Kenny braced himself on the railing looking up at them. The silence between them was a welcomed break from the heartbreaking tale.

"How long was Mennette in jail," Kenny finally asked.

"Few weeks, maybe? She went to trial and the jury found her not guilty, guess cuz it was self-defense. Or maybe they felt bad she lost her family while she was awaiting trial. Whatever the reason, the entire town went into an uproar. It practically split in half. One half was for Mennette saying that the boy got what he deserved. The other half said two wrongs don't make a right and she should stay in jail for life. It was devastating for everyone.

"When they released her, she had nowhere to go, so I told her to move in with me. We went and got Cecil from the foster family. She tried to finish her school year, but it was so unsafe for her to attend in person so she had to be put on independent studies. Every Monday, I had to go get her work from school and every Friday I dropped off her packet. Do you know how cruel those people was to me, Mr. Young? The nasty things they said!" Ms. Vee shook her head.

“So many reporters camped out in front of our house, waiting for her to do something else so they could be the first one with the story. It was sickening that they treated her like that. After all, she was still only a child. And a victim herself. You know Mr. Young, I think those very people that condemned her forgot that she was just a little girl walking home and those boys did her wrong. They were so focused on hanging her out to dry that I don’t even think it crossed their minds that she was in her own pain.” Ms. Vee sighed long and deeply.

“I used to hear her cry in her room at night. I didn’t know what to do. The child had been through so much. I couldn’t take no more. It broke my heart watching her suffer, trying to keep her head up, focus on her education, and deal with that special baby and that nasty world. I moved us out here to Abbeville to get away from all the reporters and questions and looks that she would get every time she stepped out the door.

“She graduated from Abbeville High School with amazingly high marks. She always was a smart girl.” Ms. Vee smiled as though she had given birth to Mennette herself.

“Little while after she graduated, she cooked me a big dinner. I don’t know where she got the money from. I suspected that her summer friend Guadalupe sent her some from California. Well, that night, we stayed up all night laughing. It was the first time I’d seen her happy in a real long time. She thanked me for everything that I did for her. I thought she was being awfully sweet and didn’t think nothing of it. Next day when I woke up, her and Cecil was gone.”

Ms. Vee smoothed the wrinkles from her lime green dress. “I prayed night after night that she and that baby was safe. She been dealt a bad deck of cards when it came to life. I’d write her often once she let me know where she was. But like I told you before, when I asked about Cecil, I never heard from her again. So, you can imagine my shock when you showed up at my door all these many years later asking questions about her. All these years I won-

dered what ever happened to her and the baby. But I see she still holding on. A survivor that one.”

Clouds parted and moonlight suddenly flooded the porch. Ms. Vee leaned forward and when she struggled to get out of her chair she waved Kenny over to help her up. When she stood up straight, he did something that surprised himself and he was sure it surprised her. He pulled her into his chest and hugged her. Tightly.

At first, her body stiffened in shock. But after a brief moment, Ms. Vee crumbled into his chest. She buried her face into his shirt as deep sobs escaped her throat. When the sobs grew louder, her grip on his back grew stronger.

It broke something in him. Kenny suddenly missed his mother. His defensiveness toward his wife’s younger self kicked in along with a deep sense of hurt that she never trusted him to share this part of her life. Kenny wasn’t quite ready to release the embrace just to swipe at his tears. So he let them fall silently and freely.

After a while, Ms. Vee loosened her grip and peeled herself away from Kenny’s chest, seemingly embarrassed.

“So sorry, Mr. Young. My, I don’t know where that came from.”

“Maybe it’s been there all this time and now that you know Mennette is safe, it was time for it to come out.” Kenny was impressed with his own wisdom as he quickly erased evidence of his own tears.

“Well, I guess, you’re right Mr. Young.” She patted him on the side of his arm. “I guess you’re right.” She inhaled. “Come here, round back. I wanna show you something interesting.”

Hesitantly, he followed her around the back through the wild grass and down the small hill that he tried to climb a few days ago. The moon high in the sky provided enough light to notice that they passed a few trees and over a yard full of weeds to reach the far end. She continued until she stopped right in front of one of the trees and placed her palm on it. She looked lovingly at the tree and then patted its trunk. It was a tall sturdy looking tree with green leaves.

"This here is a loblolly pine tree, Mr. Young." He looked at her and nodded, not understanding what she was getting at or why she was showing him this. "Ever hear of one of these?" Her eyes shimmered up the length of the trunk to the branches and she walked her fingers up and down the trunk for a moment. "It's very special to me. You know why?"

She didn't wait for him to answer. "Cause I planted it shortly after Mennette left." She focused on his reaction for a moment and when there was none, she continued. "You know, Mr. Young, we animals. Close to nature and God. The problem is that Man has forgotten that. But we feel spirits. And our spirits are connected to this earth. 'Vibes' is what the young people call it now-a-days.

"I always felt that as long as this tree was here and alive, Mennette was okay somewhere out there in the world." She paused. "Each month it grew stronger and bigger. Bigger than most of the others." She turned around and glanced at the other trees and his eyes followed her gaze for a moment. "And you know why, Mr. Young? Cause, I would come out here and talk to it. Give it some love and attention. Tell it all my stories like it was one of my best friends. And most importantly I prayed over it."

He looked at her and nodded his understanding. "Looks strong and healthy to me."

"Bout a year or two or so after she left, I noticed this..." She moved from the opposite side of the tree allowing him to turn to see what she was looking at. He followed her as she walked around the trunk and saw a long part of the tree rotting. Kenny furrowed his eyes, reaching out to touch the strange phenomenon.

"This part right here in the middle of the tree turned brown and rotted out. No other part." She placed her hand on top of his and guided his fingers across the rough brown area. "Feel how it's harder than the rest? I ain't never seen a tree do this before, Mr. Young. Almost impossible for a tree to rot in this fashion, from the inside in this exact spot. But the rest of the tree is healthy and thriving. Only part dead right at the center. It's heart. It never grew

back and it's been like this for a long while."

Kenny looked at her and sensed her meaning. "Cecil?" he asked.

Ms. Vee let go of his hand and his fingers instinctively continued to move across the dead wood. "I'm afraid that's what I believe. A tree can look healthy on the outside but have a part of them that's dead on the inside," she said. "Just like people."

Kenny looked around at the rest of the trees in the yard and then up into the sky. Clouds had moved in to partially cover the moon. Kenny felt a pull and tug in the pit of his stomach that he couldn't describe at that moment.

Ms. Vee took in a deep sigh and wiped her eyes before she turned them back to Kenny. "Go home, Mr. Young." She whispered, rubbing the tree. "Go home. Love on her. Love her hard. Forgive her for not telling you any of this. Maybe she don't got her memory now, as you say, cuz she didn't want it in the first place. Let go of whatever you think you mad about. She's a survivor. But even survivors break down. Give it some time, eventually she will remember..."

"...And if she doesn't?" he interrupted sharply, dropping his hands from the tree. "Besides, when she had her memory, she chose not to tell me any of this," Suddenly Kenny's shoulders felt heavy and his head began to throb.

Ms. Vee started slowly, her eyes focused on the ground for a while before she brought them up again to look deep into his. "And if she doesn't remember, then let her forget. If she's forgotten all the bad things that have happened in her life, let her. Let her forget! Allow her, Mr. Young, to have a little peace in her life. For once."

Chapter 33

BROTHER

I think this little-ass town has more secrets than it has people! I got to Brown Sugar Coffee Shop in no time flat after leaving the library. This must be the “it” spot where people hung out because this tiny place was packed. Although it was a month away, Valentine’s Day decorations already hung all around the place. It was all these pink and red hearts hanging from red curly strings. They had jazz music playing in the background. It was a real chill vibe.

Behind the counter were an older white man, a young Hispanic girl and a middle-aged Black woman who was at the register. I figured she had to be Gladys. I stood in the line of about four people, trying to figure out what I was going to say to her when I got to the front.

Part of me was like, just rip it off like a Band-aid and ask if she knew Mennette. The other part of me said, “Brother, have some compassion and ease that question into a conversation.” But it didn’t seem like this would be the right environment to have the time to ease into anything. Plus, I had to head back to the airport. I didn’t have the bread for a hotel and my flight was early in the morning. And although I had my hook up driving me around, I wasn’t stayin’ at his house.

Gladys smiled, greeted each customer, and rang up the orders quickly as the young Hispanic girl fulfilled the orders. When I got to the front of the line, she smiled widely.

"What can I get started for you today sir?" Her eyes twinkled as if she really enjoyed her job. This was going to be harder than I thought.

"I'll take a small cup of black coffee, please."

"That'll be \$2.13. Would you like to try one of our cookies with your coffee? You can get a dozen of them for your girlfriend for Valentine's Day." She pointed to a case filled with sugary heart-shaped red, white, and pink cookies. They were really on top of their Valentine's Day shit. But summer was coming.

"Ah, no I'll pass," I said looking at the cookies. "Thank you."

"Okay sir, your total is \$2.13 then." She said, ringing me up and stretching her hand out. I expected Gladys to be a little more "crazy" looking based on what ole man Carter said. But she looked regular, like someone's auntie.

"Is your name Gladys?" I asked, leaning in towards her.

Her smile wavered a bit and she pulled her hand back. "No."

I looked around the shop. I didn't think the Hispanic girl's name was Gladys and I damn sure didn't think it was the white man.

"Is there a Gladys that works here?" The woman tilted her head to the side suspiciously. "I'm an old friend of the family and I was in town for a few days. I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd surprise her," I lied quickly. It was the best I could do under pressure. I hoped she didn't notice that it really didn't make sense.

"She works here but not till later," Not-Gladys said, carefully.

"Around what time?"

"Later. Who should I say came by?"

"Brother." I said. "Do you know where else I might find her?"

"No." She shook her head and looked over my shoulder to the person in line behind me. "Did you still want the coffee?"

"Sure."

"That'll be \$2.13."

I took the coffee and went back to my waiting car. When I got in, I realized I was a jerk for not getting him anything so I handed him the coffee and played like that was my plan all along.

I realized I hadn't eaten all day and I had just ruined my chances at what looked to be a hopping spot. As I Googled what else there was to eat in this two-bit town on my phone, movement near the back door by the dumpsters caught my eye.

A middle-aged Black woman with an apron on was slipping her cell phone into her pocket and puffing on a stub of a cigarette. The back door light bounced off a nameplate. I'd bet the last \$100 I had in my pocket that it read Gladys. She went back inside through the back door. I forgot my hunger and marched back toward the front of the diner.

I didn't see the Hispanic girl or the white dude, but now two Black women stood behind the counter. The same one as earlier and the one that was by the dumpster. I got back in line and when I was at the front, Not-Gladys recognized me and I saw her give a quick glance over her shoulder at the other woman who was busy stirring white foam in a cup of coffee.

"Remember me? Is Gladys here now?" She nodded and went over and tapped the woman on her shoulder then pointed towards me. They started whispering something that I couldn't hear and then the real Gladys turned to look at me. She set the stir stick down and placed the cup on the counter.

I looked into her eyes, ready to rip the bandaid off. "Gladys, do you know Mennette?" Her smile faded and an unreadable look came across her face. She gripped the counter and tried steadying herself but her body slipped down and hit the floor.

"Gladys!" the other woman screamed. Everyone in the place looked in our direction. I peered over the counter. Gladys lay flat on her back with her eyes rolled into the back of her head. If the situation didn't look so serious, I would have laughed at her dramatic ass.

"What did you say to her?" Her coworker screamed at me while cradling Gladys' head and fanning her face with her hand. "She's sensitive!"

I was in as much shock as everyone else. I stood there with my

mouth wide open. I guess ripping the Band-aid off wasn't the best method after all.

"I only asked about Mennette. Just wanted some answers." I tried explaining.

Gladys rolled around for a bit and moaned. Then she blinked slowly and focused her eyes on me. She huffed and then frowned up at me. Her coworker helped her up, pulling and tugging on her arms but Gladys was no small chick. After the two women scuffled around for a minute, Gladys was finally on her feet. As soon as she was standing, she immediately pointed at my face.

"Who are you and what the hell are you doing here? How dare you ask me about her!" She rattled off quickly. She spat every word out like it was venom.

"Whoa! I just had some questions about what happened between Mennette and your brother..." I started but she cut me off quick.

"She's a MURDERER!" She yelled at the top of her lungs, her voice climbing higher than the jazz music. Everything and everyone in that little place went still. I definitely didn't expect this.

"She's a murderer! A murderer!" She screeched. Gladys was breathing heavily, her chest heaving like she was about to turn into the She-Hulk or something. Two customers got up and left. I don't get dumbfounded by much but I was really regretting this decision. Gladys was getting more unhinged by the second. "Murderer!" She kept yelling. Now I saw what ole man Carter meant.

I held up my hands in surrender, taking a few steps backward. The white man emerged from the opposite side of the cafe. I'm guessing he didn't need no commotion fucking up his money for the night. Gladys ignored him and kept right on yelling.

"She should be in jail for what she did to my brother! She killed Darius!" She yelled pounding her palms on the flat of the counter. "She needs to be in jail rotting! They let her go! She lived and he died!"

The white man braved getting close to Gladys and touched her

shoulder gently. "What's going on Gladys?" he asked like a dumb ass. It was clear what was going on.

"I want him gone!" Gladys growled, her voice lowering for once. She glared at me, shaking visibly.

"Sir..." he turned to me. I didn't know what the hell was going on. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave or I will call the cops."

"No need for that," I said with my hands up. I was ready to get the hell out of there. "Gladys," I said sincerely as I backed up. "I didn't mean to upset you."

I went outside and headed towards my waiting ride. I couldn't wait to get back to the airport. Then I heard someone yell from behind me, "Hey!" I turned and it was Not-Gladys, the first Black lady I met. She caught up to me, then stood for a moment, huffing and puffing to catch her breath. She nervously glanced over her shoulder, then started talking fast.

"Gladys never did get over her brother, Darius. She loved him so much. But if you looking for any survivors from that scandal, William Davis lives in Cambridge Apartments. He paralyzed now. Find him. He the only one still living that we know of. Mennette and I went to school together. She didn't deserve what happened to her."

"Thank you." I said, confused. "Why you ain't say none of this back there?"

She stared at me for a moment, like she was in deep thought. "Cause I believe his ass was guilty and he got what he deserved." She hurried back into the shop and didn't look back.

Chapter 34

BROTHER

Brother's driver rolled him up to the Cambridge Apartments and handed him a piece.

"You'll need it," the hookup said.

Brother tilted his chin toward him in thanks. He double-checked the chamber and put the safety on before slipping it into his back pocket. As he stepped out of the car, he tugged his jacket to make sure it concealed the weapon. He looked down a narrow walkway leading toward the buildings and started moving. He didn't want to be here any longer than he had to.

People milled around, busy doing nothing in particular. Some looked in his direction. Others appeared to be in drug-induced fogs and didn't seem to even know where they were. The walkway turned into a passageway between various buildings in the complex. It looked like a bunch of run-down motels packed tightly together. Each floor had long, shared terraces which granted access to the front doors.

Three women stood like they were scouting or guarding the entrance to the passageway. They gawked at Brother as he got closer. Brother decided that approaching this situation like a gentleman was best instead of the way he did at the cafe. Ripping off band-aids in a place like this could result in him needing quite a few himself.

"Evening ladies," Brother said in his best Barry White voice. The woman closest to the end had been leaning on the railing but

stood straight up when Brother spoke. She inhaled, placed her fingers in her mouth and let out a loud whistle. She was a tall, light-skinned woman with light brown braids that glistened under the fluorescent lights. Quite a few front doors and windows opened in response. Brother lifted his eyes. Women in various shades of dress began sticking their heads out of their windows or stepping out of their front doors onto the terraces in answer to her call.

“Hey handsome, up here!” one called, smiling and waving down at Brother.

Another woman emerged from a door drying a dish with a towel. She stopped wiping and gave a low whistle at him.

“Now that’s some serious eye candy,” she said. “You coming over here? Soon as I’m done with these dishes, I might need some help with something else.” Dish Towel girl giggled as she eyeballed Brother up and down.

“No, over here!” another said, poking her head out before completely emerging onto the terrace. “I need a daddy for my kids!”

“Brenda!” Dish Towel girl screeched. “You need to take care of your five badass kids yo damned self!”

Yet another woman emerged. Her smooth dark skin hid behind a long curly wig. “Y’all, he obviously here for me,” she said in a flirty tone.

Brother continued walking straight ahead, avoiding their gazes. He was on a mission. “Sorry ladies,” he said. “I’m here on business.”

“I got your business over here!” The first woman who whistled said, she batted her eyes, then flicked her braids. “Girl, he look like he came straight from Wakanda! Meeeeeowww!” She purred, swiping her paws in the air like a feline. “Heyyyy, Black Panther!”

“Ohhh! Yes he does! Black Panther! Here kitty, kitty. I got something for you to scratch over here. Come put some scratches on my back!” A new woman emerged, grinning.

“Don’t mind that heffa! Come over here and scratch this,” another called. Meows, hissing, and purring erupted in a chorus as he continued to walk down the long walkway. They were all amused.

This appeared to be the most entertainment they'd had in a long time.

More women opened their doors to check out the commotion. One stepped out in the middle of flat-ironing her hair. Half her hair was curly and the other side was smooth and straight. She pulled the flatiron from her hair and flicked her tongue at him. By the time he reached the end of the walkway and the entrance to the building, more than two dozen women were standing outside their doors, gawking down at him from various floor levels of the buildings.

One came out in a peek-a-boo negligee. "You like what you see, Black Panther? I'm in apt 2B." She seductively rubbed her hands up and down her body, performing a sensual dance and smoothing out the sides of her hips.

"He ain't coming up there!" Someone else barked up at her from the bottom level. That woman leaned her head up so she could see Negligee Lady better. "You ain't even over your syphilis yet!"

Negligee Lady gasped so loud she almost swallowed her tongue. The other women laughed hard.

"Oh yeah Terry? Well if I got syphilis, I got it from your old man, Earl!" Negligee Lady fired back.

"Oh no, bitch! You ain't got syphilis from my Earl!" Terry scoffed, smacking her palm against the railing, completely in denial.

"Terry!" Someone else yelled. "You know Earl ain't been faithful to you since Jheri Curls was in style!"

Cackles ripped throughout the corridor.

"Since Michael Jackson had his real nose!" A slight voice added.

"Since you been a natural blonde!" A husky voice from the ground level fired off, followed up by her own laughter. "If Earl is faithful, then you's a natural blonde!" She pointed.

"I AM a natural blonde!" Terry protested, angrily patting her blonde hair.

The laughter was continuous. Each had a hand in talking about

Earl. They all laughed, except Terry, who abruptly turned on her heels and slammed the door to her apartment. Two ladies were close enough to high-five each other.

Brother raised his eyebrows and slowly shook his head. He'd never seen anything like this before.

"So handsome! You headed up to my floor?" Peek-a-boo Negligee asked again. She gave him a big smile that revealed several missing teeth.

"Ladies, I need some help." Brother finally said.

"I'll help you." Giggles ripped through the air like the sound of clucking hens.

"I'm looking for someone," Brother continued. He glanced up at one particular woman who held a blunt in her mouth.

"Who you looking for?" She pursed her lips together. "Sylvia the weed lady? Cause she ain't here." She puffed on her blunt and leaned forward on the railing, then shot a stream of smoke out sideways from her mouth.

"I'm looking for William Davis."

The playful atmosphere quickly evaporated, like a puff from Weed Girl's blunt. Flatiron quickly went back into her apartment and closed the door, followed by the one drying her plate.

Blunt frowned. "What you want with that old thing for?" Blunt's eyes roamed up and down Brother's body slowly, she smiled once she was satisfied.

He was getting somewhere so Brother gave all his attention to Blunt. "Need to holler at him. Ask him a few questions." Brother shifted his weight and narrowed his eyes at her. "He live here?"

She smiled a slow smile and took her time taking another hit. Her hand dangled close to her mouth, the burning paper wedged between two fingers. She held the smoke in her lungs for several moments, then finally let it escape through her nose.

"If I tell you, what you got for me, Black Panther? Huh?" Her tongue slid seductively across her teeth. "Ain't shit free."

Brother knew what kind of payment she wanted. For a split sec-

ond, he tried picturing himself naked with this woman, her blunt dangling from her mouth as he pumped inside her. Through her tank top, he watched the curve of her breasts and his eyes roamed the curvature of her hips as his imagination and male ego picked up momentum.

“Black Panther!”

A harsh whisper came from behind him, interrupting his thoughts. He turned to see a little boy, possibly a lookout, hanging near the entrance. He had an earring in each ear, light brown tips on the top of his high-top fade. His kicks were more expensive than Brother’s. He was leaning in the doorway and looked about ten years old. His arms crossed over his chest. He stood next to a Mongoose bike. He jutted his head up quickly one time. “Who you looking for?”

“Hey lil’ man!” Brother looked around then walked over to him and bent down to meet the boy eye-to-eye. “I’m looking for William Davis. Do you know where he lives?”

“Nah. Who you? The po-leeses?” he asked suspiciously.

“Nah lil’ bro, I ain’t the police. I’m here on personal business.”

“What you got on it?”

“Huh?”

“What-you-got-on-it? Like my mama said, ain’t shit free.” He rolled his neck.

Brother pulled out a \$1 bill and flashed it in front of the boy’s face. “Now you said you know where William lives?”

The boy looked Brother up and down like the dollar was disrespectful to his intelligence.

“Nah, never heard of him,” he answered, crossing his arms.

Brother frowned, then pulled out a \$5 bill.

“How about now?”

“Nope. Don’t know him.” He stared Brother in the eyes with his arms still crossed over his chest. “Personally.”

Brother watched the little hustler for a moment, then pulled out three more tens and waved them in the air. “You sure?”

"Now that you mention it... the name do sound kinda familiar." The little swindler had the nerve to tap his little temple like he was thinking. Brother looked at him incredulously.

He sighed and pulled out the rest of his bills in his pocket.

"Look! This all I got. Do you know where he live or not?" The boy snatched the money from Brother and grabbed his bike.

"He live in the basement." He spoke fast, all his words stringing together. "Take the stairs cause the elevator ain't working. And I hope you strapped, 'cause everybody know you ain't from around here." The boy jumped on his bike and started pedaling away.

"What apartment number?" Brother called to the back of the boy.

"You ain't got enough money for that!" He yelled, turning a corner and disappearing.

Brother went downstairs where there were four apartments. The smell of the basement almost made him gag. Smells of filth and despair permeated the air. Strong urine smells wafted through his nose. Brother banged on B1's door. For a while there was no answer. Brother was about to move to B2 when he heard movement behind the door.

"Who the hell is it?"

"I'm looking for William. William Davis." There was silence. "Are you William?"

"Who the hell is asking?"

"My name is Keith. I wanted to ask some questions. Are you William?"

"Questions?" The gruff voice increased to an angry tone. "What the fuck kinda questions?"

This confirmed it for Brother. "I came out here from California." Brother waited for a reply but there was none. He heard more shuffling. "I wanted to get some information about Mennette."

The shuffling stopped. A long moment passed. Brother leaned forward, almost pressing his ear to the door.

"You a reporter?" The voice finally asked.

"Like I said, I came from California. I'm just trying to understand something. I don't mean any harm to anyone."

"Why the hell would you come all the way from California?"

"It's important to me."

There was silence behind the door. Brother thought he had to come up with better reasons to get the person on the other side to open up. A few more moments passed and Brother heard a lock unlock and chain link drop against the door. The door creaked open slightly and at the level of Brother's thighs was a pair of eyes. Then the door swung open and Brother was met by a man in a wheelchair.

"You William?" He asked, looking around.

"Come in."

Brother hesitated, then looked around at his surroundings.

"You here for answers or not?" William asked.

Still, Brother hesitated.

"You said you came all the way from California."

Brother stepped in. Once inside, Brother could see that the man was no threat. One leg was cut off at the knee, the other at the ankle. He was sitting in the wheelchair slouched over and it smelled horrible. His face sagged downward in a sad pitiful scowl.

"You William?"

"Yeah man. Who you?" he frowned up at Brother. "Another reporter?"

"Nah man. Like I said, I'm just trying to find out some information."

Brother explained everything to William, leaving out no details. He figured this was the reason he was here, to get the truth, so he might as well start with the truth. William listened intently, not saying a word until Brother had come to the end of his story about Kenny and Mennette. And explaining why he was there on behalf of his younger brother.

William stared at his left leg. His despair seeped from his body. He reached into a pouch hanging from his wheelchair and pulled

out a pistol. Brother bristled slightly but William just slipped it under the cushion he was sitting on. He took a deep breath and began talking. Telling the entire story of that day that changed his life, as if he'd been waiting to get this off his chest for years.

"I don't sleep." William started. He avoided eye contact with Brother and cleared his throat. He rolled his wheelchair a little to the right, appearing to adjust. He cleared his throat again as Brother sat patiently on the filthy old couch. Brother sensed real remorse from William. It was in the way his head hung. It was in the way his face elongated into a permanent sag.

"Ever since that day, I don't sleep. I see her face and I think about her all the time. We ain't planned it. We was young boys. Stupid, arrogant kids. Me and Curtis knew who Mennette was. She went to school with us. Came from a poor family on the other side'a town. My cousin Darius went to Ronnie's school. When he and I hang out, he'd bring Ronnie and I'd bring Curtis."

William fell silent for a moment. Brother snuck a look at his watch. 8:47 PM. He had plenty of time to get back to the airport. He just didn't want to be in this neighborhood for too much longer.

"We was all drunk that evening. We was out celebrating cause we had beat our biggest rival team when we saw her walking. Ronnie said, 'Hey! That's that broke girl who thinks she's all that!' He'd tried to talk to her a week before when we was all at the park, but she wasn't having it. She'd embarrassed the shit out of him in front of some of his friends. Ronnie wasn't used to many people telling him no. His parents was loaded. He went to a fancy private school. He was the big man on campus, the big football star. Muthafucka thought he was God's gift to women." William shook his head in disbelief at his own story.

"He always got what he wanted. But Mennette didn't give him the time of day like all the other girls. So dude got angry. And Ronnie had a dark side to him that scared a lot of people. And when I say he was angry? Whew! It lasted for days. When we saw her

walking, it was all he wanted to do to get even with her. Get back at her for embarrassing him in front of everyone.” He took in a deep breath like he’d regretted those words. “She...” he stopped.

Brother wasn’t sure if these were the details that he wanted to hear. He was beginning to second guess his decision to fly to South Carolina following Kenny.

“...Mennette didn’t deserve what happened to her. We did a horrible thing to her. All I see every time I close my eyes is her crying, begging us to stop. And we left her. We just left her there at the park and went home like we’d just been playing ball or something.

“And a few days later when the police rounded us up and charged us, Ronnie’s dad got us off. He was this big-time lawyer who had done trials for celebrities. They would be accused of some wild shit and they always walked. So we knew for sure if he could get big name folks off, we was good. Me, Ronnie, Darius, and Curtis got off. Mr. McClure didn’t even charge my family nothing, which was good cuz Darius’ parents might have been able to pay, but mine couldn’t.” William paused and stared at the muted TV.

“It devastated her. It was the town scandal for a long time. She didn’t deserve that shit,” William said, his voice trailing off.

“I used to see her walking around after like she was lost or something. Reporters and people was always harassing her. Her old man was straight tripping. Was always coming after the four of us anytime he could. He caught me one day after work. Beat me with a bat. I didn’t even see him at first. He came out of nowhere. Couldn’t feel my legs after that.

“I almost died that day. And you know what?” He stared at Brother. “I wish I had. I deserved it. My conscience won’t let me rest. I didn’t do what Ronnie did but I held her down cuz he told me to. I helped him do that shit!” Williams’ face twisted with guilt.

Brother finally spoke. “What happened to the others?”

“My cousin Darius got stabbed to death. Mennette was on trial for that. They let her off based on the situation. They said it was self-defense. The old man tried to say he did it, but everyone knew

he was just trying to cover for her...”

“And the other two?” Brother looked at his watch again.

“Curtis died of a stroke last year. Ronnie up and disappeared a long time ago. Ain’t nobody heard from him in years. She might have been the victim but we all suffered.” He said.

Brother stared at him. He couldn’t believe that those words came straight from his mouth.

“Funny thing is, Ronnie was the only one who did that shit to her,” William continued. “He forced us to help him... but we didn’t say no. It was three of us and we could have made him stop, but we went along with it so we all caught the heat. She probably didn’t know who did what so she just said all of us and Ronnie didn’t fess up that it was only him. Rich bastard! He’s the only one Mennette’s crazy daddy didn’t get to. Cuz he lived on the other side of town behind some gates and he didn’t go to our school. I’m over here paralyzed and that nigga’s probably out there somewhere, living his life. Do you know how many times I wanted to end this?”

“This?” Brother asked, stunned at the words coming out of William’s mouth.

“My life.” He paused. “Three years ago, I took bottles of pills. Swallowed as many as I could find in my bathroom. Still here.” He said, sounding disappointed. “Wheeled myself outside one night just waiting for something bad to happen. Them muthafuckers out there wheeled me right back down here.” He frowned, pointing to the window.

“I drink. All day. Anything I can get my hands on. Man, anything. Try to get her face out my mind. The other day, I decided I couldn’t take it no more. You know, the anniversary of that night passed two months ago.”

This was too much for Brother. Maybe this information was something that Kenny didn’t need to know. He knew his brother, and Kenny would want to come back to investigate, talk to this man, and obsess over this.

Brother stood. “I think I’ve heard enough. This was much more

than I planned to deal with, but I appreciate that you told me. Good luck my brutha. I'm sure you've received what you've deserved in this life."

Brother walked to the door when he heard William's voice again. He turned to see the first of tears run down William's face. "For what it's worth man, I regret that night. Not just for what happened to me, but for what we put that girl through. And her family." He looked down at his legs and coughed, hacked up some phlegm from his chest and spit it right on the floor. "I've paid for my sins. I've been paralyzed for years. Diabetes rotted my legs off. Now this cancer eating me from the inside out. So, you're right. It's my payback. Life gave me what I deserved."

Brother didn't respond. He just shut the door as he walked out. He made a beeline from the basement back up to the walkway between the buildings. It was much quieter now and all those women who cat-called him were safely tucked back into their apartments.

Halfway up the walkway, Brother heard a single gunshot come from the basement. A few pigeons leapt from the ground into the air and flew away. The gunshot noise didn't raise any other attention or suspicions and no one seemed to make a move towards the apartment or even glance at Brother as he hopped in his waiting ride and drove off.

That was enough for him. Brother was about to take his Black ass back to California. He dialed 911 and reported gunshots heard in apartment B1 at the Cambridge Apartments. His interest in Mennette's past slipped away as he realized that life was too short. He wished Kenny would just come back home and forget about this crazy mystery surrounding his wife. He should wait until she regains her memory. And he planned on telling Kenny that very thing the next time they spoke.

Chapter 35

KENNY

Kenny threw a tennis ball against the low hotel ceiling. He lay tossing, catching, and throwing it back until there were dozens of dark, round smudge marks on their white paint. He didn't care. They'll just charge the fee to his credit card on file.

Kenny's mind raced like a horse in the wind. Everything he just learned from Ms. Vee over the last few hours swirled like a tornado in his head.

He tossed the ball a few more times, then bolted upright on the bed. He swung his legs around and let them hang from the side. With a huge sigh, he roughly rubbed his face, trying hard not to look at the shopping bag in the corner of the room.

Kenny rolled his neck around, then jumped up. He paced the floor. He kept glancing, turning away from, then looking back again at the plastic Walmart bag Ms. Vee gave him as he left. Inside was one of Cecil's baby outfits, a sketchbook full of Mennette's early drawings and paintings, plus a tattered brown diary. She had discovered the items in the trash the morning after Mennette disappeared. Ms. Vee also handed Kenny an envelope that contained a copy of Cecil's birth certificate. Ms. Vee assumed Mennette had forgotten it in her hurry to leave.

Unable to resist any longer, Kenny finally grabbed the bag, placed it on the little table and took a seat. He pulled everything out one by one, examining them and laid them out in a row on the

table in front of him. He was most interested in the journal so he reached for it first.

Inside, chunks of pages were missing. They were tattered at the binding in jagged edges, as if they were torn out in a rage. He ran his finger across the stumps of her memories. He opened and caught glimpses of the curly, feminine penmanship that belonged to a teenaged Mennette. He began to read.

A few pages into the young girl's rendition of her life, Kenny learned what she thought of her four younger brothers and sisters, about her adoration for her dad, plus the fact that she aspired to become a famous designer. Kenny skipped around. He wasn't sure what he was looking for. Then his eye rolled past the name "Ronnie" and he stopped. He went back to the beginning of the entry.

Saturday, July 14, 1990

The mid-summer carnival at the fairgrounds was so much fun today! I'm so glad Guadalupe was here to go with me. Daddy gave me a whole \$20 bill to spend! I couldn't believe it! We ate so much! Hot dogs! Funnel Cake! Soda! And the rides! I got kinda dizzy on that swing thing, though. But I still loved it! I'm going to remember this day for a long time!

Oh, but there was this one thing that happened that was so annoying. I saw these boys from school. Well, two of them, Darius and Curtis were in my class last year but I didn't know the other two. Well, one of them started whistling at me and making kissing sounds. He was calling me cute and stuff but he sounded like a creep! I just rolled my eyes. Me and Lupe tried to ignore them but they kept following us. Ronnie! That was his name. I heard the other boys call him Ronnie.

Well, Ronnie looked like he was Tiger Woods going golfing or something! He had on this fancy prep boy polo shirt, khaki pants and shoes. Shoes! Who wears shoes to a fair? You wear sneakers, shorts and a t-shirt! Me and Lupe were laughing to each other about his

outfit. Maybe one of them heard us because then Curtis with his dumb ass goes and tells him that the kids in my school like to call me "Broke Girl." So Ronnie starts saying, 'Don't nobody want your Broke Girl pussy no way!' And his friends start laughing.

That just pissed me the hell off! So I turned around and dissed him real good. I said, 'Don't nobody want your stuck up, Tiger Woods-wanna be, Steve Urkel nerdy ass either!' His boys fell out over that one and so did Lupe. So did the other people who were around us. I screamed it kinda loud so they were laughing too. I know he felt real stupid because that shut him up! And they finally stopped following us. Ronnie looked real pissed when I walked away, but I didn't care. If he didn't call me names, I wouldn't have dissed him back. Boys are so annoying and stupid sometimes!

Kenny couldn't keep his chuckles down. That was his Menette... feisty! Clearly, she's always been that way. So she and Ronnie had a little history, huh? Was that fool really petty enough to hold a grudge because a girl rejected him? Kenny wanted to know what happened next but that's where the biggest chunks of pages had been removed. He flipped to the next available entry.

Tuesday, January 1, 1991

There isn't much that's very "happy" about this new year. Daddy's been in jail for months and I miss him so much. I know everyone else does too.

Last week was the saddest Christmas I've ever had in my life. Mommy got Leslie, Noah, Luke and Sissy toys in wrapping paper from a local charity event because they are still real young. But she asked me to understand they didn't do gifts for teenagers and she didn't have enough money to buy me something because Daddy wasn't there to help out.

I guess I get it. He's not here and he's not working so there's not enough money for everything. But it still sucked to not have any-

thing at all to open on Christmas. Not even a pair of socks! But it really, really sucked not having Daddy here. Mommy said I'll understand soon enough what it is to sacrifice for your kids.

I didn't know he was even in me until October, after they took Daddy away for beating up William. I wasn't eating too much because of everything going on. But whenever I did eat, it wouldn't stay down. Mama started noticing and finally asked me when I last saw my cycle. I honestly couldn't remember. That's when she took me to the doctor. Doctor said I was pregnant and that I was too far along to get rid of him so I had to keep him.

Yeah, him! I'm having a boy. I'm about 21 weeks along now. All my clothes are fitting tight and I don't know how I'm going to buy new ones. It's kinda weird to me to see my stomach slowly getting bigger and bigger. I felt him moving around for the first time last week and that was kinda cool. I started talking to him. I know it's crazy but if I can feel him moving around, I think maybe he can hear me if I talk to him. All I said was hello and I asked if he was doing ok in there. Silly, I know. I wonder which one of them he'll look like when he's born? I wish I didn't have to go back to school tomorrow. But I have to be brave and stick it out if I'm ever going to be able to take care of the both of us.

There weren't very many entries left because more pages were ripped out. Kenny noticed that as her life got more complicated, Mennette had stopped writing in pretty colored pencils and exclusively wrote in black ink. The ballpoint had been etched deep into the paper, he could practically feel the imprint of the words on his soul. He read the second to last entry.

Thursday, December 12, 1991

Ms. Vee said we gon' move soon. She's going to help me get Cecil back and we're gonna leave. Good. Because someone burned my soul and there's nothing left for me here anyway. She closed all the

curtains on that side of the house for me so I don't have to see that place. I have no desire to go anywhere so I'm going to stay in this house until it's time for us to move.

I should have been there. Me and Cecil. I wish that we all died together. Whoever or Whatever is responsible for letting me live has an awful sense of humor. But since I'm being forced to live, then I want to get out of here. I want to run as far away from here as I can. There's no need to remember any of this because I'm alone in the world now.

I wish I could forget everything! Forget what happened. Forget those boys. Forget this town and all the nosy ass people and reporters in it. Forget that my whole family is dead. Because maybe if I don't remember, I might not feel so empty? Maybe if I don't remember, then I can't have nightmares? Maybe if I'm someplace new, someone new, I can actually have peace?

Every muscle in Kenny's face tightened. He snapped the book shut, clenching it until the tops of his knuckles turned colors and his forearms spasmed. He stared at the book in his hand, his chest heaving in and out. An intoxicating blend of anger, sadness and mourning rippled through his body. He commiserated with his wife's younger self without tears.

Kenny violently threw the book across the room. It knocked over a lamp with a crash. Then he picked up his glass and threw that too. It hit the dresser mirror. The glass-on-glass impact made both shatter.

This trip to South Carolina. This journal. This truth. It was way too much all at once. How the hell could he be married to someone for all of these years and not know the most important things that shaped her life? Kenny had shown Mennette everything about himself and she loved him through it all. Why hadn't she given him the chance to do the same for her? She always said that she loved him. Well, weren't you supposed to be 100% transparent

with the person you love? If she never trusted him the way he always trusted her, then what exactly was their marriage based on?

The hotel room phone rang and he snatched it up.

“Yeah?”

“Hi Mr. Young. This is Sonya from the front desk. I got a call that there was a loud crash in room 217? Is everything alright?”

“I’m good. I tripped over the chair. Sorry for the noise.” He stared at the broken glass on the floor and the alcohol stain on the wall beside it. “Thanks for checking on me.”

Chapter 36

BROTHER

What Kenny couldn't do in six days, Brother had done in less than six hours at ground zero... get the backstory on some of the shit from Mennette's past that she never told her husband. And while Kenny hung around Abbeville to make Ms. Vee a second dinner on Wednesday, Brother had flown back on an early two-leg flight.

Brother had parked himself back on Kenny's couch a full 24 hours before he got home on Thursday night. Kenny was none the wiser of Brother's absence. Karen was long gone and Brother had taken Mennette to a follow-up doctor's appointment earlier. When they got back, she slunk around the house, back to her habit of eyeballing him suspiciously. It made Brother chuckle to himself. He wasn't sure where she was, but she was definitely in the house, staying out of his way. He had to admit that after learning everything, he had a bit more compassion for her.

By the time Kenny lumbered into the front room, Brother assumed Mennette was upstairs fast asleep. Brother was stretched out on the couch binge-watching *This Is Us*. He looked up and immediately knew his brother needed a drink. He hit pause on the remote, went to the kitchen and came back with a bottled water.

"This better than alcohol. You need to keep your mind clear. Talk."

Kenny shook his head. "Oh nah, brotha! I'ma definitely need

something stronger than that!" He dropped his bags to the floor and slid them against the couch with his foot and went into the kitchen where he pulled out his secret stash of the "good stuff." After a shot of Hennessy Pure White, he felt a little more relaxed.

"Where she at?" He turned to Brother as he met him in the kitchen.

"Sleep, I think. I 'on know. But she in here somewhere. She keep sneaking by me like a cat, real suspicious like. But she ain't try to leave. Look, lil' bro. Don't let this kill you."

"You don't know the half." Kenny paused. "It's way more than I expected. And I feel like there's more that I don't know."

Brother thought about Kenny's comments. He was right about that. Brother was certain Kenny didn't get the scoop from the old woman that he had gotten. He struggled for a moment on whether or not he should fill Kenny in on his trip and the intel he gathered. But what good would it do? He knew Kenny well and it would only make Kenny want to fly back out to South Carolina and obsess over something he couldn't change. And Brother didn't want that. So he held on to what he knew for a better time.

The pair moved back to the living room. Brother let Kenny ramble on about Ms. Vee and the fire and the old man next door. When he finished, Kenny turned his weary gaze to Brother.

"I'm exhausted, bro. I'ma go check on her and take a shower." He passed by Brother and nodded when Brother patted him on his back.

Upstairs, Kenny poked his head into their bedroom but Mennette wasn't in bed. He looked in the restroom and she wasn't there either. He slipped back to the paint room and there she sat her back to him. He watched her flip the paintbrush up and down, finishing the crest of a sunset overlooking a beach. Fluffy curled up in a comfortable ball at the foot of her resting and barely looked up at him when he opened the door.

Something about Mennette's peace angered him. How could she be sitting there with not a care in the world while he had all

this turmoil swirling inside of him that she caused? If she had only been honest about her past, he wouldn't be crisscrossing the United States playing Inspector Gadget with the puzzle pieces of her life! He took a deep breath to steady himself. Mennette must have felt his presence because she turned around and stared. Neither of them moved. It was as if she was looking into his soul as his eyes burned into her.

"You made it back." Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "Wasn't sure if you remembered where you lived."

Something in him snapped and he lost his cool.

"Oh, I remembered. And I got questions!"

"About?" Her eyebrows rose to the top of her forehead.

The muscles in his jaws contracted and he reached into his pocket and pushed Cecil's birth certificate towards her that he got from Ms. Vee.

"Whatchu know about this?"

Mennette took the paper from him and examined it. The paintbrush that was in her other hand splattered to the floor as she unconsciously released it to join her other hand in gripping the paper. The little cup of water by her feet toppled over unnoticed.

Wide-eyed, Mennette looked wildly from the paper to Kenny and back.

"I have a baby?" Her jaw slacked, leaving her mouth agape.

"Mennette!" Kenny growled through gritted teeth, "I've had just about enough of this bullshit! What the fuck is going on?"

"I don't know! Where did you even get this from?" Mennette couldn't hide her hysteria. Neither could Kenny.

"Don't fucking worry about where I got it from! Where the fuck is the baby?" He took a step closer.

"Where the fuck is the baby, Mennette? And! AND! You got your fucking tubes tied? All this time we been trying to have a baby and you never told me that shit? Lying ass!" He punched at a nearby easel. It clattered to the floor. Mennette winced.

"I swear, I don't know anything about this!" Mennette kept

shifting her gaze from the birth certificate to his face. Kenny closed the short distance between them and snatched the birth certificate from her.

"You know something!" he hissed, grabbing her arm.

"You're hurting me! Let me go!"

"You know! Stop playing games with me. You remember something!"

Mennette let out a bone-chilling scream. She flailed her arm out of his grip and started wildly swiping at him with her nails. Kenny leaned his head out of the way, stretching out his arms to keep her at bay.

"HEY!"

Brother's voice boomed into the room, making them both freeze in their tracks. He moved quickly to get between them.

"Hey man, calm down! Go." He ordered Kenny, pointing towards the door. "Go cool off. You don't wanna do this. Everybody is tired, cranky, and we don't wanna do nothing we gon' regret in the morning. Especially nothing that's gon' get us put in jail."

Brother watched as Kenny stormed out. Mennette crumbled to the floor. Brother went over to her and gathered her in his arms. Even though he never cared for her, Brother was always a softy when it came to women crying.

Mennette sobbed into his shoulder. And for a few minutes, he gave her space to get it out. When her breathing slowed, he finally spoke.

"I thought you were upstairs sleeping. Why don't you get ready for bed. Take one of those muscle relaxers Dr. Cardoza prescribed you and let's just call it a night." Mennette hesitated. Brother placed his hands around both shoulders causing Mennette to look up at him.

"I'll walk you upstairs. I'm not gonna let him do anything stupid." Mennette's face relaxed a bit and a foreign look settled the wild look in her eyes; trust. Brother snorted lightly to himself as the corner of a smile lifted part of his face. *My, my! The difference*

24 hours could make! he couldn't help thinking.

Like an obedient child, Mennette nodded her head. Slowly, she started to get up and Brother helped. Once she was safely tucked in her room, Brother headed back downstairs. Kenny wasn't in the living room, kitchen, or the gym. So Brother checked out back. There he was, pacing in the backyard, pounding one fist into his other palm

"I'm losing my mind, man!" Kenny said as he wore a groove into the small plot of grass. "I'm losing my fucking mind! All this shit! I'm trying to keep my cool. But something in there..." he pointed where Mennette was. "Just hearing her smart ass just made me snap!"

"Man, you can't blame her right now. It ain't fair. She don't remember shit." Brother never thought he'd see the day that he was defending Mennette, but here it was.

"Do she? Don't she? I don't know, Brother. I think she playing me. I think Mennette know some shit. She know that now I'm finding out some shady things about her and she playing me to keep me off her ass."

"Come on, man! Are you hearing yourself? She's lucky she even escaped that accident." Brother tried appealing to Kenny's reason without luck.

"All this time, I'm defending her. I'm trusting her. I'm thinking that she is the same Mennette. Turns out, I'm not sure I even knew her! She been lying and keeping shit from me from jump!" Kenny stopped pacing and walked purposefully to his stash.

"She leaves the house talking 'bout she wants a divorce. She comes back home and now she don't remember? Crazy ass men chasing her and she don't remember? She had a whole-ass baby! But she don't remember? And her fuckin tubes tied! She don't remember that shit either?" Taking a swig of the Hennessy Pure white made him pause.

"How in the hell we supposed to be having babies and her damn tubes tied? So just fuck Kenny, huh? Fuck what I wanted

the most!" Kenny's jaw twitched. That vein crawled angrily up the side of his neck breaking away like an upstream river into the side of his head.

"If she had just been honest, I might have understood that. Maybe we could have adopted. But then again, maybe she didn't want kids at all. But she never said that shit! Just kept fucking smiling in my face saying it's gonna happen for us." Kenny monologued in a high pitched voice with big dramatic swoops of his hands. Brother just let him vent.

"Meanwhile, she already had a fucking baby and didn't bother to tell me! Why, man?" he asked Brother, not really expecting him to answer.

"Why she do that shit?" Kenny was hysterical and close to tears.

"You got to be gentle with her." Brother chose his words carefully. "You not playing on level ground. Her memory. She had a head injury."

"Okay. Okay. Let's say she really did lose her memory from this accident." Kenny's speech started to slur a bit. "Well, when she did have her memories, she forgot to tell me any of this shit!!" Kenny's voice had reached a fevered pitch.

"She lied to me, man!" Kenny flung the glass of Hennessy across the room. Miraculously, the thick glass didn't break. It only spilled its contents.

"She's been lying to me! So what should I do, Brother? Huh? Keep letting her lie to me?"

"Maybe she's not lying about not remembering. Look. I ain't never been a fan of Mennette's. You know that. But she need you right now, lil' bro. She need you to be calm. Ain't no way she gonna ever get her memory back with you grabbing, hollering, and shaking her like that. You gotta get your shit together."

Kenny's face twisted into a scowl.

"And when she gets her memory back, she'll just confirm that she's been lying to me for years!"

Brother rubbed a hand over his head. "Man. This whole thing

is driving you crazy. Yo blood pressure probably up. You know you Black, right? And you still eat that swine so you might need to chill out.

“Look. I know it’s been hard for you too. But honestly, y’all had something that was real. And right now, you the only one to protect her. If she loses that trust in you, who does she have? Where does that leave her? Maybe you should just wait. Stop running around chasing these ghosts of Christmas past and just wait.”

“For what?”

“Till she get her memory back. Then she can tell you all her deepest, darkest secrets. If you can handle it.”

“Man, she might not ever get her memory back.”

“That’s a chance you gon’ have to take.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Forget about all this shit I’m finding out? Forget that she lied to me for all these years? About everything? Everything we had was based on some lie! This money. Her job. The baby. Even her family! Naw, I ain’t doing that.”

“I’m not saying forget or even forgive. But until you get to the bottom of this, you got to keep your cool. You wanna end up killing yourself? Stroking out? Having a heart attack?”

Kenny looked at him and sighed. “I love her man. I do. But this shit...” he paused and shook his head. He inhaled deeply and blew out ragged breaths. “This ’bout the hardest thing I done been through. Up there with Mama dying.

“Do you know when I fell in love with Mennette?” Kenny paused, his energy calming down. “It was right after Mama died. I didn’t know where the hell you’d disappeared to and I was left stuck with figuring out what to do with all of Mama’s stuff. She’s the one who helped me pack all of that stuff up. She helped me find a place to live. She helped me carry shit. I mean we walked! Boxes! Bags! All kinds of things. You name it, we trekked it to the storage place up the street. That’s when I knew that she was special. Not many girls had the kind of humility that she had back then.” Kenny’s heart warmed with the memory.

"She's something else! She's fiery! And driven. But that woman upstairs? She ain't her. She different. And I ain't feeling this different one! Does she frustrate me? Hell yeah, her stubborn ass!" Then Kenny chuckled to himself. "You know, I ain't had no real ass since she been home. Trying not to put pressure on her but damn! A man can only take so much."

Brother looked at him. "You still ain't had no pussy? No wonder you wound tighter than a guitar string!" Brother laughed out loud at his own joke and Kenny reluctantly had to join in.

"Ain't no way. I got to get all my loving," Brother insisted, starting to gyrate and thrust his hips comically. Kenny stared at Brother for a second before busting out laughing. These were the moments when he loved and hated his brother all at the same time.

The mood lightened as their laughter died down. Kenny took a seat in one of the lounge chairs they had on the small slab of concrete that served as a deck. Brother joined him on the matching chair. They stared up into the night sky.

"When are you supposed to be meeting with ole girl from Mennette's job?" Brother asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Tomorrow night."

"Maybe she'll have some more insight into Mennette."

"Maybe. At this point, I don't put nothing past Mennette."

A moment passed before Kenny let out a long, rough sigh. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall.

"Hey, Kenny, where them pictures?"

Kenny gave Brother a weary look. Brother shrugged. Kenny pointed off and closed his eyes again. "They in a folder, in the front of my suitcase."

Brother got up and disappeared into the house. Kenny thought about Brother's words and decided big bro was right. He did need to calm down. All the stress of the last few months had him dizzy.

Brother re-emerged from the house with the envelope. "So you just walked around, pulling out these pictures, asking strangers if they knew these people?" Kenny nodded without responding or

opening his eyes. Brother let out a low whistle.

"I have to admit, my brother, you got balls! That woman in there can't never say you didn't love her." Brother chuckled then pulled out the naked pictures. He sifted through them, smiling at each one. "I like that red wig though. I might have to get Karen to buy one." he laughed. "The body on this chick though! And that cute little tattoo."

Kenny opened his eyes and turned to Brother. "Tattoo? What tattoo?"

Brother handed Kenny one of the pictures as he continued to look through the rest. "Right there on her left shoulder." He said matter of factly.

"That ain't no tattoo, that's a mole."

"Nah. Look again. That's a tattoo."

Kenny frowned and narrowed his eyes. "I'll be back." He said.

"Ummm, hmmm." Brother responded. "I'll be right here." He said, still looking through the other photos.

Kenny returned with a magnifying glass he'd pulled from his office desk. He slid the glass across the woman's back. "Well, I'll be damned!" Kenny muttered out loud. How could he have missed this before? The mole was, indeed, a tattoo: A red heart with a dagger stuck through it.

Chapter 37

KENNY

*I*t was a quarter to 11 PM and Chocolate still hadn't shown up yet.

Kenny had been parked in a booth at the La Pinata Mexican Restaurant in Concord since 9:30. He wanted to make sure he didn't miss her. The free-flowing chips and salsa, along with an occasional shot of tequila, kept his mouth busy. But by 10:30, his waitress kept looking at him with pity for being stood up. He just ordered another tequila but didn't drink it. He intended to be sober for this conversation. Whenever it happened.

At 10:50, Kenny really wanted to leave but curiosity kept him glued to his seat. The place had been crowded with singles and couples all night. There was a live DJ who kept a great balance of lively and romantic music. There was a tiny dance floor in front of his booth and Kenny watched as a few couples swayed together in the tiny space. His eyes stole furtive glances at the main entrance. He was seated close to the back of the restaurant facing the door so he could see Chocolate the moment she stepped in. At 10:54, he was glad he waited.

Chocolate strolled in and leaned her head in to speak with the greeter. Kenny stood up and raised his hand in a wave. She caught his eye, smiled and pointed. The greeter then stepped out of the way and let Chocolate pass. As she passed tables, all eyes turned towards her. She looked stunning. A light, white trench-like coat

was open to reveal a black sequined cocktail dress that showed off her beautiful, ample cleavage. As she sauntered through the restaurant in a pair of red pumps, her eyes fixated on him and the smile never left her lips. He stepped towards her to accept her coat when she arrived at the table.

"Kenny!" Chocolate said breathlessly as she leaned into him with a kiss on his cheek. Her perfume danced in his nose and her hand lingered on his back as she pressed her soft body into his chest. He felt her inhale.

"I'm so sorry I'm late." She turned around and let him help her out of her coat while she chattered on.

"...but there was an accident on the road. Plus I snuck out of my event later than I expected. It was still going on when I left. You know how office politics go... ya gotta show your face and look like you're down with the team!"

Kenny only heard a few words of her explanation. His eyes were too busy roaming the contours of her hips and exposed cleavage. The slightly amused smile on her face let him know that she noticed his appreciative glare. Out of her coat, he could appreciate the slinky, sparkly black spaghetti-strap dress that cascaded against every curve she owned. For a plus-size woman, she was sexy as hell. The two shots of tequila he had while he waited weakened his ability to contain his obvious gawking.

"Damn! You look real nice tonight." He licked his lips.

"I'm coming from an office cocktail party, remember?" She fluttered her perfect eyelashes at him as she took a seat. "I know this is a dive, but they have the best margaritas here. You drinking?"

"Tequila." He sat also, draping her coat on the hook atop his side of the booth.

"I'm gonna order some more salsa and chips."

Chocolate flagged down a waitress and ordered a Texas margarita along with her chips and salsa.

"Can I also get a quesadilla?" she asked the waitress. Turning to Kenny she said, "I should be full from that party but all they had

was lots of hors d'oeuvres. Ever been to a party like that? No real food, but you just stand by the food table and nibble your ass off on cheese crackers, celery sticks, and Vienna sausages? I mean who serves Vienna sausages anyway?"

Kenny just stared at her as she continued with the small talk, smiling and giggling like they were on a date. After her second margarita, Kenny realized Chocolate wasn't going to be the first to open up about Mennette.

Her eyes slanted up towards him as her talking slowed a bit, "...because a girl can get lonely sometimes." The combination of her dark skin and cat-like eyes made Chocolate look like an exotic Black china doll. She was absolutely, stunningly beautiful. But Kenny had to focus.

"So. What you got for me?" Kenny said, trying to control the situation.

"Let's dance," she said, standing up, gulping the last of her drink and ignoring his comment. "It will loosen us both up."

"I don't need no loosening up."

"Your jaw is so tight, it's twitching." She giggled, jutting her hip out and placing her hands on them. "If that vein on the side of your head gets any bigger, it's gonna pop. Relax! I'll give you all the information I know. Have another shot and calm your nerves."

She wiggled and grabbed his hands to coax him to stand up. Kenny relented and downed his shot of tequila. Once he was up, she led him over to the small dance floor, walking in time to the salsa music. Instantly, they entangled themselves in a rhythm of salsa dancing. His hand hard pressed protectively at the small of her back while her breast pressed hard against his chest. She knew her body and moved it gracefully. Her hips swayed in motion with the sexy Spanish music. Kenny had to admit, he really enjoyed dancing with her.

As the fourth song started, Kenny felt himself slipping into their chemistry and he needed to stay clear-headed. He gently touched Chocolate's arm and guided her back to the table. He had to admit

that the drinks and few dances made him feel much less pensive. He slipped back into the booth.

"Kenny, you got some moves!" She grinned, slipping into the booth beside him. "Who knew, huh?"

Kenny raised his eyebrows and gave her a small smile.

"Feeling a little more relaxed?"

"I do, actually," he admitted. "But what is this information about Mennette?"

"Tough crowd." She teased, playfully poking a finger at his shoulder.

Kenny gave her a look that let her know he meant business.

"Oh, okay!"

Kenny watched as her beautiful breasts rose and fell with her deep inhale.

"I wasn't completely honest with you at the office. I know a little more than I let on."

Kenny looked into her eyes to stay focused and waited.

"The man that I was telling you about, the one that got Mennette fired?"

Kenny leaned his head forward.

"There was a rumor around the office that Mennette and the man had some type of history."

"History?" He repeated even though he knew what she was alluding to. "Like an affair?" He asked, his anger rising.

She nodded, slowly. "I think that may be why she got fired. Maybe. But it could have been just rumor like I said. He didn't work there. He would come in to talk with the directors. Every time he showed up, she would get all frazzled, like she couldn't concentrate."

"What's his name?"

"I'm not sure. I really don't remember."

Kenny's fist landed loudly on the table. Chocolate jumped. A few other startled patrons and waiters looked in their direction. Kenny raised his hand at their server and motioned for her to

come over, playing it off. He ordered another tequila.

Chocolate reached her hand up to his shoulder and gave it a few caring caresses. "There goes that vein again." Her eyes focused on his face. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this Kenny. You're such a good man."

"What made you want to tell me now?"

"I got to thinking after you left. And I just didn't think it was right for me to keep that information from you."

The midtempo bachata was over and the DJ switched to an exciting merengue which brought a few new dancers to the floor while retiring the lovers. Chocolate looked out at the crowd but didn't remove her hands from his shoulder. She turned back to him and looked him directly in his eyes.

"You ever wonder what would happen if she never gets her memory back?"

"All I ever think about these days." He eased his shoulder from her touch as he looked down into her breast, wondering what was holding them up.

"Mennette..." she paused. "...She was cool, ya know? I always thought she was lucky. Great job. Great man." She looked up seductively at Kenny.

"What was going on at that office? With this man? If he didn't work there, how is he connected to Mennette?"

The server brought over Kenny's tequila and Chocolate ordered another margarita for herself and more chips for them to share. The pair ate and drank while Chocolate shared the office gossip. Some people thought Mennette and this man were secret lovers. Chocolate said she thought she was leaving Kenny for this guy, which enraged Kenny as he thought about the divorce papers.

"There is always gossip in our office." Chocolate stated as she polished off her latest drink. "I don't know how much weight you could put on it. I just thought you should know what was being said and I couldn't tell you while you were in the office that day." Chocolate put her glass down. "Maybe you should just wait until

Mennette gets her memory back. And then you guys can work it out." She stopped and said under her breath, "...or not."

"What you say?" Kenny's words were starting to slur. He wasn't sure he heard her correctly. And truthfully, he was tired of everyone telling him to wait on her memory to return.

"Oh, I said, why not." She grinned. "Why not work things out between you two."

He took a chip and dipped it into the salsa but held it there for a moment. Eventually, he slipped it into his mouth. He glanced at Chocolate and asked, "What you think? Seriously?"

She cocked her head to the side and dismissed his question with a demure flick of her hand. "Doesn't matter what I..."

"It does." He stated sternly.

"Really Kenny, it..."

"It does." He stated again looking deep into her eyes. "To me, it does."

She swallowed, sighed and said, "I assumed they were having an affair."

He shifted uneasily.

"She was just so closed mouth about it and real fidgety when he was around. Every time I brought up the subject, she would dismiss it by saying she's taking care of it."

"Taking care of it?" He frowned.

Chocolate nodded. She shrugged. "Didn't quite know what that meant, but I didn't push." She nervously chuckled. "I just remember feeling bad for you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, there you were being a good man and all. And she had some kind of mysterious dealings with this loud-mouth, arrogant asshole."

Kenny gulped the rest of his tequila. His focus was fading fast. His eyebrows scrunched together in the middle of his forehead.

"There's that vein again. Kenny, you really got to relax. You've been taking care of Mennette all this time. But who's been taking

care of you?" she asked in a breathy tone. She slipped a hand up to his cheek.

"You know Kenny, a good Black man is hard to find now-a-days. It's hard out here for us single women. I know, 'cause I've been looking," she chuckled. "Mennette's so lucky to have you."

Chocolate stared boldly into his eyes and Kenny couldn't look away. The sexual tension between them was so thick. His mind betrayed him, flashing images of her smooth dark brown skin beneath him as he pumped inside of her. His manhood twitched in his pants.

"You look a little thirsty. Let me order you another drink."

"Um, no." Kenny held her hand from trying to flag down the waitress again. "Actually, I really need to use the restroom."

"Oh," she said, but didn't move.

"Um... can you..." Kenny made an open-palm gesture behind her.

"Oh!" Chocolate giggled. "I've gotta let you out, huh?" She slid seductively from the seat but still stood close so that he couldn't help but brush past her to get by.

The men's room was tiny. Just a urinal, one enclosed stall and a sink. Kenny relieved himself in the urinal then washed his hands and stood at the sink, looking into the mirror. How dare Mennette have an affair! He hoped that he had on a poker face in front of Chocolate, but he was swirling with emotions, flowing from anger at Mennette to lust for his apparent date for the evening.

"You gotta pull it together, man!" he said to his reflection. He splashed cold water on his face. He wasn't quite ready to go back out to Chocolate so he went into the stall to give himself a moment while his mind raced.

The door swung open. Someone came in, relieved himself in the urinal, then left without washing their hands.

How could he go home now? He regretted blowing up on Mennette last night because of the lies he discovered in South Carolina. The look on her face and the fear in her eyes as a result of his anger

disturbed him. He never wanted her to ever fear him. But now he just learned she was possibly having an affair. What the hell was he supposed to do with that? He was loose when Chocolate got to the restaurant but now he was certified drunk. He knew he had to calm down before he went back home.

The restroom door opened again and heels clicked on the floor. Then it went quiet. Another moment, and the door to the stall sprung open. Chocolate had a huge grin on her face.

“Girl! Are you crazy? What are you doing in here?” Kenny stammered.

But before he could continue with his protest, she eased her way in and slipped the lock to prevent anyone else from opening it. She pinned him to the stall’s wall with her body. Her hands groped all over his pants. Chocolate slipped an arm around his head to bend it down to meet hers. Her lips found their way to his mouth as her other hand continued gripping around the imprint of his growing erection.

She kissed him urgently like she had been waiting a long time for this opportunity. His head swirled and it hurt to think. So he stopped trying. Hungrily, he returned her kiss. Kenny pressed his tongue into her mouth and sucked at her bottom lip like a man who had been deprived of sex for months.

After a moment, she pulled away from him and leaned into his ear. “Don’t act like you don’t want me. I know you feel what I feel.” Her warmth hung near his ear once she stopped talking. She was panting, her chest rapidly rising and falling as she let her bottom lip lightly touch the bottom of his earlobe. The hairs on his arms stood up. He desperately wanted to taste more of this chocolate. Was she as soft on the inside as she was on the outside?

She lightly placed kisses on his cheeks, near his lips. “I’ve been dreaming of this,” she said in breathy pants. “I always knew we had chemistry. I felt it at the office.” She paused. Her voice was a low, seductive whisper. “I feel it now.”

Kenny closed his eyes and ran his hands over her ass, the

smooth sequins helping him glide over her curves.

Chocolate hiked up a heel, resting it on the toilet seat and guided his hand under her dress. His fingers touched naked wetness. Kenny's eyes popped open in surprise.

"Ooops," she purred, easing herself onto his finger. A moan escaped her lips. "Did I forget to wear panties tonight?" She closed her eyes, her mouth gaped open and she slowly slid herself up and down. Creamy wetness lubricated his finger. Kenny could feel her inside walls pulse around his finger so he inserted another, then a third. She stood still as he took control of sliding in and out of her. Her walls rapidly gripped and released his fingers. Soft groans filled his ears. That made him stiffen inside his pants. She was so wet and hot inside and all he could think about was getting completely inside of her.

Chocolate removed his hand, took her foot off the toilet and slowly shimmied down. Her fingers made quick work of his belt buckle and jeans buttons. His semi-hard manhood was in her mouth in a flash. Kenny's eyes rolled to the back of his head. He tried unsuccessfully to stifle his groan. That made her suck harder.

The door to the bathroom swung open. Chocolate stopped sucking but didn't remove his penis from her mouth. They heard someone come in and stand for a short time as if listening for movement. The person relieved himself in the urinal, then took their time washing their hands. Chocolate narrowed her eyes in a mischievous stare, smiled, and flicked her tongue a few times across his tip. He cringed with pleasure but held in his moans. He shook his head 'no' at her which only made her do it more.

The person in the restroom finally left and Chocolate started to go back to work. But Kenny stopped her. He took her chin in his hand and gently raised her up. "Not here. Not like this."

She slowly shook her head. "But I want you. I've wanted you so bad for so long!" she whined.

"I want you too, but not in this nasty-ass bathroom. You better than this." He stroked the side of her face.

"You know what? If you wanna get outta here, there's a hotel up the street. We've been drinking too much. Neither of us should be driving, anyway."

"You know that ain't a good idea."

"Come on Kenny, you can't pass this up. This... Chocolate? Isn't that what you call me?" She reached for his hand again and slid it up under her dress again. His fingers touched against her wet lips and circled the opening without her coaxing.

"You know you want to taste this Chocolate," she breathed into his ear. "You want to know how it feels to be inside of me? I'll give you a hint," she said, sucking his bottom lip. "It's hot, sweet, tight and always wet."

Kenny couldn't hold himself back anymore. He pushed her against the door of the stall with a hard passionate kiss and it popped open, breaking the feeble lock. They stumbled out but regained their balance. Kenny grabbed her to prevent her from falling but held on and led her to the sink. She instinctively bent over, her palms splayed open on the mirror.

He grabbed at her shoulder with one hand and squeezed as she let her head fall back, mouth open. He nibbled on her neck as he hiked her dress up against her beautiful chocolate skin.

She leaned forward slightly, activating the water sensor. Some sprayed onto her cheek and she stuck her tongue out to catch the droplets. That image made Kenny even harder. He ran a palm up her ass to her back. The other hand found her opening. She was wetter than before. Kenny readied himself in his hand just as the bathroom door swung open again.

A man started to walk in but froze, his eyes ballooning at the sight of Kenny on the verge of putting his penis into a bent-over Chocolate. She turned her head away from the stranger. Kenny threw an angry glare at the man. The man's eyes were fixated on Chocolate's body, probably wishing he was in Kenny's position. Then he caught Kenny's glare and made a swift pivot, disappearing.

Chocolate looked back at Kenny. Kenny looked at her. They si-

multaneously erupted in intoxicated laughter.

"Let's get out of here before we get arrested." He said.

"Up the street to the hotel?" she said, shimmying her dress down. Kenny shoved himself back into his pants, only buttoning the top one and pulled his shirt down to cover his bulge. Chocolate grabbed his hand like they were school-aged kids. Kenny threw four twenties onto the table. He was sure that should be enough to cover all the drinks they had and leave a decent tip. He grabbed Chocolate's coat and she pulled it around her shoulders without pulling her arms through and they swiftly made their way out of the building.

As soon as they were free, Chocolate turned around and grabbed Kenny by the shoulders and kissed him passionately, as if this was her last shot at being with him.

"Look..." she pointed up the street. "We can make it right there. It's a straight line." She looked into his eyes. "I want you so bad!"

Somehow, they made their way to the hotel up the street and secured a room. As soon as they closed the door, clothing started falling off in a trail that led towards the bed. It had been so long since Kenny had a chance to be inside of a woman that the heat, steamy and sizzling feeling added to his tequila-induced intoxication.

The pair tangled themselves in each other. Her heavy breathing made him breathe faster. Then she was sucking. Then he was touching. Finally, he made it inside of her. He pumped like he was digging deep for something. She countered his pumps. Before he knew it she was clawing at his back and hanging on like she was falling out of an airplane.

Everything tightened in the pit of his soul, then released into an explosion that took his breath away. Sweat beaded and released from his forehead and the tip of his nose onto her breast as he hovered over her drenched, dripping and satisfied. So very satisfied.

Chapter 38

KENNY

Kenny stood and walked to the window of the hotel. He looked back over his shoulder at a sleeping Chocolate, her mouth slightly open. A small, sweet snore escaped her throat. A taste of that chocolate was just what he needed to take the edge off. He wasn't proud of what he had done but he didn't judge himself for it either.

Outside of the window, he could see the tops of the mountains in the distance. Ms. Vee's words danced in his head: "Let her forget." Maybe she was right. Kenny sighed. What would being upset with Mennette accomplish? As long as her memory was gone, she would continue to be a mystery to him. He could make the conscious decision to roll with the punches and continue to piece together the mystery or he could keep getting angry over things he could not change and have that vein in his neck pop. The latter, he was not interested in. He heard stirring movements coming from the bed.

"What does that tattoo on your arm mean?" Chocolate's sleepy voice interrupted his thoughts. He turned to see her head propped up on her wrist, watching him. Her hair was tousled around her shoulder as she nestled into one of the pillows.

"The world is on my shoulders."

"Such strong thought lines on your forehead. You really have a lot going on huh?"

He walked to the bed, bent to kiss her on her forehead and sat

down.

"Can I ask you a question?" Chocolate asked, inhaling. She propped herself up on her elbows.

He groaned.

"If I hadn't told you about the rumors of Mennette's affair, would you have still been here?"

"Chocolate..."

She smiled slightly at the nickname.

"You cool with me calling you that?" He recovered.

"Sure, I guess so."

"Chocolate. I think you already know what this is." He responded, lifting himself up. She rolled over as Kenny reached for his pants on the floor.

"That's fine with me," she said. "It was all that I imagined it would be anyway."

"If things were different..." He started but she slowly cut him off.

"But they aren't. I'm a big girl. I've handled much worse than a simple rejection from a married man that's digging me." She smiled. "But if you and Mennette ever break up..." she stopped, forcing him to look up at her. "Well, then things would be different. Tell you what, keep my number. If you need any help with Mennette, please let me know. If I find out anything else for sure, I'll definitely pass it on." She yanked the blankets from her and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

By the time Kenny was fully dressed, she'd slipped into and out of the shower. She reached for a bracelet on the dresser and handed it to him. "Can you?" She asked for his assistance and he obliged, hooking the dainty clasp. That's when Kenny noticed the emblem dangling from the end. He pulled her wrist up closer to his face.

"Where you get this from?" he inquired.

"Why?"

"I've seen this before," Kenny said. "Mennette has a picture of herself that she loves from when we were in college. She had on a

bracelet just like this.”

Chocolate gently pulled her arm away from him and protectively cradled it with her other arm. “It’s not something that I can talk about, Kenny,” she said, taking a step back.

“Is it a sorority? Are you two in the same sorority?” His mind churned as it made a new connection. The nude girl in the photos with the red wig and tattoo on her shoulder also wore a bracelet like this. What the hell was going on?

“Umm... not exactly.” Chocolate chose her words carefully.

“Listen, what we just did... no regrets. But you know that I need information about Mennette before she lost her memory. If you got something, I need you to tell me. I would like to find a person who had a bracelet on just like this one.”

Chocolate looked down. He pulled her chin up with his finger until her eyes met his. “I ain’t gon’ hold nothing against you. And you just said any information I needed, you would pass on.”

“It’s an organization. A very elite group. A secret one. Mennette doesn’t belong to it anymore. But she was the one who introduced me to it when we first met years ago and I needed some help.”

“Organization? What kind?”

“I really can’t say more. I’m sworn to secrecy, Kenny. I’ve already said too much.” She moved to gather her dress and slip it on. Kenny reached over and handed her high heels to her and when she turned around, he helped her into her coat. They walked to their door and stepped outside. Kenny slipped the hotel key card into the return box and the pair walked down the block back to the restaurant parking lot to retrieve their cars.

When they arrived, Chocolate pointed to her car and said, “That’s me over there.” Kenny walked her to the door. She opened the door and was about to get in, but she stopped. Chocolate turned around and tugged on his neck, drawing him in for a kiss on his lips and a soft hug.

“Take care, Chocolate.” Kenny had to admit that he might miss her.

"You too." She got in and turned on the ignition. Kenny took a step back to let her move. But before she put the car in gear, she rolled down her window.

"If you want to know about the bracelet, go to Market Street in San Francisco. There's an elongated building; you can't miss it. Behind that building, way in the back is a large, unmarked building. There's a small boutique catty-corner to it that sells women's clothing. Just go in there and ask them about the bracelet. Take a picture of this so they can see."

Chocolate held her wrist out the window and turned her head. Kenny took a close-up picture of the bracelet with his phone, avoiding her being in the frame. He stepped back and nodded his appreciation.

"I appreciate it."

"Good luck, Kenny."

She started to roll up her window, but stopped. "Travis Stamps," she said. "The guy Mennette was rumored to be having the affair with? His name is Travis Stamps." Then she pulled off.

Chapter 39

KENNY

“Travis Stamps.”

Back at home in his office less than an hour from leaving Chocolate, Kenny muttered the name as he typed it into Google and pressed enter. So many thoughts ran through Kenny’s mind, he felt like his brain could use a search engine to help him sort through it all. He couldn’t believe that investigating Mennette’s past had become his present life. The more he learned, the more questions emerged.

A few articles populated about Travis Stamps. Apparently was born into an affluent Black family, but none of the top results Kenny read offered any details about who his family was or where they came from. It was like Travis Stamps sprung to life when he attended Harvard University on a football scholarship. There was a lot of information about his success on the field throughout his four years there. His name started littering business publications a few years later as he started making waves in the entrepreneur world. The most recent articles detailed his political aspirations as he was running for Mayor of Bay City.

Kenny found a picture of him at a rally just a week ago. He stared at the smile of the man Mennette was supposedly having an affair with. How long had it been going on? Kenny tried to figure out just what she saw in him. What was the lure that this man had on his wife? Was he the reason Mennette wanted a divorce? Was he

the source of all Mennette's lies? Was she really with him whenever she claimed to be away on a trip with Tamara? Did she go see him each morning that she lied saying she was on her way to work?

Kenny leaned into the computer and placed his finger on the forehead of the profile picture. "I'ma fuck you up!" He said to the image on the screen. Something about this man was familiar. And not the "running for public office" familiar. Something else that Kenny couldn't put his finger on. He stared a few minutes longer. Drawing a blank, he finally shut the computer off and called Brother.

"Sup, Kenny?" Brother answered on the first ring.

"Need a favor. Can you run some information on some dude named Travis Stamps? Running for Mayor of Bay City. Anything you find out about him let me know."

"Bet," Brother said then hung up.

After Thursday night's big blow-up, Kenny made himself scarce on Friday, then met up with Chocolate that night, only coming home this morning. Kenny felt terrible about the tension which still lingered in the air. After all, they both still lived in the same space. Things were hard enough and Kenny didn't want to make it more difficult.

So in an attempt to make things better, he made his way to the master bedroom where she'd retreated to. He poked his head into the room and watched as she frowned at the television, her face a mixture of curiosity, amusement, and confusion. She slowly looked at him when she realized he was there. He took that as his cue to walk in and sat on the bed next to her.

"You know, a few years ago, you told me that you would teach me to paint." He paused and waited for her to look back at him. "I think it's past due. You owe me."

"Not now, I'm not in the mood to paint." Mennette folded her arms and attempted to go back to watching TV.

"You've always been in the mood to paint."

"Well, congratulations! You officially put me out of the mood."

Kenny didn't respond. He deserved that. "This ain't been easy. But I want to start fresh. I'm really sorry for the other night. Please forgive me and teach me how to paint." He delivered his rehearsed lines.

"I'm not in the mood." Mennette scooped over on the bed to get a better view of the TV.

"I was wrong for what I did," Kenny admitted. He thought about what Brother said about him having to protect her, no matter how angry he got. Plus he knew you catch more flies with honey. Any setbacks with her could just throw a monkey wrench in his plans and her recovery, so he had to apologize and play nice.

"I just want to see if we can do something together to help us get back on track."

"Not in the mood!" She moved completely to the other side of the bed. "Please leave."

"What can I do to get you in the mood?" He tried smiling, but she ignored him. "I come in peace."

She gave him an irritated look. "Can I be left alone, please?"

"After we paint."

"And then?"

"And then, I'll leave you alone." He promised.

"Fine!"

She let out a long exaggerated sigh, then swung her legs over the side of the bed and headed downstairs.

Kenny grabbed an extra chair from the kitchen and followed her into the paint room. He set his extra chair next to hers.

"So! What are we going to paint? Bowls of fruit, flowers and vases?" He waggled his eyebrows at her. "Naked models?" he asked with an eager smile.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Let's start with something simple."

"Bet." He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "I'm game for whatever."

She went back out to the kitchen without a word to him. In her

absence, Kenny brushed his fingertips across the softness of the multitude of paintbrushes jutting up from the cup. "This should be fun," Kenny thought to himself. He had to admit that the turn of events intrigued him. He looked at the color palette.

She returned with a box of sugar and set it on top of a rolling caddy.

"Really?" he accused, feeling offended.

"Let's get started." She gathered a canvas with different colors of paint. She poured water into a plastic cup from a gallon of tap water she always kept on hand. She set the brushes beside this cup. She grabbed an apron and instructed him to stand. She twirled her finger around and he obliged by twisting away from her. She slipped the apron over his head, then wrapped and tied it around his body.

Immediately, after he sat down, Kenny started dipping his brushes in the water and carefully picking out his colors. He decided that since she was being a smart ass with the box of sugar, he was going to paint it orange and green instead of the traditional pink and white. As he mixed his colors together on the palette, Mennette explained the different types of brushes and the colors and the strokes and motions. He stroked the paint-filled brushes up and down the canvas with haste.

"Slow down!" she said, frowning and looking appalled. "Painting is about patience. Apparently, you don't have much of it!"

Kenny thought this ironic considering the immense amount of patience he practiced while dealing with her ass over these last few months. He chortled.

"Here, let me show you what I mean." She took out an extra canvas for herself and set it in place right next to him.

Kenny watched as her delicate wrists swished and rotated gracefully, creating a colorful background for the sugar box. In just a few strokes, he actually began to see the caddy it was sitting on forming. He sat in awe of her. He hadn't even thought of trying to paint what the box was resting on. He was amazed at how calm

and peaceful she was as she worked. Her mind may not remember a lot, but it definitely remembered what was important to her.

He tried emulating her strokes, her arches, her flicks of the wrists and her grips of the brushes. After, he was impressed with himself on his first try. It wasn't as bad as he expected! He could see why she would hole herself up all day in the paint room. It was cathartic, to say the least.

"Like this?" he asked.

Of course, his box of sugar was floating in mid-air because he dared not tackle the intimidating caddy with all of its intricacies.

"Your stroke is all wrong." She walked over and stood behind him. She gazed over his shoulder.

"Show me then."

She leaned into him, reaching for his hand. He could feel the weight of her breasts on his back. She touched his arm. His stomach actually did a little flip.

"Here, like this. No, no, no! Hold on to the brush." Her voice was soft, deep and soothing. Her breath warmed the back of his neck with each word she spoke. Kenny was instantly aroused. This Mennette was sexy and seductive. Experiencing her in her element turned him on.

Mennette took his wrist in her fingers. The tips of her fingers lightly swayed his hand in the right direction. He looked down at her fingers and admired their sweet, elegant length. He desperately wanted to start his tongue at the inside of her wrists and slowly run it up to the crease of her elbow.

"I'm just gonna move your wrist just a little. Here. Yes, like that, softer. Now we just need to dip the tip in some more paint." She paused. "Soft, soft movements. You're not paying attention." She said when she noticed his eyes were locked onto her face.

"How do you remember all this?"

She leaned back, stood straight up, and hunched her shoulders. "I don't know. It just comes to me."

He turned to her and watched the curve of her lips. Her beauti-

ful nipples poking through her shirt winked at him. She was wearing a bra, but one of those thin, cute ones that were just for decoration or wearing around the house.

“What else comes to you?”

“Not much else.” Her shoulders slightly drooped like they did when she was feeling sad. Kenny watched her intently. His love for this woman never dissipated, no matter how much shit he was finding out. His love for her was not in question. But Kenny now wondered often where her thoughts and feelings truly were.

He slowly raised a clean, soft brush to her exposed shoulder blade and brushed it slowly across it. “What does that feel like?”

“A feather,” she barely whispered, her breath hitched in her throat. His eyes did not move from her lips as he slowly and methodically roamed the soft brush lightly back and forth over her collarbone.

“What about that?”

Her breathing deepened. “A softer feather.” She closed her eyes with a pout and a soft moan. He followed the path of the feather with his lips, leaving kisses in the trail of the brush bristles.

He brought the brush back up and across her chest then lower to her breast, circling the tips against her nipples until they popped through the thin materials of her shirt and bra enough for him to imagine them in his mouth. He rubbed his thumb back and forth over one nipple, pinching it between his thumb and pointer finger until she gasped and trapped her lower lip between her teeth.

“How ’bout that?” His voice octaves lower than moments ago. Her breathing intensified and he suddenly realized that he wasn’t the only one who hadn’t made love in a long time. He watched her eyelids flutter in pleasure. Her hand gripped his shoulders. Kenny paused his stroking.

“I was thinking that I needed a new canvas to inspire me.”

“A new canvas?” Her eyes widened in disappointment because he stopped. “Like what?”

He slowly placed his hand on her cheek and stroked it. She

melted into his touch. He didn't even care if they didn't have sex. Chocolate was a temporary fix. What Kenny really missed was being with the woman he loved. Even though she was different, her body was the same. And for once, he just wanted to bathe in the memory of what they used to be together. He would settle for just seeing her naked. For running his fingers through her hair. For touching her beautiful skin. For painting her.

Kenny stared into Mennette's eyes. And it was almost like she could read his mind. He pulled her T-shirt up over her head. Reflectively, she went to cover her breasts but he stopped her. Gently, he brought her hands down to her sides.

"Don't," he said. "Don't cover up my beautiful canvas." He reached around her and unsnapped her bra, setting her breast free. They expanded. Her brown nipples ripened into two hard buds. In one fluid motion, he released her sweatpants to the floor and she stepped out of them.

"Take your panties off." Without hesitation, she slipped out of them and kicked them across the room.

"I want to paint you." His voice was low and rumbling.

"On what canvas?" She asked, gazing at him through half-closed eyes as she stood nude in the middle of the room.

"I want to paint *you*." He guided her to a white paint sheet on the floor and guided her to lie down flat on her back.

Kenny took the paint and the thinnest brush he had, then dipped it into a blue color. He reached for her hand and exposed her palm open. With the soft tip of the brush, Kenny started a slow ascend from the inside of her right middle finger and pulled it up her palm where he circled around the center softly. He watched her closely as this gentle movement made her breathing begin to deepen again.

After a few sensual circles in her palm, he wet the brush and continued up her delicate wrists, trailed up her arm, across her chest, and ended with light wet circles around her nipple. For this, Kenny decided to change the color to red and the anticipation of

him changing the brush to one with softer, broader bristles made Mennette squirm slightly as her eyes were locked on him.

Another dip in the water cup and Kenny sent more circular strokes across her erect nipple, back across her chest bone to the other breast, rolling over it slowly like it was a speedbump. He took his time taking care to include her areola as well. With each stroke across her nipple, he saw her deep breathing speed up.

He slid the brush down the center of her breast, down her stomach, down her thigh and circled it back up her inner thigh. He stopped right at the crease of her legs and brushed back and forth in the crease. When he stopped, he leaned forward, dropped the brush, then placed his face into the “v” that the paint created.

Kenny slid his tongue across her clit. Mennette moaned, her hands reaching for him. Her eyes formed slits as her head fell back. He massaged his tongue in circles. Her hands slipped to her sides and gripped the canvas beneath her. He moved up and kissed her belly, poking his tongue into the hollow space, then kissed it gently. He moved up to the flat middle part between her breasts and kissed it. He placed a series of soft kisses right at her breast bone then looked at her.

She giggled. “You have paint on your face.”

He kissed her face, then leaned into her partly open lips.

“So do you.”

He rolled over onto his back and they both watched the ceiling fan rotate. “Tell me something I don’t know,” Mennette said, rolling onto her side, facing him.

“Something like what?” he asked, confused. Mennette had a habit of asking some crazy, asinine questions out of the blue. He should be used to it, but it always threw him off.

She hunched her shoulders.

“Like something about your mother. What was she like?”

The question shocked him. His mother? His mother. Kenny always wished she had the chance to meet his mother. He always thought she would have loved Mennette and would have treated

her like the daughter that she never had.

"My mother..." Kenny started, but stopped. Other than Brother, it had been a while since he'd spoken to anybody about his mother. He took a moment to conjure up, then savor the essence of her memory.

"My mother was a beautiful soul. Everyone loved her. She was fiery just like you. Everyone respected her too. With a smile so wide." An endearing smile spread across his face. "That smile was so wide that it damn near took up her whole face." He chuckled. "If there was ever an angel on earth, she was it. We were lucky to have been born to her. We didn't deserve her.

"She would have loved you." Kenny rolled over to face Mennette. "She always wanted a daughter. She got stuck with two knuckle-headed, rough boys." Kenny chuckled thinking of it.

"We gave her hell sometimes. I'm sure we made her gray long before her time. She loved to sing. Just like you do. Sometimes, even now, I can hear her voice, in the kitchen, singing. Aretha. That was her girl. Mama couldn't quite hit all those notes, but she was the only person I knew who could take an Aretha song and make it her own. And it would sound good too! Almost like Aretha wrote another version of it, just for Mama."

Mennette closed her eyes. Kenny imagined that she was trying to picture his mother singing in the kitchen.

"And your father?"

"Don't know much about him," he scoffed

"You don't remember anything about him?"

"There is a time in a boy's life..." Kenny began. "...when he realizes that his mother is just a human being. With the ability to hurt." He paused. "I think I was around 10 when I really truly understood the type of pain my father caused my mother. Sure, I'd seen her cry many times. It only fueled my anger and resentment toward him. But this night... This night was different. I walked in on her sobbing. She knelt over a picture of him and she was praying. Mumbling and shit. I couldn't really hear. But I heard her mention

his name. Mention our names. I hated him at that moment. I really hated him for causing her pain. That was the day I realized that she was just a woman loving and missing a man.” He paused for a few moments.

“And no matter what me and my brother did for her, we could never replace that love she desired of a man. My mother never dated anyone after him. We never saw her with anyone but our father. When I got older, I realized it was on purpose. It was her sacrifice for us.” He picked at the hangnail, pulling it loose from the side of his thumb and flicking it on the floor.

Mennette leaned over and kissed his cheek softly. Kenny didn’t know how to react to this simple gesture. It reminded him of the woman he first met those many years ago.

“Who was worse? You or your brother?”

“*Ppphhh.*” Kenny shrugged. “I think it was a tie. But Brother... He was her twin.”

“He must have taken it hard when she died.”

“You don’t know the half! He went crazy. Practically tore up the hospital. He fought with security. They couldn’t control him. Had to call in the police to subdue him. He didn’t want to leave her. Couldn’t let her go, even long after her spirit left her body.

“He even blamed me for her death. Said I gave her permission to go. At the funeral, he didn’t even sit next to me. He sat on the opposite side. First time since I’d been born that we had been separated. It hurt. We didn’t speak for three years. Other than word on the street, I didn’t know where he was or if he was dead or alive. Heard that he was in a bad way but I couldn’t go to him. He wouldn’t let me. It was really bad.”

Kenny could almost picture the look on his mother’s face. Mennette must have sensed the sadness, the sorrow. She eased her hand over to his and intertwined her fingers into his, holding his palm. They shared a moment of silence as they stared at the ceiling fan above them.

“It’s sad...” she finally said. “....that I don’t remember how

we met.” She looked at him. He searched her eyes. The railroad tracks were fading, the bruising practically invisible under her light makeup. She was healing on the outside, but her mind still struggled.

He decided to oblige her because at this moment, they were good.

“In college.”

“Tell me the story.” Her eyelids opened and closed. “Please? Mark says that the more I revisit the details of my life, the more likely it is to get my memory back.”

Kenny watched her carefully. He wanted more than anything for her to feel better and to get back to being herself. But there was a lot of shit that came with that and too many issues he wasn’t quite sure he was ready to fully face right now.

Fluffy pushed her way through the door and eased up next to Mennette. She quickly turned up her nose and walked away when her paw accidentally touched a spot of wet paint. Most of the paint on Mennette’s body was dry and cracked in places where her body naturally creased.

“Please?” Mennette pleaded, turning her attention from Fluffy back to him. Her grip tightened around his arm. His hard exhale puffed out his cheeks. Kenny rubbed a hand across his face.

“Okay.”

Then, he closed his eyes. He pictured them as young, innocent kids, unaware of what life had in store for them.

“It was the beginning of my junior year. Registration. I was 20. You were 19, but of course, I didn’t know that yet. I was standing in line, wondering what I was doing there because I knew I couldn’t afford to register. We had just found out that Mama had stage-four ovarian cancer. I was standing there thinking about how I would probably need to get a full-time job. I needed to help Mama as much as I could, plus pay my part of the rent. I had three other roommates, but it was a ton of dough to me at the time!” Kenny chuckled at the situation his younger self was in.

"I was starting to walk out of the line and then I saw the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen." Kenny rolled his head over towards Mennette. "That would be you!" She opened her eyes a bit and gave him a soft smile.

"You looked so innocent and perplexed all at the same time. So unaware of how utterly beautiful you were. You were doing that thing you do with your bottom lip, looking over some papers. I was frozen in a trance. Until you started moving out of the building and I just had to follow you."

"Stalker!" Mennette giggled. Kenny chuckled.

"I followed you clear across the courtyard and up the steps of Wheeling Hall. You never once looked up from your paper. When you went inside, I followed you in but then I didn't see you. And then... you scared the shit out of me!"

"Really? What did I do?" Mennette perked up with interest.

"You just appeared out of nowhere and said, 'You make it a habit of following people?' I nearly jumped out of my skin! But your voice was so soft and sweet and husky, I had to keep it together and play it cool!"

"So what did you say?"

"Girl! Wasn't nobody following you!" They both broke out in laughter.

"Your eyes were something else. Still are," he said looking at her. Mennette gave him the sweetest stare he'd seen on her face in a long time.

"Piercing. Mesmerizing. Like they are right now. I was so glad I followed you."

"So what did I say?"

"Man, some shit about stalking you and trying to threaten me with some pepper spray! Then you walked off in a huff!" Kenny whirled his neck around like a Black girl and laughed. Mennette gave him a playful punch on his shoulder.

"Well, obviously you didn't take that as an answer."

"Hell naw! I followed your ass into your classroom! I wasn't let-

ting you out of my sight!”

Mennette shifted on the floor, picked some paint from near her vagina and flicked the flakes onto the white sheet. For a moment, she was quiet and Kenny searched her face for any emotion.

“That’s a lovely story. So that’s how we met, huh?” Mennette finally said. “Hmph. Did you learn anything that day? In class?”

“It was Statistics.” He frowned.

“Did you learn any Statistics?”

“Not a damn thing. I sat there listening to that lecture like it was in Chinese. I spent the entire time staring at the back of your head.” He chuckled to himself. “But I don’t regret staying. I actually had to attend that damn class a few more times before you finally gave me your number. And not too soon either. The midterm was coming up and I didn’t know how I was gonna pass a damn test for a class I wasn’t even registered for!”

Mennette giggled and it made him look at her. The laughter caught him off guard. He stared into her eyes and gazed into her mouth. Watching her laugh made him believe that maybe he could get through this.

She lay flat on her back and turned her head to him. A sad smile crept across her face. “I don’t wanna fight no more.”

“Who you fighting?” he asked even though he knew damn well what she meant.

Mennette rolled onto her side and propped herself up onto her elbow. “If you had to rate me, how would you say I was doing?” she asked.

He looked confused. “Rate you? What do you mean?”

“In ‘Being Mennette?’” she said, making air quotes with her fingers. “Tamara said I’ve changed.” She looked at him. “Do you think I’ve changed? Since the accident?”

He thought about how to answer this question. Hell yeah, she changed! At least at first, he thought she’d changed. Now, after finding out so much shit, he was starting to think that maybe she’s always been low-down and conniving, but he just never knew all

these years who he was married to.

"I'd say yeah. You've changed."

"Mmmm. Doesn't sound inspiring." She nervously chuckled a little then sighed. "Look Kenny, seriously. All this arguing about things I don't remember is stressful. And honestly, I don't wanna do it anymore. This is so difficult for me and I'm going through a lot. But in my meeting, Mark mentioned that the people in our lives are suffering too. At first, I thought he was stupid, but the more I thought about it, well, I guess he's right. This has got to be driving you crazy too." She looked at him and offered a weak smile. "And I apologize for that."

"What are you apologizing for?" Kenny still didn't trust her. Even though he still loved her, his resentment had grown considerably. It would take a lot to rebuild trust. But if he was going to believe that she truly had lost her memory and that this "new" Mennette might be here for good, then most of his actions and words for the immediate future were going to focus on regaining and keeping peace within the household.

"Not sure," Mennette responded. "But I know that the tension is too much for me to take anymore. I just want peace. At least until we can figure out what's next."

Kenny slowly nodded. They were both on the same page when it came to that. He was tired too.

"I just feel useless around here sometimes. I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm not sure exactly what you are expecting of me."

"Trust me Mennette, you're not useless. The only thing I expect you to do is get better. I know that I put a lot of pressure on you to remember our life together and I realize that. And for that..." he held her hand. "...I'm sorry. When I went to South..." He stopped. "On my business trip, I had a lot of time to think and reflect on our marriage and the unique situation that we're dealing with. You're right... it's been damn hard for me. But right now, what I realized is that we got to take this thing one day at a time or it's gonna drive

us both crazy.”

Kenny inhaled. He meant every word he said, even though he didn't trust her. Of all her lies and omissions, her tubes being tied angered and hurt him the most. But Brother was right. He'll be in an early grave if he let this thing take over him. He had to find a way to deal with it and play the role of a dutiful husband while he figured some things out.

Mennette's fingers inched their way up the side of his arm. “I kinda feel like I got to know you a little bit better today,” she said playfully.

“I guess it's a good thing I forced you to paint a sugar box, huh?”

She smiled. He placed his head on her chest and watched it rise and fall. Surprisingly, she wrapped her arms around him and they lay together in the quiet moment.

“This is nice.”

Kenny didn't know how to respond to that. He opened his mouth to say something but decided against it. He didn't want to mess up the mood. The anger that was brewing inside of him could easily bubble out and make this progress dissipate. But right below the surface of his anger were years of loving this woman deeply. That wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

“Yeah,” Kenny finally agreed. “This is nice.” He smiled back at her and rubbed her arm with the tips of his fingers. He leaned into her and kissed her gently. Mennette smiled, wrapped her arms around him tighter and leaned into his kiss, accepting his tongue and his body.

Chapter 40

KENNY

Later that afternoon with only one hour of sunlight left, Kenny and Brother were able to locate the discrete boutique behind the tall gray building in San Francisco. Tucked away from foot traffic, there was no large, bright neon sign to announce its presence. Kenny wondered how they attracted any business at all.

The two men entered the small shop and looked around. A disinterested teenager leaned against the counter, chewing gum, glued to her phone. She barely looked up as she robotically droned, “Welcome to She She’s Boutique. Scarves are on sale today.”

Brother walked around like he was looking for clues or a hidden door or something. Kenny simply walked up to the counter.

“Are you looking for something for your wife?” The teenager never lifted her eyes from her phone. She was completely uninterested in them or in trying to make a sale.

“No, but maybe you can help us,” Kenny started. He fumbled with his phone as he tried to free it from his pocket. Brother walked right up behind him and cut to the chase.

“Look-a-here, baby girl. We ain’t here for no scarves.” Kenny had managed to pull up the picture of Chocolate’s bracelet on his screen. Brother repeatedly tapped the phone urgently. “We want to know about this.”

The girl’s eyebrows raised up. She looked at the picture, sighed, then rolled her eyes and she locked them back onto her own screen.

“Go to the back where the purses are. Press the gray button on the wall. I’ll ring to let them know y’all are coming.” She still spoke in a deadpan tone.

Brother led the way to the back. When they found the button, a secret door slid open like some MacGyver shit. Kenny and Brother looked at each other, then stepped in.

The door slid closed behind them but soft lights illuminated a long corridor. Kenny was a little amazed while Brother was amused by the dramatics. As they approached the end, another door slid open into a lobby with a large desk and a professional-looking receptionist sitting behind it. She had a straight blunt-cut blond bob with pinched facial features. Her crystal blue eyes slanted like a Cheshire cat. They were emphasized with thick, black eyeliner. She ended the call she was on when the brothers approached.

“Hello, gentlemen. I hear you are inquiring about the bracelet? Do you have an appointment?”

“Uh, no,” Kenny responded, frowning.

“Have you spoken with Madam Aberdean yet?”

“Uh, who?”

The woman stared at Kenny for a moment before she cleared her throat, visibly annoyed. “How can I help you gentlemen today?”

“We’re looking for a girl,” Brother jumped in before Kenny could fumble the opportunity further.

“Again, do you have an appointment?”

“No.” Brother looked at Kenny. “Appointment for what?”

“For a girl,” she said, exasperated. “For one of our staff members.” She polished up her statement.

“We’re not just looking for any girl,” Kenny said. “We’re looking for a specific girl. This one.” He took out the pictures of the red-wigged woman and pointed to her back.

“What is your account ID code?” She swiveled towards another keyboard. “I can look her up for you.”

“ID code?” Kenny looked again at Brother, confused. “We ain’t

got no ID code. I just wanna know who this chick is.”

“I’m sorry sir. We don’t give out any personal information about our staff members.” She smiled a fake smile. “Have a good day.” She turned her attention away from them and intently gazed at her computer screen and pretended to type.

“We ain’t come all the way out here to be dismissed,” Kenny said a little louder than he planned, his frustration bubbling. “I’m not leaving till I get some answers about this girl in this picture!”

She smiled that fake smile again then pressed an intercom button and leaned in. “Charlie.” She spoke calmly. “We have a situation at reception.”

Ten seconds later, three large men seemed to materialize from the wall behind Miss Blonde Bob. “Gentlemen.” She said with a smug raise of her eyebrow. “If you will not respect my dismissal, maybe these fine men can assist you off the premises.” She grinned like the cat who swallowed the canary. “But I can assure you that I’m kinder than they are.” She cocked her head, raised her eyebrow and plastered an insincere smile on her face.

“All I’m trying to do is get some information,” Kenny said angrily.

Blonde Bob’s face straightened up as something behind Kenny caught her eye. Both Kenny and Brother turned to see a beautiful woman dressed in a long, black lace dress. It was a simple fitted bodice with a sheer bottom, allowing a tantalizing view of her full cleavage.

“Madam.” Blondie almost whispered, stood, and damn near bowed.

“Lisa.” She acknowledged with a slight nod. “Is there a problem here?” She glanced at Kenny then Brother.”

“These gentlemen do not have an appointment. Nor do they have an ID code.”

“Gentlemen.” Madam Aberdeen announced with a slightly raised right eyebrow. “I’m Madam Aberdeen. How can we help you today?”

She was breathtakingly stunning and clearly in control. She took a step towards the brothers and her presence radiated from where she stood, filling the room. Madam Aberdeen didn't seem to be as young as Blonde Bob. But neither man could guess her age because her rich melanin refused to yield its secret.

Her hair was tucked into an elegant bun which was perfectly perched by the nape of her neck. Brother wondered which African country this exquisite specimen of a woman came from. He could not place the hint of an accent that was polished by impeccable poise and manners.

Kenny rushed an explanation, confessing that they were in desperate need of finding the girl in the photo. Brother heard Kenny's words as background noise, knowing he'd have to clean up the mess but he couldn't peel his eyes away from Madam Aberdeen. She, too, listened to Kenny, but her gaze was set on Brother.

"Gentlemen, I do not condone disturbances at my establishment. Now, you seem rather passionate about what you speak of so this must be important to you. How exactly is it again, sirs, that we can help you? I'm trying to understand your request."

The three large men had positioned themselves directly behind Madam Aberdeen.

"I was given this address from a friend who wears a bracelet like this." He showed her the picture on his phone of Chocolate's wrist. Madam Aberdeen peeled her eyes away from Brother to briefly look. She responded with a "mmm...hmmm" and returned her eyes to their former gaze.

"She said I could find out information about this girl here," Kenny continued.

"But you were given no code or ID?"

Brother watched Madam Aberdeen's burgundy lips move. Her skin, the color of mahogany, smooth and flawless beckoned him. When her hazel eyes rested on him, they seemed to twinkle. The air around her sizzled with importance and sensuality. Her hands were placed together in front of her like she was an opera singer.

She held her hand out and Brother received it, placing a sensual kiss on top of it. His lips lingered on her skin and he took in her scent, then narrowed his eyes at her before speaking. "La Colle Noire? Christian Dior?"

Kenny frowned and glanced at Brother. He wanted to hit him over the head with the folder.

Madam's left eyebrow slowly rose to the top of her forehead as she peered over her diamond cat-shaped glasses at him. "Impressive," she purred.

"I know quality," Brother replied, staring intensely at her.

She brought her hand to her neck and held it there for a moment, the tips of her fingers doing a sensual dance as she stroked her décolletage, then she slowly turned to the receptionist, taking her eyes off Brother only for an instant. "Have their assets been checked?"

"No." Blonde Bob responded.

She glanced back at Kenny and her eyes focused back onto Brother as she thought. She smiled, her eyes performing a slow sensual crawl up and down Brother's body. She rubbed her hands together.

"Why don't you two follow me into my office," she finally decided. Turning gracefully to the receptionist, she commanded. "Hold my schedule for an hour or two."

Brother and Kenny looked at each other.

"This way, gentlemen." She pivoted like a ballerina on a stand, turned from them and sauntered away. Underneath her lace dress appeared to be a well-toned, well-cared-for body. It was almost as if she glided across the floor instead of walking.

They followed her past the three bears and Goldie Locs, through a glass door that neither of them had noticed prior, and into another lush lobby to the back. Inside her plush office, she perched behind a large throne-like chair and desk. Two smaller, complimenting chairs sat before the desk and she motioned for them to have a seat. They complied.

“Can I offer you gentlemen something to drink?”

“Hennessy.” Brother said. Kenny shot him a look and shook his head.

“No thank you,” Kenny said. “We’re good. We gotta keep our minds clear. As I said Miss...”

“...Madam...”

“Madam Aberdeen, one of your girls gave me this address. We’re looking for her in the pictures.”

She finally leaned over, peering over the diamond glasses, and for the first time seriously looked at the pictures. After sifting through all of them quickly, she handed them back to Kenny.

“Congratulations, handsome!” She brought her glasses down a bit on her nose. Her face was beautiful and tight. “You found our special bracelet somewhere? I’m sure we can accommodate you. Did you bring any income information?”

“No. We’re only interested in this girl.” Kenny said, poking his finger on the photo much harder than he’d planned. “This girl, only.” He stated. “You recognize her?”

“I do not. Unfortunately, even if I did recognize her, I couldn’t divulge any personal information about our staff members. It helps protect your privacy and theirs. However, we offer many other staff members of all different types, for all different types.” A seductive smile appeared on her face as she looked over at Brother and paused.

“My, my, my but you are gorgeous! Such allure.” She practically purred. “Tell me, handsome...” an elbow came up to her desk and her index finger held up her cheek. She was studying him. “What’s your fancy? You like redheads? Blondes? Beautiful exotic mixes?”

Kenny fumed. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Brother must have sensed it because he placed a hand on Kenny’s shoulder. Kenny’s mind and stomach twisted in knots. The girl in the picture wasn’t Mennette, but why did Mennette have her picture? How was that girl connected? Mennette and Chocolate had the same bracelet. Chocolate said Mennette wasn’t a part of “this” any more.

Any more? When had she ever been a part of? Kenny imagined Mennette being in a place like this waiting, allowing strange men to take her out, gawk at her, put their hands on her and do God knows what else. Was he about to uncover yet another one of Mennette's lies? He needed real answers fast.

"Is this a brothel?" Brother asked, leaning forward with interest.

Madam Aberdean sat back in her chair and steepled her fingers on top of her desk. She had a calm nature about her and took her time before answering.

"Not a brothel, darling." Her lips barely parted when the smug chuckle escaped them. She was amused. "Far from it. We are an experience!" She paused a moment longer, reading them with her beautiful eyes. "I assumed by the fact that someone had given you the address that you already knew that."

"All we know is this," Kenny said, again holding up one of the pictures and pointing to the bracelet.

Madam focused on Brother, completely ignoring Kenny's comment. "We specialize in professional, business, and personal events. However, we offer a variety of other services here. You seem like a more upscale man with a little edge to you. We can even get down and dirty with BDSM if you're into that sort of thing. Chains, feathers, whips, leather. We have an assortment of beautiful floggers that I particularly enjoy using. But don't let that fool you either. Only an elite group of men patronize my staff and they get paid very well for their participation."

"So a brothel?" Brother asked again with a grin.

"That's a little crass, don't you think?" She raised an eyebrow to distract from her own smirk. "Our clientele are among the utmost respected members of society. To call it a brothel only diminishes my establishment and therefore cheapens the experience. And like your exquisite nose was able to detect my Christian Dior, I'm sure your brilliant mind is capable of comprehending what a treasure this is that is presented before you right now." That one eyebrow of hers lowered as her chin rose.

"In order to be considered, one must have a certain income and assets. We require bank statements, copies of income taxes from the past five years and one must have a particular credit score to participate or even be considered because we are an extremely exclusive organization. Once you've been cleared, you are given an ID code to which you can connect and choose someone from our staff. Most men find a favorite and stick with her. Others like variety. Still others only contract our service only once. But I can guarantee you, sir, that we have many repeat customers and have never had any complaints. Not a brothel, as you say. An experience for the highly discerning. Discretion is our top priority. So as you can see, I can't help you regarding the girl in the photo."

Brother stood and so did Madam Aberdean. Kenny stood last. "Well, I guess we're done here then." Brother said.

"For you, handsome," she said quickly, "We could make an exception. As you know, that's not customary. However, you seem like the kind of man worth taking that risk." A seductive smile eased on her face with hints of malice and she damn near purred at him as her voice dipped. "You could have your pick."

"Madam Aberdean. As much as I love to be called handsome, I'm going to have to decline your generous offer. In my lifetime, I've paid for many things... but that ain't never been one of them." He returned the same maliciously seductive look.

"Such a shame you think of it as only sex." She smiled, almost undressing Brother with her eyes. "It's so much more than that. More like a sophisticated escapade with many perks for its members. A man with your impeccable taste could surely find what you are looking for here... as well as cause any woman to tingle with ecstasy. I can only imagine the artistry of your talents!" Her breathy words were heavy with desire.

Kenny gazed between the two of them, stunned, as he watched them go back and forth with each other like a tennis match. The air was charged with sexual energy and their chemistry was palpable. Kenny wondered if he should leave the two alone! He couldn't be-

lieve that Brother, who barely had a job, had this high-class woman wrapped around his finger, ready to make concessions for him based on his looks.

"If only you were the experience, Madam..." Brother said, his eyes still locked into hers. "...then that proposition would be irresistible."

She'd taken the cat glasses off and they hung loosely around her neck on a pearl lanyard. She slinked from around the desk.

"I..." she cleared her throat. "...would be the quintessential experience. However, I am not on the menu. Unfortunately."

"Madam, you appear to be a woman in complete control. I believe the right man's touch could send you spiraling out of control. Make you lose your mind. Does the thought of being out of control make you off the menu?"

Taken aback, she blinked slowly, allowing a few intense moments to pass between them. With a slightly indignant scoff, she responded. "I am, simply, priceless. That is what makes me off the menu."

A sexy chuckle escaped Brother's lips as he took one careful step toward her. "Madam..." His smile illuminated. "Everyone has a price."

"Not everyone. Maybe everything. But not everyone."

"How can you say such things? You're in the very business of selling love and sex and you don't think everyone has a price?" He cleared his throat. "What about your clients? The ones you sell sex to... what would you say to them, huh?"

"Psssst." Madam Aberdeen quickly nodded her head to the side. "Amateurs! It is not sex that I sell."

"So what, then? Love?"

"What is love?" she scoffed.

"What is sex?" he countered.

She paused. Her amusement grew with each returned serve of the conversational ball between them.

"Sex is simply a carnal desire. A natural inherent need human

beings have to be touched. We're mere animals, my beautiful creature. Our desire to mate starts with the physical wants and needs of the flesh. But then, it becomes more than just the need to mate. Raw and natural. It is the heated passion that is so intoxicating that you can barely think..." She inched closer.

"...or breathe..." he said, matching her step.

Her breaths came heavy and steady. "It becomes what most of us need... to simply exist."

"Touch." He was watching her breasts a moment ago, now staring into those eyes. "You sell the need for us to touch each other then? Or the want?"

"Not touch. If that was all, there would be no need for my business because anyone can touch themselves. It's not what is wanted that sells. It's what entices. I sell power." She cackled a hearty little laugh. "The male ego can not be told 'no.' Whatever a man desires, he will move mountains to get it. Or destroy everything in his wake to achieve it. And that one thing it wants, above all else, is power. Power over other men. Power over women."

"So all the male ego wants is power?" Brother questioned as he edged another step closer to her.

"Yes. Such a fragile little thing, the male ego." She eased herself two steps closer to Brother. "However, if it is not fed, it has the ability to destroy mankind. So although it is weak, by default, it is actually the most powerful."

"I thought it was the woman that controls everything?" Brother laughed.

"Don't get me wrong, handsome." One final step closer and they were in each other's personal space. "The vagina is very powerful. Indeed it is, but the penis is the only thing to make the vagina truly happy. So therefore..." She was close enough to press a hand on his broad shoulder and lean her breast into him. "...the penis is the one in charge."

Kenny could tell that although Brother had his Ph.D. in "womanology," he might have met his match in Madam. He thought the

two were about to get it on right in front of him. Madam Aberdeen leaned in closer still to Brother, inhaled and almost purred at him.

“What do you desire, Handsome, hmmm? To be touched? To release?” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “To have power? Have you ever had anyone give you pleasure without so much as a touch, sending you into ecstasy? That one that raises the temperature of your blood?” Her lips were dangerously close to his neck, as she continued whispering in her sexy accent. He could feel the warmth from her breath on his ear and chills skipped up his spine. “...with just the breath on your neck? Or the intense stare into your eyes? The one who makes such an imprint on your mind that the very thought of their touch can send you in a tizzy? Have you ever felt that?”

“Can’t say that I have,” Brother responded as stoically as he could.

Madam Aberdeen took two steps back and studied him as if he were a work of art in a museum.

“Such a shame.” She softly scoffed and turned. They watched her perfectly rounded butt as she sauntered back to her side of the desk.

Kenny was in awe at the spectacle that just occurred in front of him. But he had to admit that Madam Aberdeen impressed him. He’d never seen Brother lose control of a situation with a woman. And although, outwardly, Brother seemed as cool as a cucumber, Kenny could tell that Madam had gotten under his skin.

Brother looked at Kenny, “I guess we’re done here.” He reached for Madam Aberdeen’s hand, raised it to his lips and kissed the back of it. He turned to leave and she lingered, her hand still hanging in the air from where Brother left it after placing his lips. A moment passed with Kenny watching Madam Aberdeen. She did not move a muscle, her beautiful eyes focused on the empty space that was once Brother.

Kenny cleared his throat. “So you don’t have this girl?”

Madam didn’t even look in his direction before she responded.

“Good day sir.”

Kenny’s sigh trailed off. “Yep.” He turned and followed in Brother’s footsteps.

Chapter 41

KENNY

The following morning, the bright sun promised an unusually warm day. So in the spirit of keeping the peace, Kenny thought it would be nice if he and Mennette got out of the house for a few hours. Sunday was a naturally relaxing day to do that so they spent time walking around the mall followed by a late lunch at a nearby restaurant they used to frequent. It was almost 4 PM when they decided to call it quits on their excursion.

Out on the street, Kenny opened the passenger door for Mennette and she slipped in. Just as he was about to walk around to the driver's side, he heard his name being called. When he looked up, a rapidly moving Tamara was coming towards them, loaded down with several shopping bags. Her expensive-looking sundress swooshed around her legs. When she caught up with Kenny, she took in a deep breath. She rested her shopping bags on the ground and adjusted one of the spaghetti straps on her shoulder.

"Is she with you?" Tamara didn't give him a chance to respond before she bent down and rapped her knuckles on the passenger side window. Mennette opened the door and Tamara smiled at her.

"Hey girl! How are you feeling today?"

"Good." Mennette hesitated and cocked her head to the side like she always did when she was trying to figure something out. "Tamara."

"Yes! You remember me." Tamara almost jumped up and down

with glee.

"Of course. You're my best friend with the beautiful house." Mennette said it with a smile, but Kenny was learning the new Mennette. Her tone was slightly seasoned with disinterest. Tamara couldn't see him smirk behind her back.

"Yes! I haven't been able to see you lately. How have you been? You been taking care of yourself? I really would like to spend more time with you. We used to talk all the time, practically three or four times a day. I'm afraid to lose contact with you." Tamara prattled on without a breath.

"It's okay. I'm still in the process of healing."

"Well, if you need anything, don't hesitate to call me."

"I'm fine, really. Feeling better." She looked over at Kenny. "He's been taking good care of me."

Tamara ignored that comment. "Well, you know you can call me anytime. Do you remember my number?"

"I'm sure I have it at home. Kenny can find it for me."

"Let me give it to you again, just in case," Tamara said, shooting a glance over her shoulder in Kenny's direction. She fumbled with her large bags until she found the one containing her purse. She fished out one of her business cards.

Mennette took it and read it out loud. "Image Consultant?"

Tamara just shook her head proudly. "You can call me anytime and talk. I sure would like to visit you more." She smiled. "Maybe we can set up time for you to come visit me, alone." She emphasized that last word. "Just in case you ever need time alone to ask me questions about any other parts of your life. Any. Other. Parts," she stressed. "And just so I can keep up with you and make sure that you are doing okay."

"Thanks. Kenny has really been doing a great job of filling me in and taking care of me. But one day soon, okay? I would love to come to your house alone for girl time." She lied. She had as much interest in regaining Mennette's "old" life as she had in getting a root canal. She just had to play the part until her opportunity pre-

sented itself.

“Yes, I’m sure honey. But sometimes girlfriends share certain information that husbands aren’t a part of. And we haven’t been able to really talk like we used to. Alone. In private.” She said that obviously for Kenny’s sake. After such a good day, Kenny didn’t need Tamara sending him over the edge.

“We really got to be going Mennette. I gotta get you to your Affairs to Remember meeting,” Kenny lied, knowing full well her meeting wasn’t until next Saturday.

Mennette got out of the car and hugged a surprised Tamara. “It was good seeing you again. Come by next week so we can have tea again, ok?”

“Oh, yes hon!” Tamara seemed pleased with this invite. She shifted the bags again. “Well next week it is. I don’t wanna make you late for your meeting. I’ll call to check on you tonight, okay, hon?”

Mennette shook her head as she sat back in the passenger seat. “Tomorrow. Sometimes the meetings wear me out emotionally.”

Tamara stiffened her back and sniffed. “Tomorrow?”

“Please...” Mennette pleaded. “It would be better. And I’ll be more refreshed to talk.”

“Okay honey. Tomorrow, I’ll call. I love you. Smooches.” Tamara said, blowing a series of multiple air kisses at Mennette with her free hand. “If the crypt keeper will allow.” She turned, scowled at Kenny and walked away.

He bent down into the car to address Mennette. “I’ll be back.”

Kenny followed Tamara. He was close behind her rapid steps. Two cars back, she stopped to unlock the doors. Kenny swooped in close and got in her face. He didn’t want to yell his business in the street.

“You know what the doctor said. No stress.” Tamara chucked her bags into her trunk with an attitude. “She doesn’t need all this extra talk about ‘filling her in on her life.’” Kenny made air quotes. “She knows exactly what she needs to know right now. You and

Mennette are friends; you and I are not. I'm in control here. She's my wife and I know what's best for her. I don't need you to keep filling her head with a bunch of unnecessary bullshit."

"Is it me Kenny? That's filling her head?" Tamara slammed the trunk closed with a roll of her neck and walked around to yank open the driver's door. "Everything wasn't great with you two, and you know it!" She pointed a perfectly manicured finger at him.

"This little time that you have while her memory is gone is nothing but you living in your own little fantasy world. The longer you wait to tell her the truth, the worse off you're gonna be." She chuckled. "She's going to be so pissed off!"

Tamara slid into the front seat. Kenny shut the door behind her.

"Why don't you worry about your own life."

The Aston Martin's engine roared to life in response. The window eased down and her frown was still apparent.

"I don't know what kind of game you're trying to play, Kenny. But Mennette is gonna get her memory back sooner or later. And when she does, it's all gonna come crashing down on you. And I'll be the first one there to pick my friend up and the first one to laugh in your face!"

Tamara yanked the seat belt around her with a hard snap, the force of which caused her to lean forward a bit. He had to jump out of the way to avoid her rolling over his foot as she whipped away from the curb and sped off. But not before he caught a glimpse of a tattoo on her left shoulder: a red heart with a dagger through it.

Chapter 42

KENNY

*M*onday came and almost passed without event. 5:30 PM caught Kenny laying on his couch, thinking about his life. He had received confirmation earlier that the court had granted him his conservatorship request. He just needed to come by to pick up the paperwork and present it to the bank. Surprisingly, he didn't feel the need to rush out to complete that task. He realized he didn't have a plan for the money beyond catching up on the bills. More than that, he didn't have a plan for how to move forward with their lives.

Kenny could hear music blasting from the paint room. Menette was deep in her zone. He hadn't seen her for hours. It was just as well; he needed the mental space as much as she did.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Kenny pulled it out. His eyebrows scrunched together in a mix of surprise and concern. It was 5:34 and Chocolate's name was on the screen. Why was she calling at this time?

"Hello?" he answered.

"Can you hear me?" She whispered but didn't wait for him to respond. "Travis came into the office today!"

Instantly, Kenny sat up straight. His heart started beating faster. He gripped the phone. "Is he there now?"

"No. He left about an hour ago. But I can't talk too loud. Or stay too long. I've already been away from my office for a few minutes.

A bunch of people left for the day but some are still here working.” He could hear her heavy breathing over the phone. She sounded nervous and Kenny was immediately concerned.

“What was he doing there? What did he say?”

“He was angry about something. He didn’t really speak to me. He was talking to some of the big-wigs. He has been coming around the office a lot lately, because you know he’s running for mayor, trying to drum up support from us. I think the company must be a contributor to his campaign because he was actually at the cocktail party Friday night. Misty, the vice president’s assistant, told me she heard lots of raised voices coming from the president’s office.” Kenny heard Chocolate rustle some papers.

“I’m guessing it had to do with what’s on the news today,” she continued.

“What happened?”

“Oh! It came out that Travis is being accused of money laundering and a bunch of other awful things.”

“No, I didn’t hear that,” Kenny replied as he instinctively reached for the TV’s remote control.

“Well, I’m in the HR storage room right now,” she continued in a loud whisper. “I think there’s more to this story about Mennette. I was able to find some stuff in her files. I was going to make copies but I don’t think I have time. I’m just gonna take them and bring them to you.”

“Chocolate, please don’t get yourself into any trouble. Not on my account.”

“I’m good. Just gotta move fast. You know,” she paused. “Something else I didn’t tell you is that I feel like I’m being watched.”

“What do you mean?” The hairs on the back of Kenny’s neck stood up. She wasn’t his woman but he still didn’t like the idea of someone trying to harm her on purpose.

“Well, everyone knew that Mennette and I were close. At first, little things would happen and I thought it was weird coincidences. Then as Travis kept coming to the office more frequently, he’d

stare at me but didn't say anything. Then, ever since that day you came into the office, weirder things have been happening more frequently. ”

“Weird things like what? Like following you?” Kenny’s voice was filled with genuine concern.

“Yes. The other day when I went home, my door was unlocked. I know I had left it locked. Thankfully the boys were over at my mom’s house at the time. That’s why I had to sneak out of the party on Friday. I didn’t want anyone from the office to see me leave and catch me meeting up with you. I’m a little scared, Kenny. With this news coming out today, I think maybe there was more than an affair happening between Mennette and Travis.”

“Be careful. I don’t know anything about this dude. Stay away from him. I want you to go home now.” The music coming from the paint room changed from Floetry to Luther Vandross and he knew Mennette was feeling some kind of way.

“I will.” Chocolate said. “I don’t want to be around him. He creeps me out. I’ve never gotten good vibes whenever he showed up. Oh! And there’s something else.” Although Kenny couldn’t see it, Chocolate cupped her hand around the phone and lowered her voice as if someone else were in the room with her.

“I heard that Travis might not even be his real name! Apparently, they can’t fact-check his early years. There seems to be a lot of secrets surrounding this man.”

“Woah! Why didn’t you drop this on me when we met up? I don’t think you should stay there because now I’m worried about you. Let’s meet up.”

Chocolate let out a relieved gust of air with a nervous chuckle. “Thanks, Kenny I really would like that. When you wanna meet and where?”

“I can meet you right now,” he said.

“Ok, I just need to grab my things from my desk and meet you in about 30 minutes.” She balanced the cell phone between her shoulder and ear as she gathered files and closed the drawer. “Same

place? La Pinata?"

"I'll see you shortly."

"Ok, I'll see you shortly. Thanks, Kenny. I really appreciate this!"

"Why are you thanking me when you're helping me?" Kenny asked, a bit confused.

"Yes, but you make me feel safe. I'll see you in a little bit."

"Okay. Be careful."

"I will."

Carolyn eased the phone from her shoulder and slipped it into her pocket. She grabbed two handfuls of files and stuffed them into her purple tote, taking care not to wrinkle them. Before she hiked the bag onto her shoulder, she ducked her head and bent down. In the lowest drawer of the file cabinet, she walked her fingers across the top of the folders, running her fingers over the words "Financial Report." She yanked those files also and placed them in her bag next to the others. She closed the drawers softly and took in a deep breath as she stood.

When she turned around, Travis was standing there watching her. She sucked in a sharp breath and her heart quickened. Even in the darkness of the room, she could see the menacing look on his face. She quickly glanced at the distance between him and the door, calculating her steps.

"How long have you been standing there?" She croaked, swallowing the lump in her throat.

"Long enough!" he sneered.

Chapter 43

KENNY

Kenny was up and out before 9 AM the next day. He knew Eric's team had just played a game the night before. He watched part of the game on his phone while he was waiting for Chocolate and saw the back of Eric's jersey flash across the screen. The teams always traveled together back to their home city and Eric was likely going to catch a flight that landed him back home sometime that afternoon. Kenny needed to strike now.

At the red light, he tapped Chocolate's name to dial her again. Again, it went straight to voicemail. Last night at La Pinata, he downed two orders of chips with salsa and only half a beer as he waited. When she didn't show up by 9:30, he was really worried but he left figuring she probably had to tend to her boys. He'd practically blown up her phone with calls and texts the rest of the night. He'd driven to her office, but there was nobody there. Everyone had left. Only a janitor who didn't know anything and wouldn't let him into the building. If he'd known where she or her mother lived, he would have swung by to check on her. As for right now, he first needed to handle some business, then he'd swing by her job again when he was done.

Kenny turned down the long, secluded street that led to Tamara's mansion community. Kenny showed his ID at the gate and drove to the luxurious home where old Mennette loved spending time. Henry, Tamara's butler, met Kenny at the door and escorted

him to a large sitting room off the end of the den. The brilliance of the bright natural light filled the room. Straightaway, his feet sank into the plush carpet. He almost felt guilty for stepping on it with his shoes. Almost. He plopped down onto the sofa opposite two wing-backed elegant-looking chairs.

While Kenny waited, he took in the expansive room. Chandeliers with large drooping crystals dangle above his head. He didn't recall ever being in this room before. Windows extended as high as the ceiling and from his vantage point, he could see their lush green backyard complete with an Olympic-size pool, basketball court, outdoor kitchen and a bar. There was enough seating to host about 25 guests. The side of the guest house where they all partied for the New Year could be seen off the corner of the longest window.

Close where Kenny sat, a wood-burning fireplace crackled with an orange and yellow glow and fierce heat roared out making the room cozy, despite the sunny, January day. Just above it hung a colossal-sized portrait of Tamara and Eric on their wedding day. She was beaming and lovingly gazing into his eyes. He was caught mid-laugh while holding a glass of champagne.

Kenny remembered that day. The drinks. The decorations. The over-the-top floral arrangements. The amazing food and all of Eric's current team members, coaches, the owners, and friends from other teams, college, and his family. The extravaganza landed the Edwards a feature spread in a magazine. Kenny had a ball that day even though he had to admit it was nothing like he and Mennette's quickie wedding on the Reno strip. He'd always promised himself that they'd renew their vows someday in a grander style.

The door flung open and Tamara appeared in the room with a frown, her butler trailing behind her. Even at 9 AM, her hair was perfect. Her flowing off-white chiffon lounging pants and blouse draped down and around her body like a cloud. Her makeup was flawless like she was attending an Oscar premiere. Kenny wondered where the hell she was going first thing in the morning

looking like that. Tamara dramatically sat down and crossed her legs, then looked at him with a tight smile.

"Kenny." She acknowledged, then looked down at his shoes. "We usually ask guests to take off their shoes before they come into this room." Her frown was now aimed at Henry who completely ignored her by staring straight ahead as he dutifully stood at attention near the doorway.

"I didn't have time to ask, ma'am." He finally said with a small huff.

She cleared her throat. "Kenny, would you like something to drink?"

"Is it too early for alcohol?" He asked, then looked over at Henry. He wasn't sure about rich people's protocol with early morning drinking.

Tamara just nodded at Henry with a long blink, who then turned to Kenny with a small nod. "What would you like sir?"

"I'll just take a shot of cognac. Thank you."

"My usual, Henry."

Henry disappeared through the doors. Tamara turned her attention back to Kenny and gave him one of her phony smiles. "I've wondered how Mennette was doing. I was waiting for her call yesterday but didn't get it for some reason," she said sarcastically. "I also tried calling both of your phones but hers went straight to voicemail and yours, well... I believe you purposely just don't answer my calls to you."

"Don't answer your calls?" He feigned confusion. "Why on earth would I do that? They're always so pleasant."

"Cut to the chase, Kenny." Her voice deepened. "Why are you here?"

Henry walked in before Kenny could respond. He waited until Henry served their drinks and walked out of the door before he responded to Tamara.

"There are some things that I don't know about Mennette and I need to find them out." He leaned forward. "And it seems like

you might be the only one who can tell me since she's in no condition to tell me anything." He stopped talking, placed his bag on the floor and knocked back the shot of cognac. It was the good kind. Courvoisier. He firmly placed the glass down on the coffee table between them.

Tamara smirked. "Now let me get this straight! You barely allow me to see Mennette. You run interference on my calls. If I try to come over, you claim that she's asleep or away at one of those God-awful meetings. And the one time you did allow me to see her, you wore the floors down outside of her room trying to spy on our conversation. And you keep feeding me this 'doctor's orders' bullshit. And NOW, you barge into my house and expect me to tell you all her secrets?" She threw her head back and laughed heartily. Her dainty diamond chandelier earrings danced with the sudden movement.

"That's rich!" she said when she finally collected herself. "You are something else." Tamara sipped her drink.

Kenny calmly waited till she was finished. A small twitch tugged at the corner of his eye. "I had a feeling, you would feel that way," he finally said.

"Well, let's see... what secrets could she possibly have?" Tamara pretended to think as she tapped a finger to her chin. "Well, for starters, she was about to divorce you. Did you tell her that?" Tamara asked, her eyes wide in mock shock.

"Mennette had already filed for divorce and was planning on leaving. That's a secret. As a matter of fact, I wonder where those papers ended up? Do you? 'Cause wherever they are, it won't stop the divorce!" She took a dainty sip from her glass then swallowed and smirked at him.

"Let's see... what else?" she asked no one in particular. "Oh, yes! Another secret, she was tired of you, Kenny! Plain and simple, just tired of you." She started to take another sip but aborted it and wagged her finger on her free hand instead.

"And that little pyramid scheme thing that you and Brother

did a few months ago? The one where you gambled the mortgage money? Well, that really pissed her off. Personally, I think that was the straw for her.” Tamara seemed satisfied and was now able to take her sip. “Any other secrets you want to know?”

“What about secrets about her past?” Kenny asked, undeterred by her dramatics. “Or better yet,” he said, leaning forward and resisting the urge to strangle her. “...what about secrets that involve you?”

Tamara reared her head back, puzzled. “Mennette and I don’t have any secrets between us. We’re besties. We tell each other everything.” The plastic smile was back.

“Well, Tamara. Your ‘bestie,’” he said with air quotes, “...may have forgotten to mention a few things.”

She glared at him. “No, I don’t think so. I’ve known Mennette since before she started college. Long before she met you. You’ve always been jealous of the fact that I’ve always known her longer and better than you do.” She leaned back in her chair and gloated at him as she put the glass to her mouth to finish her drink. She cocked her head and a wicked smile appeared on her face. “I know everything there is to know about her and you don’t.”

Kenny planned his next words carefully. “That very well may be the case,” he admitted. “But I’m interested in secrets that maybe Eric doesn’t know.”

“Eric?” She gasped a little, confusion settling in.

“You know, Eric! Six-foot-two fella? ’Bout 210 pounds? NFL running back? That Eric.” He concentrated and enjoyed watching her superiority complex drain from her face. “Maybe some secrets that involve a certain type of bracelet?”

Tamara looked like she’d seen a ghost and a wicked smile now spread across Kenny’s face. She narrowed her eyes at him, set her wine glass on the side table and flipped her hair. The phony sweet voice was gone. Her real voice filled with bass and disdain, and attitude. Her neck took a roll.

“Why are you here?”

“Information.”

“Why in the hell would I give you any information about Menette? And what the hell does Eric have to do with this foolishness?” she snapped. “You have nothing on Eric so you can stop with those little mind tricks because I’m not falling for that nonsense.” She leaned back, stuck her lips out with an exaggerated attitude and smack. She blinked her eyes rapidly.

“You claim to be the husband and the one in charge, so then you should know everything you need to know. But if you think for one second that I’m gonna sit up here and rattle off all of my friend’s secrets to you, you’re dumber than you look!”

Kenny was amazingly calm. He was learning that he actually had more patience than he realized. The old him would be raging right now, ready to tear the entire mansion down with her in it. But the new him simply uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. He folded his lips into his mouth to give himself an extra moment to think before verbally tearing Tamara’s ass up.

“Like. I. Said.” He deliberately spaced his words out. “I’m just looking for some information, Tamara.”

“I’m the wrong one.”

“You sure?”

She crossed her arms and smacked her lips. “Yep!”

“No information, whatsoever? Not even some that involve you?” Kenny pulled the envelope from his bag and stood for dramatic effect. One by one, he slipped a black and white naked photo of her in a red wig with a man who was clearly not Eric.

“Nothing?” Kenny asked, letting another one glide in her direction. “What about now?” He flipped another one out. “Oh! How about this one? Cute heart tattoo!” Kenny kept tossing the pictures at Tamara till the envelope was empty, slamming his hand down on the table on the last one.

Tamara let out a sound that was something between a gasp and a cry and she put a hand up to her mouth. Henry instantly appeared in the doorway.

"Ma'am, is there anything ..."

"Get out Henry! I don't need anything, just close the door!" She yelled at him. He complied. Tamara scrambled to the floor and gathered the photos from the table in her arms. She shot daggers at Kenny with her eyes.

"Where did you get these?"

That was all the confirmation his hunch needed. Kenny was proud of himself for finally figuring out one piece of the puzzle that was Mennette's life on his own. But he still didn't know how or where it fit. But now he was confident he could get Tamara to sing like a canary.

"Doesn't matter where I got them from. What matters is that I have copies. Plenty of them. So you can keep those." Kenny sat back down on the comfortable couch.

"Does Eric know you out here fucking other men?" He loved finally having the upper hand over Tamara.

Tamara got up off the floor with the pictures pressed to her chest and glared at Kenny. She dramatically walked to the closed door and locked it. When she sat back down across from Kenny, she laid the pictures out on the table in front of her and remained silent for a few moments. Finally, she let out a deep sigh.

"Something bad happened in Mennette's past."

"You mean the gang rape and her baby Cecil?" The words caught in his throat and burned as he spat them out.

"Yes," Tamara admitted, wide-eyed. "She actually told you about that?"

"I know a lot that you don't think I know."

"Kenny, don't play with me. You said it yourself: you and I are not friends. I would never betray Mennette. When she met you, she told me she'd never tell you because she just wanted to have a clean break from her past. I'm the only person she's ever told everything that happened to her." She looked away and pondered for a moment. "How did you find out?"

"That's not important. The fact is, I know."

“So if you already know, what do you need me for?”

“Look. I need to know what’s going on. Strange shit started happening the minute she had her accident. I’ve got all these pieces of a puzzle but I don’t know how they fit together. I need to know who this man in this picture is. I feel like he’s familiar, like I’ve seen him somewhere before, but I’m not sure. If Mennette is in danger, it would be a bigger betrayal if you didn’t help me protect her.”

“You said you’ve seen this man?” Tamara asked, picking up one of the pictures and pointing to the full frontal of the man.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“I can’t remember. Who is he?” Kenny stood up. He could feel himself starting to lose his cool.

Tamara looked a little worried. “I can tell you Kenny, but not here and not right now. Eric will be home any minute.” She gathered the pictures together and stood up. “I’ll have to meet you tomorrow somewhere.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Tamara!”

“Not here!” she hissed. “The help listens in sometimes. Besides, Eric has cameras everywhere.” She looked up into a camera positioned in the corner of the wall. Kenny hadn’t noticed it before. “We will talk, but not here.” She picked up his bag for him. “Tomorrow. 3:00. You pick the place.”

Kenny accepted his bag from her and strapped it on his shoulder. Then he tugged at the pictures stuck in Tamara’s grip.

“You really want these hanging around this house?”

Tamara knew he was right and relented, releasing them.

“Tailgaters. 3:00. Don’t be one minute late. Or every man on Eric’s football team will be getting copies of these in their emails.” He shook the pictures at her. He meant every word.

Chapter 44

KENNY

*F*irst thing Wednesday morning, Kenny handled business at the bank. Then he swung by Chocolate's job. She never responded to his calls and texts so he decided to see for himself that she was okay. But when he asked, they said she hadn't been in since Monday. It really bothered Kenny and he truly hoped she and her boys were okay. But he had other fish to fry today.

He got to Tailgaters on Lone Tree a little after 2 PM. He was starting to get tired of waiting for women at restaurants. If Tamara wasn't there on time, he had every intention of leaving and making good on his threat. Thankfully, he didn't have to go that route.

Tamara arrived right before their 3 PM date time. She stepped through the doors looking like she was walking the runway. If she was trying to be incognito, she failed miserably because she was overdressed for the sports bar. Her head was covered with a Gucci scarf. Wide, dark sunglasses hid her eyes. Her stilettos clicked on the floor, attracting attention with every step. She looked like a honey-colored, updated version of Jackie O. Luckily, it was a slow time so there weren't many people in the place to remember her. When she saw Kenny at a table in the back, she slinked towards him and sat down in the chair across from him.

"You hiding from the paparazzi?" He chuckled and shook his head.

"Not funny," she said, grabbing a napkin and wiping down the

table in disgust. "You do know I am somebody." She huffed.

"What you having Tamara?" He motioned for the waitress. She looked genuinely surprised at his consideration.

"Don't look shocked, Mrs. Edwards. I may not make millions, but I am a gentleman."

"A full-bodied cab? Maybe an Opus One?" She requested confidently.

"Not in here you not! How about a nice margarita or a beer? You are not in one of those fancy country clubs that you're used to!"

"Clearly!"

"Hot wings?"

"Not in this lifetime!" Tamara scoffed and turned up her nose.

Once Kenny ordered drinks and an appetizer for himself, Tamara seemed as settled as she was going to be. So Kenny started probing and to his surprise, she was quite cooperative.

"Just so you know, this has nothing to do with wanting to help you. I just want my friend to be safe. And until she can remember anything, I guess you are the best one to protect her, you being her husband and all."

"Who is the man in the picture? And what does he have to do with Mennette?" he demanded, not beating around the bush.

"His name is Travis Stamps."

"Travis Stamps? The one she's having an affair with?"

"Who told you that stupid shit? Mennette is not having an affair with that troll!" Tamara's voice dripped with disgust as if she couldn't fathom the very thought.

Kenny pounded his fist on the table, scaring Tamara. She flinched.

"Why the hell does this man's name keep coming up? What the hell kind of connection does he have with Mennette?"

"First of all..." Tamara held a finger up to his face. "...you gon' calm the hell down!"

He held his hands up. "You right, you right. I'm sorry. It's just his

name keeps popping up from different people.” Kenny scrubbed his hand over the top of his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “How is this man significant to Mennette?”

“You really don’t know do you?” First shock, then sadness washed over Tamara’s face. “Travis is one of the boys from her past that raped her. In fact, he’s the main one. He made the rest of them go along with it.”

An eerie silence swelled in the booth. The waitress dropped a margarita in front of Tamara.

“Motherfucking bastard!” Kenny hissed. “I’m gonna kill him!”

“Good luck with that!” Tamara said sarcastically as she took a sip of her margarita. “I hate to be the one to break it down to you like this, Kenny. But Travis is important in the business and political worlds. He doesn’t scare easily. He’s always surrounded by people. It’s gonna be hard to get to him.”

She unraveled her scarf and set it next to her purse, but kept her sunglasses on. She leaned forward.

“Listen, Kenny. I love my best friend. And if it means that I have to tell you all her business to keep her safe, so be it. I’ll tell you everything that you need to know. But you are going to have to control your temper. Now pay attention ’cause I’m only telling you one time.” She held up that one perfectly manicured finger again as if she was scolding a little boy.

She snapped her fingers in the air and waved her wrist around, beckoning the waitress as Kenny watched her bracelets jingle on her arm. He could not believe the audacity of this woman.

“I’ll have an order of those wings... whatever he’s having,” she said, waving dismissively at Kenny’s platter. “And another margari-ta. And can you make sure it’s chilled this time and in a clean glass? Thank you.” She turned away before getting an acknowledgement. The waitress rolled her eyes and walked off to put in the order. Tamara pulled back her shoulders before she spoke again.

“Early last year, Mennette called me from work, frantic! I mean she was hysterical. Apparently, this Travis Stamps guy showed up

at her job to meet with the boss. Mennette recognized him right away but he acted like he didn't know or recognize her. Can you believe that asshole? He ruined her life, but he's gonna play like he don't know her?" She shook her head in disbelief.

"Travis was there because he wanted the company to back him running for office. Apparently, he knew the president of Mennette's company from dealing with him before. At first, Mennette didn't know why everyone was calling him Travis because she knew him as Ronnie McClure in South Carolina."

Kenny's jaw dropped. He needed a moment to process that. Just then, the waitress appeared with Tamara's second drink and wing platter, setting it down rudely. Tamara didn't care because it looked like she was actually hungry. She picked up one wing, sniffed it, then took a small bite.

On the way back from meeting Madam Aberdean, Brother had fessed up about his sneaky trip to South Carolina and shared everything he learned, including Ronnie McClure's name. No wonder Kenny never found any information about Travis Stamps or his family before college... the rich bastard must have changed his name to put some distance between him and the scandal. Because when Kenny Googled the incident for himself, Ronnie McClure and his dad's name was all over the place. After a few bites, Tamara continued with her story.

"Each week he would show up to her job. She became obsessed with trying to find out what he was doing there and if he remembered her. One day, that bastard actually walked up to her desk and whispered in her ear that he knew who she was and that she'd better not tell anyone about their past or he'd finish her off like the rest of her family!" Tamara licked a finger and picked up another wing.

"Can you believe the nerve of him? Telling her some shit like that? And after weeks of passing by her desk, pretending like he didn't know who she was!" Tamara paused and pointed a half-eaten wing at Kenny. "That's when she decided she was going to light his ass up and take away everything from him like he did to her!"

Tamara polished off the wing she was holding.

"I mean here he was, living large, meanwhile Mennette had lost everything and had to get it out of the mud and build her life up again. Mennette became obsessed with plotting how she could expose him and take him down. And you know Mennette when she gets an idea in her head! She is determined to get what she wants!" Tamara chuckled a little and took a swig of her margarita.

"What put the nail in his coffin is when he had her fired! Just like that!" She snapped her fingers. "As hard as Mennette works! Mothafucka! She wasn't given an explanation but she knew he was behind it. Mennette was devastated. Came to my house crying. At first, she didn't know what to do."

"I didn't even know she'd lost her job," Kenny said reflectively.

"I know." Tamara stared at him. "She couldn't tell you because she'd have to tell you why and she wasn't about to do that. Besides, if you'd known, you would have just gone down there like a Neanderthal and tear up the place to make them give Mennette her job back." Kenny couldn't deny the logic.

"It didn't take long for Mennette to come up with a plan to blackmail the asshole. She couldn't believe he was still affecting her life well into her adulthood. She wanted to put an end to him ruining her life once and for all. I felt so bad for her that I was willing to do anything for my friend. So I told her I'd help." Tamara shrugged as she chewed another wing down to the bone and reached for another.

"What was the plan?"

"Well, we started sneaking into some of his public events and we noticed that he was with a girl we knew. Travis was one of her clients at this place we used to..." Tamara's voice faltered, "Used to...umm..."

"You mean she was one of Madam Aberdean's girls? Travis was one of her clients?"

Tamara's head reared back like someone slapped her. "How in the hell do you know about Madam Aberdean?"

"Like I said, there's a lot I know that you don't know I know!"

"Then why am I here eating these things and messing up my perfect figure, wasting my time telling you anything?"

"Because I don't know everything," Kenny admitted. There are still so many parts and pieces that don't make sense. You are helping me put it all together in my mind." Tamara huffed, folded her arms and stared at Kenny. But after a moment, she took a long sip of her margarita and she continued her story.

"Anyhow. Mennette and I went to Madam's and talked her into letting me back on staff just for Travis. We found out that he had a dinner scheduled with some constituents and had requested an escort. I paid his regular girl off to tell Madam she couldn't make it and convinced Madam to let me take her place."

"What made you think Travis would fall for that?"

"Seriously, Kenny? What red-blooded hetero Black man, dead or alive, can resist all of this?" She gave herself a Vanna White-esque revealing gesture with her hand, framing her torso from top to bottom. She sat up straighter, allowing her cleavage to pop.

"That was the easy part. I just eased up next to him after their dinner and after a night of cocktails. I dangled my bracelet in front of him. Of course, he was intrigued. Suspicious because I wasn't his regular girl, but intrigued."

"How did you stop his suspicion?"

"You know, Kenny, I can be very persuasive. I assured him he'd have a better time with me than his current staff member. Guaranteed I'd give him the time of his life but only if he changed his ID code to be exclusive to me. Whispered a few more words in his ear and he was all mine. Hook, line, and sinker. I showed him a good time that night and the next day, he changed his ID code with Madam Aberdean and I was back in business. He was my only client." Tamara summoned the waitress over. She tipped the glass to her. "Another please." She let out a tiny belch, then back to Kenny.

"Madam only allowed us to carry out our plan if me and Mennette could promise that no other girls got hurt or were involved.

And without revealing the organization, of course.”

“Imagine that. A madam with a conscience!” Kenny chuckled, remembering Madam Aberdean’s scrutinizing eyes on him, her face and her mannerisms right then.

“Don’t let her fool you. She’s about her business. One thing she doesn’t play with is the safety of her staff members.”

“Yeah. Or the privacy or the organization. She already gave me that lecture,” he responded dryly.

“It took a few dates before I gained Travis’ trust. He is really suspicious. Always showing up with security and an entourage. But I guess when you have a lot to hide...”

“On y’alls dates?”

She nodded while taking another gulp from her glass. “Yep. And I saw why. Travis is dirty.”

“Dirty?” Up until this point, Kenny hadn’t touched his beer, but now, he downed almost half the glass.

“As dirty as they come, Kenny. Fraudulent acts. Blackmail. Money laundering. I heard him on some of his calls. He just thought I was just another pretty girl but I help run some of Eric’s businesses. I may be beautiful, but I’m smart and savvy as hell too. So I knew what Travis was doing. He even tried to embezzle money from Madam. That’s part of the reason she went along with our crazy plan. She had her own reasons to see someone bring Travis down.

“Mennette was getting antsy. She was in such a hurry to get back at him. She was getting frustrated with him always showing up with all those people with him. There would be no way that we could put her plan into action. But after about two weeks of giving him the best he ever had, I was finally able to convince him to meet with me alone. That’s the night when Mennette was hiding in the closet with her camera. With his entourage missing, we had a chance to slip her into the hotel room without him knowing.”

“She took the pictures and you were the bait.” He nodded thoughtfully. “The red-headed woman.”

“Precisely. Since he got Mennette fired, we threatened to send

these pictures to his wife and leak them to the public to discredit his run for office. To a man like Travis, image means more to him than anything else. If his reputation was ruined, he'd lose everything. His wife. The election. Possibly his businesses." She sighed. "But Mennette held on to those pictures."

"Why didn't she just release the pictures to the public and the wife and be done with him?"

"Mennette was furious and hell-bent. I don't think I've ever seen her so obsessed with hurting a person. She was out for blood. Ruining his reputation wasn't enough. She wanted to cause him pain. Serious pain. And where else do you cause a politician pain besides his image?"

"His pockets."

Tamara nodded and pointed an affirmed finger at Kenny. "That part! I've never seen her like that, ever. It scared me so much, I was tempted to come to you and tell you once. But I knew she didn't want you involved. In some way, I think she felt that she was protecting you."

"Me? What the hell did she need to protect me from?"

"Travis is very dangerous. She just didn't want you involved in case things didn't work out as planned. Said we could handle it."

"Really? Two women? You all should have just come to me." He frowned. "So how did she get the money?"

"Mennette didn't anticipate how spooked Travis would get when she threatened to release the pictures. That's when she knew she had valuable collateral. So she asked him for money to compensate for the fact that he was the reason she was out of a job." Tamara realized she had cleaned her platter so she reached for a wing from Kenny's plate. He was unfazed, having lost his appetite back when she said Travis Stamps was Ronnie McClure.

"He offered her \$100,000 and she set up a new bank account to receive it. But when she got it, she refused to give up the pictures and decided to ask him for more. That's when she wanted more than revenge. She literally wanted to make him pay for ruining her

life. She told him that she would give him the pictures if he gave her more money. And if he didn't, she'd tell the world his real name and what he did to her all those years ago."

"What happened?" The vein in Kenny's neck was throbbing and a migraine threatened to take over. He wasn't sure if the information from Ms. Vee and Brother was more shocking than what he was hearing out of Tamara's mouth. Who was this conniving and vindictive Mennette? Was this the same woman who loved him out of a dark place and who he'd committed his life to?

"He paid her, too. He did not want those pictures in circulation and he definitely didn't want his past coming back to haunt him"

"How much?" He gripped the bottle of beer so tight, he thought he would break it into tiny shards.

"After he gave her the initial \$100,000, she demanded \$900,000 more. But Travis only agreed to pony up \$650,000 more and she accepted." She gave Kenny a moment to register shock.

"She asked for a million dollars?" Kenny couldn't believe it. He always knew his wife was bold but he didn't know she could be gangster with it. He felt a strange mixture of pride and fear.

"She knew he was good for it because of all his successful business ventures. In all the years I've known her, I'd never seen her like that. It was almost like she was drunk on the power that she had over him. Like she'd thought this opportunity to get even would have never happened, but now that it was here, she was taking full advantage of it. Like she'd been waiting on this opportunity for a lifetime."

"Then what happened?" Kenny pressed.

"He wired the money to her account."

"Then what?"

"Then they agreed on a day and place to meet to exchange the pictures."

"Then what?"

"Kenny, I told you. I'm only telling you this if you can handle it. You need to calm down. The look on your face is making me

nervous.”

Kenny nodded his head vigorously. His heart pounded in his chest. He finished his beer. “You right, you right.” He shook his shoulders and rolled them around. “I’m good. I’m good now.”

“Anyhow, Mennette changed her mind and didn’t show.”

“Shit!”

“Two days before her accident, Mennette was supposed to meet him but showed up at my house instead. I thought she chickened out, but she didn’t. She said she was never going to give him the pictures or the money back. He called her phone and she argued with him in front of me.

“Mennette told him that she wanted him to feel as much pain as he had caused her in her life. She wanted him to have nightmares like she did for years. She wanted him to know how it felt to be violated, taken advantage of, and constantly needing to look over his shoulder like she did. She told him if he ever tried to come after her, she’d do to him what she did to Darius.

“Travis was pissed! He cussed her out. Said she needed to watch her back. Then two days later, she was in the accident and here we are.”

Kenny shook his head incredulously and took in a deep breath.

“You know, the police did say there were signs of two cars that skidded. But only Mennette’s car was in an accident. You think he ran her off the road?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Tamara said.

“So what was Mennette’s plan for the money?”

“Come on, Kenny. Do you really need me to tell you that?”

“Oblige me.”

Tamara rolled her eyes. “Honestly? She really didn’t have much of a plan. You already know she wanted a divorce. I know I said it was because she was tired of you. And in a way, she was. She was tired of your no-ambition ass. She wanted more out of life. But I think,” Tamara’s tone softened. “...in her own way, she wanted to be kind and set you free. She knew deep down she couldn’t be the

wife you really needed her to be, no matter how much she loved you.”

Kenny let that sink in for a moment.

“She just wanted you to sign the papers and let her go. But your stubborn ass wouldn’t sign! As for the money, I know she kept paying her part of the bills so you wouldn’t realize she’d lost her job. I also know she took out almost \$20,000 just to have cash on hand. After Travis threatened her, she was thinking about disappearing for a little while till he calmed down. She hadn’t even decided where she was going to go yet and then she lost her memory.”

Kenny reached for the glass of water that was still full. He didn’t want to order another beer because he needed a clear head to process everything he was hearing. He finished half the glass in a few gulps and placed it back on the table. Then, a thought flashed across his mind.

“So you and Mennette both worked for Madam Aberdeen. How long?”

Tamara sighed. She expected this question from Kenny. She placed the half eaten wing onto a napkin and wiped her fingers on another and set her jaw.

“We worked for Madam in undergrad. Then I met Eric. When he got drafted in his senior year, I knew I didn’t have to work anymore. I stopped when he got his first check and we moved in together.”

“And Mennette?”

Tamara looked away, deciding if she’d tell her friend’s secret. Then she looked Kenny directly in the eyes and told the truth.

“Mennette worked for her until she had completed her master’s degree.”

“We were married then!” he said loudly, unable to contain his temper. Happy hour had begun and the restaurant had filled up around them. A few patrons nearby turned their heads to look. Tamara waited for the eyes to turn away from them before speaking.

“Yes. She was already working for Madam when you all first

met and she continued while you were married. But as soon as she submitted the payment for her final semester, she quit. She only worked for Madam because it paid enough for her to graduate without student loans and it didn't take up much of her study time."

"So all those times she said she was going out with you, she was really going out to fuck other men?"

"Everybody has a past, Kenny. Even your wife. But back then, we did what we had to do to survive and get what we needed. And we needed to pay that high ass tuition and books, room and board! Not everybody was born with a silver spoon in their mouth. Education is expensive. If Mennette and I hadn't done what we did, where would we be today? We did what we had to do."

"What about Cecil? Her baby?"

A saddened look came over Tamara. She shifted and looked away. It took her a long time to answer. She gripped the margarita glass and drank in large gulps. Kenny could see the tension in her tight grip on the glass. She shifted her seat.

"I never got to see him. He died months before I met her. But she did show me a picture of him once. He was so adorable."

"What did she say happened?"

"She said the doctors never expected him to live long because of some rare condition. After she buried him, she was lost." Tamara glanced away momentarily. "There were times, Kenny, that I think there was some relief in her voice. Not that Cecil was gone. But that I came into her life at the right time to help her."

Tamara looked directly into Kenny's face and rubbed the side of her cheek. "Don't look at me like that Kenny! You're realizing that you didn't know your wife at all. And you're right. You didn't really know Mennette. You didn't know anything about what made her tick! She was and still is a complex individual. Lots of layers to peel back. To be honest, sometimes I feel like I only know a small portion of her... and I'm the closest person to her and the only one who knows about her whole life. About her past. About

her thoughts. Her views. She's like the sister I never had." Tamara paused.

"I love her, Kenny. And as much as I hate to admit it, I know you love her too. So we got to protect her cause, regardless of how well we feel we do or don't know her, she's a good person. A great friend. She's been a good wife to you even when I, personally, didn't think you deserved it. She's just had a lot of trauma in her life."

"Damn!" For once in his life, Kenny had to agree with Tamara. He shook his head. "I never realized how much she's been through."

Tamara leaned in and looked at Kenny like she was assessing something. Her look was soft, almost empathetic.

"When I met Mennette, she was working a dead-end job at Popeyes and living with this girl Guadalupe and her family. Guadalupe and Mennette met when Guadalupe used to visit her father in South Carolina from California every summer. She was Mennette's only friend back then, probably because Guadalupe never went to school with her. She was there that summer when everything happened.

"When Mennette graduated from high school, Guadalupe's mom and step-dad helped her and Cecil move to California so they could have a fresh start. They took them in, gave Mennette a job at the Popeyes they owned, and basically made her a part of their family." Tamara sighed. "They even helped her bury Cecil when he died." She fingered the rim of her drink.

"Mennette was in a bad way when I met her. She was barely existing. She'd lost her family and never had a chance to tell them goodbye. The only one she had left was Cecil. Then he didn't survive. I don't think she ever really got over the pain and hurt from losing a baby, and certainly not all the crazy ass circumstances of how he got here in the first place. You know, Kenny, a child is supposed to outlive the parent. No matter how old. Lots of nights when we lived in the dorms together she would have these crazy nightmares. She barely slept."

"She's always had trouble sleeping. Even now," Kenny agreed.

"I was just a child myself. The night she finally broke down and told me her deep dark past, I cried. I mean, literal tears. I had never met anyone like Mennette before. I mean I never had such respect for a person. Can you imagine going through something like that at that age and surviving?

"I bet you didn't know this, Kenny, but I grew up on the outskirts of the suburbs with a single mother who worked two jobs to put me and my brother through school. I never heard of someone that age going through something like that." She sighed.

"The day I met her in that Popeyes with those grease stains on her face, I knew then that we were going to be together forever in friendship. It was those big ole eyes of hers. I saw sadness behind them. Almost like she had this deep-down hurt in her that nobody could reach, not even me. But at the same time, Mennette had this fire in her that nobody could squash. This wild, crazy desire to live and a will to do whatever it took to get what she wanted.

"I knew she was special. I knew that she was going to be someone in my life that not only I helped, but helped me too. From day one, I was determined to help her better her life. I helped her get into college and introduced her to Madam. That was a turning point for her. I think with all the trauma in her past, she made a concerted effort to never let anyone or anything have power over her like that. Can you imagine being so young and dealing with something like losing your whole family and the death of a child?"

"But she knew that I wanted kids! We talked about it all the time like it was a muthafuckin option!" His anger resurfaced.

"Didn't we all?" she said sarcastically.

He stared at her.

"You ain't the only one wanted kids, Kenny! Sometimes in life, we get what we need and not always what we want. I wanted my own kids but Eric already had two before he got to college with his high school girlfriend. He was adamant that he didn't want any more and I later on found out that I couldn't give him any if I tried. Ain't that some shit? I guess in that respect, we're much more alike

than we want to be.” She sighed.

“Don’t judge her for working for Madam for so long. Mennette did what she felt she had to do. Her life had been unstable and she was creating that stability for herself when she met you. You were the love and the family she was craving. She didn’t want to taint your relationship with anything related to her past.

“And just so you know, the first thing Mennette bought with the money from Madam Aberdeen was a headstone for her baby. Without that money, she would have never been able to afford it.”

Kenny slowly nodded, digesting everything. He had to be grateful that Tamara told him what Mennette never would, but now he had to rethink the last 24 years of his life. Looking at things from Mennette’s perspective, he could understand why she made the choices she did. But it still didn’t change the fact that she chose not to be as honest with him from the beginning as he had been with her. Could you really have a successful relationship that way?

His phone buzzing in his pocket interrupted his thoughts. He answered and Brother immediately started talking fast.

“You need to get down to The Wild Place pronto!” Brother said, speaking of their usual hang-out spot. “Guess who’s slumming it?”

“Who?”

“Ya boy Travis!”

“On my way.” Kenny jumped up.

Tamara jumped up also and grabbed her purse. She flipped her hair.

“I’m going with you. I want to give that bastard a piece of my mind.”

“No. It’s too dangerous. What do you think he’ll do to you if he sees you, knowing you helped Mennette play him? Na. Brother is there. He’ll be with me. I need you to go to my house and pick up Mennette. Take her to your place and keep her there until I call you.” He handed her his house keys. “Call her and let her know that I’m out taking care of business.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

"I don't know and don't care. Just do it."

"What if she doesn't come with me?" She sounded concerned.

"That's your best friend, right? Figure it out! And hurry."

Tamara nodded her head with understanding.

"Text me when you have her and when you guys get to your house. And set your alarm as soon as you get home."

"Travis rolls with an entourage and always has security around him. How are you going to get to him?"

"There's always a way."

"Kenny. He's done so much dirt that a lot of people want to hurt him. I mean, have you been watching the news lately?"

"I have. And it's perfect." Kenny tossed a few bills on the table and turned to Tamara. "No one will suspect me when I fuck him up!"

Chapter 45

KENNY

Kenny spotted Brother in the corner of the crowded bar sipping a Corona. He surveyed the room, eyes scanning for Travis, but he didn't see him. So he made a beeline to Brother and sat down.

"Where's that motherfucka?" he asked impatiently, his head on a swivel.

Brother raised the bottle to his lips and took a swig. He then tipped it towards the left of the bar, where a man sat in a dark corner on a stool. When Kenny saw Travis up close and personal, he had on the same coat Ferragamo Man had on. That's when everything clicked.

This was the man that shook Mennette at her first Affairs to Remember meeting. Travis was after Mennette because he wanted the blackmail pictures of him and Tamara! Travis was very likely the one who was responsible for Mennette getting into the car accident. Travis was the only one, according to Willam's confession to Brother, who raped her, fathered Cecil, and caused Mennette to lose her family. Because of Travis' selfish actions, Mennette chose to sell her body so she could go to school and turn her life around from the shit hole that Travis had caused it to be in the first place!

For the first time since the night of the accident, all the puzzle pieces finally fit together for Kenny. In his mind's eye, it formed a picture of Travis... or should he say Ronnie... with a big red

"X" across his face. Kenny gripped the side of the table so hard he thought it would splinter into shreds in his hands.

"I'ma kill that..." Kenny started to raise up, but Brother's hand was immediately on his shoulder and forced him back down on the seat.

"Cool your jets, brotha. He's a public figure. He's fucking running for mayor. And he's having a hell of a week in the media."

"I don't give a..."

"I said, cool it." Brother pulled out his rarely used "older brother" tone to keep Kenny in line. "We can't just get him right here in this crowd with all these witnesses. See that dude behind him? And those over there..." Brother nodded in the direction of two large men appearing to chill not far from Travis and another one close by.

Kenny turned to see two more big men closer to the door. "Security," Kenny stated. "Tamara said he would have an entourage and security."

"Don't worry. He been checking his watch. You know what that means?"

"A woman."

"Yep. He's waiting on someone, looking for someone. Gotta be a woman."

A few people came up to Travis shaking his hands and patting him on the back. A few sat and had quick conversations while Brother and Kenny watched. Travis was gracious enough to each intrusion, but Kenny could tell that he was agitated and restless.

Travis' phone rang and he answered with irritation. He hung up the call, finished his drink, tipped the bartender, and headed for the door. He walked right past Kenny and Brother, oblivious of their presence. Two security guards exited first, then the rest made sure to exit after Travis. Kenny realized that it wouldn't be easy to get to Travis like he thought. He'd have to come up with some type of plan.

Once the security exited, Kenny and Brother followed on their

heels. It was easy to trail their caravan of black SUVs. They followed it to a luxury hotel in Downtown Oakland. The entire entourage filed into the hotel with a slightly shorter Travis in the nucleus of their circle. Kenny and Brother waited about 15 minutes before going inside. Travis and his squad were nowhere to be found. Behind the reception desk, a man and a woman checked-in guests.

The man looked up and motioned for them. "I can help the next guest please."

Kenny shook his head. "Oh no thanks. We're waiting for someone." When the woman was available, Kenny sent Brother in for the kill. Meanwhile, he wandered around the lobby trying to guess where Travis and his group could have disappeared to.

Five minutes later, Brother walked up behind Kenny and tapped him on the shoulder. Kenny turned around to his wide grin. "Tenth floor. Room 1039." Kenny was grateful for that Ph.D. in Womanology!

"Let's go!" Kenny said eagerly. They took the elevator up to the floor and when they got off, they noticed that there were two men standing guard at the beginning of the hallway leading to room 1039.

"Shit! Forgot about the gorillas," Brother said. "We need a plan."

"Two on the floor. How we gonna get past them?" Kenny said.

They went back downstairs to put their heads together. They needed the goons gone so Kenny could get into the room and deal with Travis himself. He would need Brother to look out and make sure nobody disturbed them when Kenny was taking care of his business. They went outside and sat in the car. Brother rolled a blunt for Kenny.

"You need this." He handed it to Kenny who reluctantly took it. "I have an idea. It'll probably take about an hour but I think my plan will work. But first, I'm gonna call Madam Aberdeen."

Kenny looked over at Brother confused.

"Oh yeah." Brother smiled. "We FaceTime periodically."

"Bro! We left there together. When the fuck did you even get

her number?”

Brother grinned.



An hour later, the elevator door dinged to the tenth floor and Brother stepped out dressed in a sharp, black suit with two women on each arm from Madam Aberdean's establishment. The women were barely dressed and very sexy. They were instructed to giggle as they approached the two bodyguards and look like they were having a good time. They stopped right in front of them.

“Y'all Travis' boys right?” The two look at each other, then back at Brother without answering. “He sent me to relieve you and give you a break. Sent these two lovely ladies to keep you company for a while. But only for an hour. Cause I got to get back to securing the other part of the hotel.” The two continued to look at him without speaking. Brother pulled out the card that Madam Aberdean gave him with the emblem on it. He flashed it to them letting their eyes confirm what they saw.

“Look, fellas. I don't have much time. One hour he said. And by the looks of things,” he looked them up and down, “...y'all gonna need all the time you can get!”

The two ladies eased up on the men, each linking her arms into theirs. Their fingers roamed across the men's chests and one even stood on her tiptoes to kiss one on his ear.

“We ain't hear nothing about this,” the biggest man said.

The one whose ear was being licked looked over and replied, “Man! Free pussy! He got the card with that symbol on it. So, Travis musta sent him. Let's go!”

“Nah, something ain't right. He gon' need more than a business card.” The biggest man responded. The woman on his arm feigned a pout and leaned her head on his chest.

“You shouldn't be worried about a business card, big man.” Brother said acting impatient. “What yo ass need to be worried

about is all this money Travis just spent on these two girls. Now if you waste his money and don't do as you was instructed, then that's what I'd be concerned about if I were you."

The two men looked at each other again and Brother could tell that between the two of them they had half of a brain. Brother huffed, blowing his cheeks out and shaking his head. "You already wasted ten minutes standing here. Like I told you, I got to get to the other side of the hotel in 50 minutes to secure those doors. Time is money and you wasting not only my time, but your boss's time. And his money!"

"Man, I'm ready. Let's go." The first man said.

"Alright." The biggest relented. "But this bet not be no trick."

"Ain't no grown ass man got time for tricks. I'll be standing right here when y'all get back." Brother said, standing in the spot where he was standing, pretending to stand post. The women led the men away. "Forty-nine minutes left!" Brother said as they passed him and disappeared down the elevator where the women were instructed to take them.

Brother watched an approaching Kenny coming down the hallway towards him. He stopped briefly and they shook each other's hands and Kenny moved on down the hallway like they didn't know each other. In this transaction, Brother had slipped the key-card into Kenny's hand. Kenny let himself into the room.

In the darkness, he could see the outline of two bodies sleeping in the bed. Thick curtains on the hotel windows blocked out the glow of the moon. It took moments for Kenny's eyes to adjust to the details of the room. He leaned against the desk facing the two sleeping bodies. He could hear Travis snoring. The other body appeared to be a woman. With a gun tucked in his waistband, he lit the blunt and took a few puffs.

Now that he was here, he took time to really think about exactly what he was going to do to this man. He couldn't kill him, although that's exactly what he wanted to do. But he could definitely beat the shit out of him. Kenny puffed a few more times, took in

a deep inhale into his lungs, held the smoke, then blew out a long white stream.

The woman's body rolled over, sniffed and sat up quickly. She grabbed the sheets to her chest as her eyes ballooned. A squeak threatened to escape her mouth.

"Scream and I'll kill you," Kenny said calmly, his right hand pointing the gun at her, his left hand moving the blunt to his mouth as he took another hit. She nodded her understanding.

"Don't. Say. One. Word. Get your ass in that bathroom and don't come out or I'll kill you twice."

The woman scrambled from the bed and into the bathroom where Kenny heard her lock the door. He didn't worry about her. She was naked and didn't have a phone on her, just a sheet. He waited. He puffed more on the blunt as he contemplated his plans. A few minutes later, Travis reached over to the side of the bed where the woman was. He sniffed and sat up.

"Yeah," Kenny said, snubbing out the last of his blunt. "Wake up, motherfucka!"

"What the hell is going on? Where's Michelle?" He looked at the empty spot on the side of the bed.

"Travis? Travis Stamps?" Kenny pushed himself away from the desk. "Or should I say, Ronnie McClure?"

Travis sat up slowly. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Mennette's husband. I hear you been looking for her. Well, I'm here to answer any mothafuckin questions you have."

Travis relaxed, feeling unthreatened by Kenny's presence and unfazed by the absence of the woman.

"You can start by asking her where my motherfucking pictures at and where's my motherfucking money." He said, coolly, like he was in control of the situation.

Kenny was surprised that Travis didn't scare as easily as he hoped he would. Part of him wished that Brother was up in the hotel room with him for backup. But Mennette was his wife and he had to be the one to take Travis down. Flashes of his white Ferraga-

mo shoes leaving Kenny in the dust crossed his mind. He watched as Travis continued to talk. His fingers itched to pull back out his gun. But he had to play that card at just the right moment.

Travis swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, his naked body exposed. "If she would have stuck with our deal, I wouldn't have had to run her ass off the road." A cocky smirk appeared on his face. He cocked his head.

"See Mr. Big Man? All this wouldn't have happened if your little wife would have minded her own damn business. Nobody told her to come fucking with me. Now," he paused and raised his eyebrows. "You here to give me my shit? Cause if not, you can take your bitch ass back out that door where you came from. I got real shit to deal with."

Something inside of Kenny snapped and he was on Travis' ass like a flash, pounding him with his fists. Kenny landed a blow straight to his jaw. It startled and threw Travis off balance, sending him into the window. Travis grasped at the curtains to break his fall. The curtain rings popped under his weight and the beam snapped away from the wall. Everything fell on him.

Kenny felt his energy rising. He was ready for Travis. Travis quickly unraveled out of the fabric and charged toward Kenny, knocking him into the wall. Kenny battle-rammed blows to Travis' side in a series of kidney punches. He didn't let up. All the anger that he felt over these last few months came roaring out. He wanted Travis to feel every bit of pain he'd caused. He wanted Travis to hurt the way Mennette did for most of her life. Kenny's fist kept pummeling Travis till the latter was disoriented.

At one point, the woman cracked the bathroom door open but when Kenny shot her a quick evil look, she quickly shut and locked the door again. Kenny grabbed Travis and slammed his naked body back on the floor. Where Travis had Kenny in height, Kenny had Travis in girth. Travis fell back but he kicked at Kenny. He caught Kenny in his face and he fell over. That gave Travis the break he needed. Before Kenny could react, Travis jumped up and

let his fists rain down on Kenny like he had been in the boxing ring at one point. Kenny could feel blood pouring from a cut from one of Travis' rings. He blocked Travis' next blow and gave a body blow to Travis that knocked the wind out of him. The advantage swung back to Kenny.

Kenny's fist connected with Travis' jaw again, then he landed another quick blow to his nose. Kenny was on top of him. With each blow to Travis' face, he felt better. The feel of his fist connecting and crunching that smug ass face again and again was therapeutic. Then Kenny pulled out his piece and started hitting Travis' face with the butt of the gun. One blow met Travis' eye which immediately started swelling. He was so into the ass-whooping that he didn't hear the slight movement and noise behind him until it was too late.

A sharp blow at the back of his head traveled up Kenny's spine. Spots popped in front of Kenny's eyes like miniature light bulbs bursting on a 4th of July night. The gun felt heavy in his hand as it slowly aimed at the floor and flopped with a hard steel thud. He dropped to one knee and grabbed at the coffee table, but his fingertips slipped off the edge. With his last bit of strength Kenny tried pulling himself up before another hard blow to his temple, a foreign object that shattered into tiny pieces, showering his head and shoulders with small shards. Excruciating pain radiated through him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the woman from the bathroom holding the base of a broken lamp. Travis stood grinning at him with blood streaming down his face. Travis wiped at the blood with the back of his hand.

Kenny's pain was unbearable but fear now gripped him with shooting pains like hundreds of tiny needle pricks tingling throughout his body. His fear was unrelenting in its efforts to suffocate him with the crippling thought of what would become of Mennette if he were to die right now. He tried hard to reach for his gun, but his brain ceased to communicate with his limbs.

Travis delivered one more devastating blow to Kenny's head.

His sight blurred and his eyelids got heavy until he could not keep them open any longer.

Chapter 46

KENNY

Kenny awoke in a daze. Pulsating pain traveled across the back of his head. He looked down to find his hands tied behind his back and ankles tied with the coiled cord from the hotel room phone. Travis was dressed and so was the woman. She was now counting a stack of \$100 bills. With her hair combed and her make-up on, she actually looked decent.

Kenny wondered if she was one of Madam Aberdeen's escorts. He thought of Mennette being one while he was married and made his adrenaline spike. He struggled to no avail against his bonds.

When Travis noticed that Kenny was conscious, he walked over and kneeled down next to Kenny. "Now I'm not gon' ask you again where the hell those pictures are. And I want my muthafucking money."

"I ain't telling you shit, man," Kenny growled. He could not ignore the immense pain within his entire body. He could see the dried blood on Travis' swollen and bruised face. Apparently, before the woman snuck up on him, Kenny was giving Travis a run for his money. He was proud of his work.

"Protecting your bitch?" Travis snarled. "Trust me, she ain't worth it."

Kenny spat in his face. The woman stopped counting the money and looked over in slight amusement.

"Oh, my brotha!" Travis chuckled, his mouth curling down into a frown. "You shouldn't have done that." He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the spit from his face, then shoved it into Kenny's mouth. He stood up and kneed Kenny repeatedly in the face until Kenny was slumped over. Blood surged from Kenny's nose and face, dampening the front of his shirt. Travis grabbed the last of the telephone cord. "That was total disrespect."

Travis quickly wrapped the cord numerous times around Kenny's neck. "Now I'ma do to you what I should have done to your wife in the first place when she disrespected me all those years ago!" he whispered menacingly. His voice was deep and raspy and hot in Kenny's ear. He scorned, then laughed.

"Let me ask you something Big Man, while you on your way out of this life. I want my voice to be the last damn thing you hear. Did she call my name at night? Did she yell out 'Ronnie?'" Travis asked, tightening the cord around Kenny's neck. Veins popped in Kenny's neck and he struggled to get air. Kenny thrashed as he attempted to wiggle out of the cord around his neck.

"When you fuck her, do you feel my dick print? Huh, big man? You so damn tough! You thought you could roll up in here and fuck with me? Not me! Nah, man. I ain't the one!" Travis tightened the cord. Kenny coughed, his breathing shortened.

"Hey Travis, I'm not with that," the woman said with compassion in her voice. "I was just trying to have a little fun, make a little money. Not go to jail for murder. You need to let up on that cord."

"Shut up! Shut! The! Fuck! Up! I pay for you! This son-of-a-bitch think he can come in here and fuck with Ronnie! He must not know 'bout me! Don't nobody..." Suddenly his rant was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Oh shit!" the woman whispered. She'd stopped counting the money.

"Ignore it." Travis said, glancing away from Kenny who was still struggling to breathe.

The knocking persisted and the woman looked at Travis.

"Room service," came a man's voice from the other side of the door.

"Wrong room. I didn't order no room service," Travis snarled. He looked down at Kenny who seemed to be floating in and out of consciousness.

There was fidgeting behind the door. "Yes. Room 1039. I have a delivery here," the voice said.

"We're not expecting a delivery," the woman responded.

"Ma'am, my boss just tells me where to deliver. This is room 1039. I have a delivery for this room," the voice said.

She glanced again nervously at Travis.

"Answer the door, but crack it. Don't let nobody see in," Travis instructed her. "I'ma stand right behind you so you better not get cute about things."

He dropped Kenny onto the floor which gave him a chance to take in quick, shallow breaths. Travis went to stand behind her as she opened the door slightly. She stared at the man on the other side.

"I have something here for room number 1039," he said. "It's a package."

"Well, I didn't order anything," she said.

Travis stood behind the door with his hand on her shoulder. She could feel him breathing on her neck. She sized up the attractive man. She noticed that he didn't have a package in his hand. Travis couldn't hold back his anger any longer.

"She said she didn't order no God-damn..." The door burst open before Travis could get all his words out, knocking the woman to the ground. Hundred-dollar bills fluttered into the air. She rolled over and then she didn't move.

Brother stood on the other side and came in like a storm, dropping his fists into the jaw of an unsuspecting Travis. Brother was wild-eyed. Travis was dazed as Brother dropped his fists into his body. Travis tried to swing back, but Brother was bigger and stronger and easily overpowered him. For the second time that night,

Travis' face took another beating. Travis managed to wiggle and jerked his way out of Brother's grip. He jumped over Michelle's body and bolted out of the hotel room. Brother quickly untied the cord around Kenny's neck and unraveled his arms. He slapped him in his face a few hard times to get Kenny to open his eyes.

"You alright?" Brother asked.

"Get...that," Kenny said in between sputtering breaths, "...motherfucka..."

Brother was off like a rocket.

He darted down the hallway in time to see Travis run into the stairwell. He slammed through the door with a loud bang. It ricocheted against the wall. Inside, he heard the quick echoes of Travis' shoes going down against the cement stairs in the stairwell corridor. A quick glance over the railing told him to quicken his pace. Travis was two floors below him.

Brother was determined and not about to let this man outrun him as he did Kenny. He could see Travis circling around each flight downward like a spiral torpedo. He knew they had far too many floors to go down and that Travis would tire out before getting to the bottom floor. Already, he could hear Travis panting as he descended each landing.

Brother focused. He was confident that he would catch him. All those workouts in preparation for summer were now coming in handy. It was "go time"! This was not a drill! Brother had to admit that the adrenaline and the fact that he was gonna get revenge in the name of Kenny excited him. He increased his speed, hitting a few corners and railings.

Brother took a chance and jumped a railing, putting him down an extra level and closer to Travis. If he jumped again, he could land on Travis' back. He just needed to time it correctly. Brother decided it was worth the attempt and he leaped over the next floor's railing. He landed right on Travis' back, causing them both to tumble down half a flight of stairs. Brother felt the pain first speed up through his knee when he landed on it, then ring through his

back as he came down hard on it. He groaned and took in a sharp breath. He was in an insurmountable amount of pain. From the corner of his eye, he saw Travis rolling over and getting up from the ground. Brother reached out in time to grab his ankle, toppling Travis back to the flat of the stairs.

Somehow, Travis shook it off and kicked at Brother. Travis' heel landed on Brother's forehead. He kicked again and connected to Brother's eye. Brother scrambled. He grabbed for Travis' pants legs and stumbled a little but straightened up in time to land another blow to Travis' jaw.

Blood flowed from Travis' mouth. He spat out a red, bubbly wad that landed at Brother's foot. Brother hit him again, but Travis was like the energizer bunny. He came back with a few strong blows to Brother's face, like a professional, knocking Brother into a railing. Travis grabbed, then pushed hard on Brother, leaning all of his weight on him. Brother's head hung over the railing. The stairwell spiraled like the inside of a snail's shell and he was barely able to turn his head and look down to calculate how far his fall would be if Travis overpowered him. Brother grabbed at Travis' throat and squeezed. He stopped Travis' attack long enough to get a good blow in.

Travis regained control and overpowered Brother enough to shove him out of the way. Travis completed the final landing and threw his weight onto the exit door which emptied out into an alleyway that led to the street. Brother recovered quickly and was only two seconds behind him.

Travis ran into the street and dodged a few cars. He turned to look back at Brother, daring him to follow. Travis threw his hands up in cocky arrogance, then took off full steam ahead. He was a few steps away from making it to the other side of the street when a large pickup truck rammed into him, followed by two other cars. Traffic screeched to a halt. People jumped out of their cars, concerned about the man lying on the street. No one noticed Brother standing in the mouth of the ally.

Travis lay sprawled in the middle of the street. His leg bent backward while his left arm bent in the opposite direction. His body was twisted almost into the shape of an “S” and blood was everywhere. Brother couldn’t tell if he was dead or not. The people on the street would likely call 911. Travis was out of his hands now. Brother looked around and inconspicuously eased back into the hotel side door.

He ran all the way up the stairwell as fast as he came down it earlier. He made it back to the room and helped Kenny back down into their car. The brothers slipped away, unseen.

Chapter 47

KENNY

Kenny watched Friday's evening news with guilt and sadness. Carolyn Tanner was reported as missing. There were no clues and the public was being asked for help locating her whereabouts. Her job reported that she was last seen on Monday evening at the end of the business day. Her mom said she never came home that night.

It was the same night that Kenny waited for her after work and she never showed up. Kenny had even called the local police station to report his last conversation with Chocolate and her suspicions about Travis Stamps. But without evidence or motive, there was no reason for them to investigate anything. Besides, the police said to "pick a number" when it came to people lining up who had things to say about Mr. Stamps' suspicious dealings.

Labeled lucky to be alive, all hell broke loose when Travis entered the hospital. More allegations of his misconduct surfaced. Without him available to refute claims or keep things out of the press, his image took a major blow. Opinion polls projected a generous 3% of voters were still likely to vote for him.

Kenny cleared his throat and felt raw, dry pain that lingered as a result of the wire from Travis. He never went to the hospital for his injuries; he didn't want to raise the doctor's suspicions and risk them calling the cops. Instead, Brother called one of his many women who happened to be a PA with emergency room trauma experience. She confirmed that his wounds were only surface. With

plenty of Tylenol, ice and rest, he'd make a full recovery. Brother didn't catch Travis' wrath as bad as Kenny had, so he temporarily moved in to help out. Mennette remained with Tamara. Everyone thought it was for the best right now. Her affluent community offered more security options than their own neighborhood.

Brother entered the room and sat on the chair next to the bed.

"You watching the news?"

Kenny nodded. His shoulders sagged. "They still ain't found her, man." Kenny sighed, focusing his attention on his brother. Brother's face was still bruised and his eye was still swollen, yet it never diminished the attractiveness of his face. Kenny gave him a tight smile. If Brother hadn't been there for him, he wouldn't have been alive right now. Kenny had no doubt Travis would have murdered him without blinking and buried his body in a junkyard somewhere.

"Don't blame yourself." Brother knew exactly how Kenny was feeling.

"I can't help it. I feel like I dragged her into this." Kenny adjusted himself and Brother jumped up to fluff his pillows just like he did for their mother years ago.

"She's a grown-ass woman. She made her own decisions. You need to get your rest and not stress. Let the police do their work. They'll find her." He stretched. "I spoke with Tamara today. I'm gonna take some things over to Mennette. Some paint stuff and a few things she asked for. Anything you want to send her?"

Kenny shook his head no and closed his eyes, sinking back into the pillows.

Brother reached over to pick up the empty coffee mug and the bowl with the now cold soup from off the nightstand.

"How did my life turn out like this?" Kenny said in a hoarse voice. He cleared his throat again and winced at the pain. "One argument with Mennette changed everything and I end up here." He inhaled and shook his head in disbelief. "And Chocolate..." Kenny pursed his lips tightly and closed his eyes again.

Brother stood, dishes in hand. For the first time in a long time, he had no words.

"I never meant for anybody to get hurt." Kenny glanced out the window. "Especially someone innocent like Chocolate."

Brother moved closer to the window that Kenny was looking out of. "Everyone knows your heart, man. Nobody's blaming you for her missing."

"Don't matter." He stated abruptly. "I blame myself. She's such a sweet kind-hearted woman. And she got caught up in this foolishness with that..." He shook his head and frowned. "I wanna get that mother..."

Brother shook his head. "We'll get him. Don't worry. You need to take some time to recover. You lucky. Only surface damage to your skin. You coulda died."

Kenny blew air from his nose.

Tamara's words about Mennette working for Madam Aberdeen all the way through graduate school bounced throughout his head. It was best that Mennette was with her right now because his anger crept up each time he thought about her sleeping with other men for money while they were together. Hell, while they were married!

Logically, Kenny understood Mennette's desire for a fresh start as Tamara explained it to him. But damn! Did it have to be at the expense of his love for her? He had completely trusted Mennette and shared with her the biggest trauma in his life... and she stood by and supported him through it. Why didn't she give him the chance to love and support her the same way? Why couldn't she trust him with her darkness? He would have done anything and sacrificed everything to work and help her achieve her ambitions. But she never gave him a chance. Could he be married to someone who chose not to trust him?

With all the mysteries around his wife settled, Kenny had ample time to think about his life as he recovered over the last two days. It seemed Mennette made choices based on what she wanted. Now it was time for him to figure out what he really wanted out of life at

this point. He still loved Mennette and no doubt he'd always have love for her. But things were really different now and he had a hard choice to make.

Kenny turned off the television and leaned back into the large pillows. Brother started towards the bedroom door. "I'll warm up your soup to help with your throat. And I'll get your pain medication. The main focus right now is for you to get healthy and strong. We'll get him. Don't worry about that. We'll get his ass. It's only been two days. We know where to find him. And that muthafucka deserves everything you wanna give him."

Chapter 48

KENNY

I just wanna kill this motherfucka.” Kenny said to Brother. They were standing next to Travis’ hospital bed. He and Brother made a visit, complete with flowers as a disguise to the nurses, to Travis’ hospital room exactly two weeks after they put him in there.

Kenny’s swelling and bruising had healed and so did something in his heart. Even though sparks of rage threatened to erupt anytime he thought about Mennette and Travis, there was a sense of calm that always followed. It was a peace that had come with his vigilance to reclaim his life and make decisions about what was next for him. There were just a few loose ends to tie up first.

“Kill ’em.” Brother said inspecting his knuckles. He leaned against the windowsill, periodically glancing out of the hospital window. He wore dark shades so as not to bring attention to his fading black eye.

After spending three days in the intensive care ward, Travis had moved to a hospital in Walnut Creek to help him recover. He had a broken arm, leg, ribs, and a neck brace. White bandages wrapped around his stomach. The leg in the cast was suspended in midair by a sling. So was his left arm. The neck brace completed his immobility. He literally looked like he had been run over by a truck.

His face was no better. The Young brothers saw the result of their handiwork before Travis ran out into the street. His mouth was swollen. His nose looked like it was dislocated. One eye was

badly bruised and the other had a large gauze pad right alongside it. A breathing tube snaked down one nostril. An IV pierced his arm and two bags of fluids hung nearby.

Travis barely opened his eyes when he heard the door open. Brother had leaned into him to see if he was breathing. Upon confirmation, he took up space between the bed and the wall. He was uninterested in Travis. His mind was on something else.

Travis sensed movement and slowly opened his eyes. He sucked in a sharp breath when he recognized Kenny. The only thing he could do in his defense was to dart his horrified gaze quickly back and forth between Kenny and Brother. He couldn't even reach for the nurse's call button.

Ready to have a little fun, Brother pushed himself from the windowsill and leaned into Travis. He placed his hand on the arm in the sling and Travis' breathing increased.

"You don't look so good, buddy! You look like you got run over by a truck!" He chuckled at his own joke. "Remember us?"

Travis' eyes widened and he made some type of mumbling noise which Brother stopped by putting his hand up close to Travis' mouth.

"Relax. We just here to have a friendly little chat. Unless things don't go our way. Don't strain yourself. Now, I see that you're having a little trouble breathing. This is how it's gonna go. My brother Kenny here need to talk to you about some things." Brother picked up a thin chart sitting by the bed and ran his finger up and down reading it. "Says here you're going home tomorrow. Congratulations!" He put the file down and applauded a few times. "Just remember, we know where you live, muthafucka!"

"We here to make sure this shit don't happen again." Kenny started. "Or I'ma have to finish what that truck didn't. Now tell me... you plan on coming after Mennette again or do we need to beat your ass again?" Kenny asked, not particularly expecting an answer..

"Cause we ain't got nothing but time." Brother added, then

coolly walked up to the side of the bed inspecting the tubes running from the IV bags to Travis' arms. He ran his fingers down one of the lines leading to the inside of Travis' elbow.

"Wonder what this one does?" He bent the thin plastic tube in half. He looked at the medication. "Oh, this one is for the heart, I think." Travis' eyes swelled. Brother released the tube, then bent it back. He did this a few times over and over as Travis hyperventilated.

"Now listen here. This is how it's gonna go. We gonna negotiate today. I'ma say some things and between the three of us men in this room, we gonna come to some agreements understood? Blink once for yes if you agree, twice for no if you disagree."

Travis blinked once.

"He's a quick learner!" Brother applauded again. "Let's get started. You've caused too much pain in Mennette's life. You gon' leave her alone. And you gon' forget about that money too 'cause you got plenty." Brother said. "Understand?"

Travis blinked once.

"Don't you ever come around Mennette again. We agree?" Kenny added.

He blinked once.

"I dunno." Brother teased. "He don't look too serious to me." He turned to Kenny. "What you gonna do about that?"

"I feel like choking the life out of him right now. Just squeeze the damn air out of his fucking lungs and watch that machine go beep happy!" Kenny said. He narrowed his eyes, pinning his stare at the man in the bed. "I don't like it when somebody fucks with my wife."

"It ain't nothing but a thang. Ain't nothing but space and opportunity." Brother said. "Nobody saw us come in. Nobody'll see us go out." He shrugged his shoulders. "Choke him."

Travis' eyes widened and he rapidly blinked twice. He blinked twice again. Then mumbled something frantically through his swollen lips.

"What's that?" Kenny cupped his ear and cocked his head.

"I think he said something about the pictures." Brother said.

"Oh! The pictures!" He pulled an envelope from the back of his pants. "You mean these?" Kenny opened the envelope and pulled out the pictures of him and Tamara. Instantly, Brother walked over and took them off Kenny's hands. Grinning, he looked through them like this was his first time seeing them. Travis glared helplessly at Brother. "You want those?" Kenny asked, pointing to Brother.

One blink.

"I think he wants the pictures or for us to get rid of them. To destroy them? Or to give them to him so he doesn't have to worry about his wife or career?"

Again, one blink.

"Here's the deal," Kenny whispered in Travis' ear. His voice was deep, low and raspy. It took everything in his power not to press all his weight onto that oxygen tube and make all of those machines wail as they stopped all the air from being pumped into his body. But what good would that do? What good would he be to Mennette sitting in prison?

"You disappear from Mennette's life," Kenny continued. "I don't wanna hear about you coming around at all. Or my brother and I will have no problem choking the life out of you. Understood?"

One blink.

"And you can have these." Brother tossed the envelope onto Travis' chest.

Then Kenny snatched them back up. "Nah. I don't think I should give them to him, Brother." Kenny said.

Brother played along. "Why not?"

"Because he tried to kill me. He choked me."

"WHAT?" Brother feigned shock, his voice climbing octaves in a mocking tone. "He tried to kill me too! Maybe we should return the favor."

"Think I will!" Kenny grabbed the oxygen tube and folded it in

half with satisfaction on his face. His own blood pumping wildly in his ears. He held it tighter and watched Travis' eyes bulge with fear and the color drain from his face.

"Where is Carolyn?" Kenny demanded.

Travis' struggled. He tried blinking twice.

"Let me find out you had something to do with her missing. And I will hunt you down like a dog!"

He leaned into his ear like Travis did to him in the hotel when he had the upper hand. His lips practically touched the ridge of his ear. "Are you looking at me, motherfucka? I want my face to be the last face you see before you die." He sneered. "Smell my breath? That's the last smell your punk ass is gonna smell before you burn in hell. Hear me?" Kenny growled. "Hear. Me. Mutha. Fucka?" Kenny could only hear the pounding of his own heart in his ears as he watched Travis grasping for life.

Tears ran down Travis' eyes as he realized his oxygen was diminishing quickly. He quickly blinked once. But Kenny didn't let up. His heart was pounding so hard he could have sworn that he heard Travis calling his name in mercy.

"Kenny. Kenny!" He heard his name being called in the distance over and over then louder until someone roughly gripped his shoulder. "Kenny!" Brother yelled, digging his fingers into Kenny's flesh. "Let him go. He ain't worth it." Brother tried pulling him off of the oxygen but Kenny's grip was too strong.

"You can't go to jail for murder. Kenny! Calm down! You gon' have the police, nurses and all kind of people running in here if these machines start beeping." When Kenny was sure the oxygen stopped, he released the tube and the sound of air whooshed through it. Travis' chest rose and fell quickly.

Kenny yanked the tube and the machine started wailing. He turned and walked out of the hospital room, but not before Brother took one more look at the pictures. Then instead of replacing them on the table, he placed them just beyond the reach of Travis' broken fingers. Brother walked out of the door right passed the

rushing nurses headed toward Travis' room.

Outside, Brother had to jog to catch up with a seething Kenny. He clasped him roughly on his shoulder as they walked. "You did the right thing man. You can't be killing people and thinking the white man ain't gon' come looking for you. Especially if you woulda killed him. You know white folks love him."

Kenny didn't respond. He just kept taking long strides to his car.

"I got one question, though," Brother asked out of breath as they arrived at the car. Kenny hopped in. "Why you give up those pictures? What if he don't keep his word? Then you ain't got no leverage."

Kenny started the ignition, reached into the back seat and handed Brother a folder. Inside were copies of the pictures. "Those are yours. Do with them as you will. I've got more copies in case that motherfucka decides his balls are bigger than mine. And next time, he gon' wish broken bones was his only problem."

Chapter 49

KENNY

They found Chocolate's body a few days after Kenny and Brother visited Travis in the hospital. She had been strangled and left floating in the Delta, according to the news. No suspects. No leads. Kenny's thoughts floated between last week's news reports, what he actually knew to be true and his overwhelming sense of remorse that she was gone.

Kenny wrapped his right arm around, tying the blue tie into a knot. He checked out himself in the mirror. The dark blue suit accompanied by the sad look on his face stared back at him. He couldn't believe that he was dressing for her funeral. Although Brother told him not to stress himself, he couldn't shake feeling responsible. Travis must have been keeping an eye on her because she was Mennette's friend. And even though she thought she was careful, he probably had his henchmen follow her when she left the party and saw her connect with him. She paid for it with her life.

Kenny made numerous trips to the police department trying to convince them that Travis needed to be investigated. But he couldn't share a clear motive or evidence without implicating himself in what happened to Travis so he had to let that route go.

Her closed casket funeral was this morning, Saturday, February 23rd. It was being held at Mount Zion Church in Oakland: ironically, the same place where the Affairs to Remember meetings are held. Mennette did not want to attend. Kenny sat in the pew

and watched as Chocolate's three boys filed down the aisle to their mother's closed casket. Flashes of his own mother's lifeless body formed in his head and he realized he couldn't stay. Kenny gave his condolences to her mother, children, sisters, and ex-husband, then left.

From there, Kenny swung by the post office to pick up Brother. He was there picking up a delivered expedited passport. When he pulled up, Brother was standing near a group of bushes, staring off into space. Kenny had to honk the horn a few times to get his attention.

"How long you been waiting?"

"Not long. It was busy in there."

"Ready?"

"As I'm gon' be." Brother said. "How'd it go? With Chocolate and all?"

Kenny slowly shook his head. "I don't wish that on nobody. But I know how it feels. Like I was transported back in time to Mama."

Brother nodded slowly, understanding.

Kenny needed to change the subject. "Man, did I ever thank you for that bank hookup? If she hadn't told me about that conservatorship business, none of what we're about to do would be possible." Showing gratitude was always a mood changer for him.

Brother gave a tight smile.

Kenny started the car and headed towards Brother's house. He could tell that he had a lot on his mind and Kenny thought he knew what was bothering his brother.

"You sure you're ready?" Kenny asked. "It's time."

Brother just nodded without a word. A sudden sadness crossed Brother's face. He looked like he was going to protest but then a wave of understanding came over him.

They pulled up in front. "Packed?" Kenny asked him as Brother got out of the car.

"I'm all packed and ready to go. Hit me when you done at your house." Brother stared up the street at nothing in particular. He

turned to walk away.

Then Kenny gently said. "Don't forget Mama."

Brother nodded sadly without looking back.

Kenny went home to shower and change. The entire time he thought about Chocolate. He planned on putting some of the money away for each of her boys into a trust once he made it back from their trip. He had a small list of tasks to take care of before he and Brother headed to the airport for their flight out from San Francisco airport later that evening. For his first task, he opened his phone, located a number and dialed.

"Hey Ms. Vee!" Kenny said brightly when she picked up.

"Mr. Young!" She rejoiced. The woman had the memory of an elephant. Warmth and happiness laced her voice. "How is she? Did she get her memory back? Is she okay? Did you ever figure out..."

He let the phone line fill with silent air and he could tell that Ms. Vee knew what this meant. He didn't want to be the one to tell her that Cecil had passed, but here he was again, delivering heart-breaking news.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Vee"

"That's okay. It's what I figured." She sniffed then blew her nose. "Poor dear, poor, poor dear boy...Lord watch over that baby angel," she said.

"I hate to be the one to break that news to you." He paused. "You did say that Cecil wasn't expected to live past the age of five? And from what I heard, he lived a pretty good life with Mennette up until he was almost three years old. And Mennette, she's gonna be fine. Time is gonna be her best friend right now."

"Praise God." She whispered. "Do you promise to bring her to visit me as soon as her memory come back?"

"You the first one on the list, promise! Scouts honor, Troop 423!" he chuckled.

"Mr. Young?" She paused. He heard her sigh into the phone and pictured her face. "Can I confess something to you?"

"You can tell me anything."

There was still a pause as if she were contemplating. "When you was here in South Carolina, I stalled."

"Ma'am?"

"I coulda told you everything you needed to know that first night. I had a good feeling about you that day. I get gut feelings about folks and I knew that you didn't mean no harm to Mennette. I was shocked, but I knew you loved her."

He chuckled. "So why did you stall?"

"Was just lonely, I guess. You see, Mr. Young, I don't get much company. No real family. After my sister died, I just floated through life. No husband, no kids. So Mennette and Cecil was my family for a while. Ain't really had none since she left."

He knew it then. But it was sweet of her to come clean.

"Are you sure it wasn't the steak?" Kenny teased.

She giggled. "The steak was the icing on the cake." He almost heard her blushing through the phone. "Mr. Young, I'm not gon' keep you from your business. Keep in touch with me, hear? And please take care of her. She's special that one."

"Yes'm, will do. By the way, did you get the package I sent you?"

"Just came today." She said. "And I thank you for them."

"Steaks from Omaha Steak Company." He laughed. "Best steak you'll ever taste."

"Mr. Young, I done already tasted the best steak." And he realized that she was talking about his. "...and the best sunflower seeds!" She giggled.

"Did you get the other thing inside?"

"Other thing?"

"Inside of the box of steaks. Reach your hand deep down, under those steaks. There's an envelope."

"Hold on." He heard her wrestling with the box and then she let out a loud whoop and holler. She fumbled on her way back to the phone and was breathless when she made it.

"Mr. Young! There's an envelope here full of cash!"

"Twenty thousand to be exact."

"Twenty thousand?" She inhaled with a squeal. "Dollars?"

"Yes'm. Dollars."

"Oh Lord Glory be thy name! It's for me?"

"Yes'm."

"But why?"

"For taking care of Mennette and Cecil all those years ago even when you didn't have to."

She fell silent for a moment and he could hear soft sniffles. A low sob escaped her mouth. "Thank you, Mr. Young. And thank you for taking care of her and loving her when I wasn't able to and even during those times that she may not have seemed to deserve it. And also Mr. Young. Thank you for coming into my life."

"More than welcome. Enjoy the money."

"Lawd, I got to go bury this in my Folgers can in the backyard by Mennette's tree! Alright Mr. Young I got some digging to do!"

"Alright, Ms. Vee. Keep in touch."

"I will!" she said then, hung up.

A few minutes later, Kenny carried a box downstairs and placed it in his car. Before getting in, he took a glance around at his neighborhood. The children were out playing and of course, the annoying barking of his neighbor's dog could be heard. Kenny smiled a sad yet confident smile.

Inside, the house was full of boxes neatly piled and ready to go. He'd hired some movers and they would be showing up soon to take everything to his storage unit. But he wanted to make sure that the last of Mennette's things were packed so he could personally deliver them to her. A Morgan Hunts Realtor sign perched in the front of the yard with the smiling face of their realtor on it.

He had filed for divorce. With the blackmail money from Travis, he felt the fairest thing to do was to split up what was left. They had both suffered at Travis' hand and deserved the opportunity to have a fresh start at his expense. More money would come in after the house sold and he'd split those proceeds with her too.

Kenny had also quit his job. He thanked Matt profusely for

his patience since Mennette's accident, for his friendship over the years, and for giving him the opportunity in the first place. Matt assured him the door was always open if he wanted to come back. If he did choose to return to Airglass, it would be as an engineer. Kenny was finally ready to make good on the promise he made Mama years ago to finish his degree. But first, he needed a nice, long vacation and Brother was going along with him.

Kenny thumped the box on the front seat. This was bittersweet. He'd found his independence but lost his wife, all behind one accident. He wasn't quite sure how and what his life was going to look like going forward, but all he knew was that he had to keep moving forward. He took one more glance at the place that he and Mennette had called home for over half his life. Then he drove off, leaving it to fall away in the rearview mirror.

Chapter 50

MENNETTE

Things have shifted. Everything has changed. Some of it is good. It's like a cloud has cleared and I can breathe a little easier. Not totally free yet, but at least easier. I've been staying with Tamara and Eric for a few weeks now. Even though football season is over, he makes a lot of appearances on TV, gives talks and has other business, so he travels a lot. And even when he is home, the house is so big that I rarely see him.

Tamara is thrilled I'm here. She has someone to keep her company when Eric is away besides the staff. She doesn't trust them. She wants me to stay with her for good. But I've already decided that I won't. I can't. If I'm to ever get my life back or start a new one, I've got to get out on my own. I'm not sure how to break it to her.

Kenny and I rarely speak. The other day, Tamara and I drove by the house and there was a for sale sign in front. He told me he was going to do it but seeing it made it seem real. Final. There are divorce papers. Not long ago, someone came to Tamara's house to serve me with them. I signed them right away. After all of this drama, he felt it was best for us to go our separate ways.

I can't blame him. Apparently, I did some pretty horrible, inexcusable and unforgiving things. I still don't remember for myself all the things that he and Tamara told me. Nothing about the escort service, my childhood, or even my son. I did have a dream once, though, of holding a little baby. But I never saw his face in

the dream.

Kenny called Vee Turner for me to see if she had any pictures of Cecil but sadly she didn't. Everything was lost in the fire. She seemed so happy to speak with me. But I think I really hurt her feelings when I told her that I didn't remember her. I'm not trying to hurt the people that have helped me, but I still feel stuck on an island by myself.

Kenny said I don't have to worry about Travis anymore. He'll never bother me again. Kenny also set me up financially. He created a trust with \$240,000 in my name. Plus he promised he'd give me half the money from the sale of the house when it came through. Financially, I'm set for a little while until I can figure out what I'm going to do next. I continue going to my Affairs to Remember group therapy meetings because they've helped me think about creating a new life for myself. But maybe I'll stop going soon.

Right now, I'm sitting in Tamara's guest room, painting a sunset. It's a beautiful golden reddish-orange. Then Henry, Tamara's butler, knocks on and opens the door.

"Miss Young. Mr. Young is here to see you downstairs."

I hesitate momentarily and think before I place the paintbrush down. I had just dipped it into the thick orange color and stared at it as some of it ran from the brush. I feel Henry watching my back, waiting for me to respond. I turned and spoke to him from the side of my face without looking directly into his eyes.

"Thank you, Henry. Please let him know I'll be down."

I'm not surprised that he's here. He called earlier to let me know that he was bringing some things for me. Even though he has reminded me numerous times that we are no longer a couple, I slip into the restroom and apply a coat of lipgloss. I ruffle my fingers through my hair and push my breast up higher into my bra. I wonder if I should change from my painting clothes into a sundress. I decide that was a good idea and slip into a cute little number I had hanging in the closet. Hey, you can't fault a girl for trying. There are plenty of days that I hold up hope that he will come and get

me from Tamara's house and take me back home with him. But he never does.

I stand at the top of the large, impressive spiral staircase and I see Tamara and Kenny at the bottom, having a conversation. It actually looked like a pleasant conversation.

For some reason, my heart hitched. A sadness and a joy mixed together came over me. Even though he will soon be my ex-husband, I was actually happy to see him and his beautiful smile. He really did try his best to take care of me. I guess for that, I will always be grateful to him. There are some days that I wish I could go back to the house and live with him, but he has made it clear that is not an option. He appears relaxed and content. Settled. Better than I've ever remembered seeing him. He is laughing, sharing a moment with Tamara and he is the most attractive he's ever been. When I start down the stairs, Kenny looks up at me and smiles and Tamara disappears around the corner.

Chapter 51

KENNY

Kenny looked up and Mennette waltzed down the stairs. Her beauty still took his breath away. From his vantage point, she looked as if she were floating in slow motion as that beautiful sundress floated behind her. He reminded himself not to succumb to nostalgia; he couldn't afford to fall back in love with her.

"I'm supposed to pick Brother up in about an hour," he said to her when she reached the bottom of the giant staircase. "I brought you the last of your personal things that were at the house." He handed her a box and a suitcase.

"Thanks." She turned to place them near the wall.

"Our photo album is in there," he pointed.

"In case I get my memory back?" She smiled over her shoulder at him and he realized that she was trying to flirt.

"In case. Or even in case you don't." Kenny leaned his elbow on the staircase. "You'll always know that someone out here loves you and always will."

"You still love me after all the terrible things I did?" She turned completely around to face him.

"Mennette, I'll always love you."

"But we're still getting a divorce?" She inquired.

"Yes." He answered without hesitation. "I will always love you Mennette. I will always have your back. And I will always be here for you. Anything you need, please don't hesitate to call me. But I

think it's best that we go our separate ways for right now."

"And Fluffy?"

"Brother has her. Eric is allergic to cats, so she can't stay with you."

She looked away momentarily, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth. "When, well if, I do get my memory back, what's the next step? Where do we go from there?" There was a hopeful look in her eyes.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. You'll be safe here with Tamara. She's agreed to let you stay for as long as you need, which I think is a wonderful idea."

She watched him looking at her for a moment.

"You gotta birthday coming up next month, right?"

He opened his mouth but didn't immediately respond. It took him a few minutes before he could find the right words. "Yes, March 30th. How did you remember that?" He was baffled.

"I told you, I was trying. Started journaling in my meetings and I had an entire section just for remembering you." She meant it and a sad smile crossed her lips. "You're my husband."

Kenny's face loosened into an unreadable look. He took in a few breaths. "I need to get going," he finally said.

"What are you going to do now?" she inquired, wishing she was on his agenda.

"Brother and I are going to the Maldives Islands."

"Maldives? Fancy." She playfully elbowed him and laughed. "Although your brother doesn't seem like the cultured type."

He shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out an old, tattered page from a magazine that had been folded several times. It was so faded that she could barely see the water or the islands. It appeared to be handled with much fondness.

"The overwater bungalows in the Maldives. My mother kept this picture on her refrigerator for years. She carried it around in her purse for so long. But then she got sick. After she passed, I found it tucked under her mattress. She always dreamed of travel-

ing but never could afford to do it. Brother and I are going to the Maldives for a couple of weeks. We're going to spread her ashes there and all the other places she dreamed about visiting. Plus, it's time for Brother and me to celebrate Mama together because we never got a chance to. And then, we'll move on. So much has happened in the last few months."

"What about your job?"

"I quit."

She raised her eyebrow and frowned.

"I quit." He repeated. "Not gonna live my life on other people's terms anymore. Life is too short and anything can happen in the blink of an eye. Thinking about going back to school for some training or starting some kind of business with Brother. Not sure yet. Ya never know. Right now I'm just gonna concentrate on my mother's ashes and her wishes."

"Good for you." Mennette smiled. "I really wished I could have met her."

"Yeah, me too." Kenny refolded the magazine page and slipped it back into his pocket. "You two would have really gotten along good." His stare lingered a little too long and he straightened up and cleared his throat. "I gotta get going. When I get back, I'll come by to see you. We can have dinner or something."

"I'd like that."

He turned to leave.

"Kenny?" His name escaped her mouth breathlessly and he turned back to her and gazed into her face. "I love you." A hitch in her voice suggested that she was becoming emotional.

He smiled. "I love you too Mennette."

"And Kenny?" She said quickly, stopping him from leaving again.

"Yes, Mennette?"

"Thank you." It came out almost in a whisper. "I know this whole situation wasn't easy for you. I know it's not something that you signed on for or expected to have to deal with."

"It's cool." He shrugged. He'd run through the range of his emotions. There was not much more left for her other than love. "Gotta run, Brother will be ready soon. Want me to send you some pictures?"

"I'd love that." Her eyes welled a bit. "Please send lots of pictures of the beach. And sunsets."

He nodded and left. There was no need for him to hang around any longer. He called Brother once he got in the car.

"I'll be there in a few." Brother said to Kenny when he answered. He sounded like he was on the move. "I got to take care of something important before we leave."

"You got Mama?"

"Yep." Brother sighed. "And I actually feel okay about it."

"Alright, don't be late." Kenny chided, starting his car. "You know SFO airport be crowded."

"Ai'ght I'll be there, don't worry. We gon' make it. See you in a few." Brother hung up.

Chapter 52

BROTHER

Brother coolly walked up to the door carrying an envelope and animal crate and rang the bell. A dog started barking and the sounds of children running and playing could be heard through the door. Then the noise moved farther away, like they were ushered into a back room.

Brother leaned into the doorbell again and then stood back to admire the luxury home. While it was a far cry from Tamara's home, this home still spoke volumes about the financial stability of the owner. Red and pink roses surrounded the walkway and the bright white shutters made the house look like something out of a magazine. Moments later, a woman looked through the blinds with a frown. When she finally cracked the door, Brother could only see one nostril, part of her nose and one eye.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

"Is this the residence of Mr. Stamps?"

"Yes it is." She said, eyeing him up and down suspiciously. "What can I do for you?"

"Are you Mrs. Stamps?"

"Yes."

"I have a delivery for him. I just need him to sign for it."

Mrs. Stamps sent Brother an unconvinced one-eyed glare. "What type of delivery?" She asked, focusing on Brother's outfit, which was a pair of jeans, a black T-shirt and an Atlanta Braves

baseball cap.

"Ma'am. I don't ask no questions about what's being delivered. I just do my job."

Another moment trickled by before the door swung open wide. She wore a stained apron, spotted with some yellow substance, over a pair of baggy ill-fitting sweatpants. Her blouse, loose around the collar and swallowing her medium frame, looked like it had been washed more times than it'd been worn. She looked frazzled. Dark circles looped under her red eyes and her frizzy hair shot out of her head in multiple directions. When Brother gazed at it, she smoothed it down apologetically with her hand.

"Please excuse my appearance," she said. "My husband was in a terrible accident and he's only been home from the hospital one day but I've been caring for him round the clock since. And the kids. I barely have any time to care for myself." She chuckled nervously.

"I'm very sorry to hear that ma'am." Brother allowed her to appreciate his smile. He knew he had to get to his house quickly to meet Kenny for their drive to the airport. "It must be exhausting."

"Yes it is. All the back and forth to the hospital for weeks. But now that he's home, it's all on me. I basically have to do everything for him." she responded.

"Like feed him..."

She nodded.

"...and bathe him..."

"Umm, humm."

"It's a good thing he has such a hard-working, loyal wife. I'm sure you sacrifice a lot for him."

"That's what a marriage is about." She rapidly blinked a few times, sounding unconvinced herself.

"A beautiful, sexy, erotic woman such as yourself should spend her days being pampered and her nights being made love to." He winked.

Mrs. Stamps stared at Brother. She seemed taken aback by

Brother's words but something in her eyes let him know that she agreed.

"Pardon me," he said, trying to recover quickly. "I can see you're a beautiful woman and you just caught me off guard."

She blushed and cleared her throat. "Uh, you said you had a delivery for my husband?" She glanced down at the animal crate by his foot and frowned.

Brother produced a large manilla envelope from his side and handed it to her. Then he had her sign her name on a generic signature page he found online and printed. It was attached to a \$2 clipboard he picked up from Office Depot. When she finished, he tipped his baseball hat.

"You, beautiful lady, try to enjoy the rest of your day."

"And that?" She pointed to the covered crate with the manilla envelope. He lifted it and gave it to her. She pulled the sheet back and Fluffy was licking her whiskers. She looked up at the woman and meowed. "What the hell is this? Travis is allergic to cats."

Brother shrugged. "I heard he love pussy, so I brought him some more." He gave her that famous Keith Young smile again.

Mrs. Stamps stared blankly at Brother for a moment as he turned to walk away back down the walkway. She sat the crate down and tore the envelope open, pulling out the photos.

When she saw the pictures, her face turned into a hateful scowl. Brother could hear her scream at the top of her lungs: "Travis! I'm gonna kill your ass!" She slammed the door. The windows rattled. The dogs started barking again.

Epilogue
MENNETTE
6 MONTHS LATER

I stabbed him. First in the back, then his neck, then his chest. I remember it vividly. It wasn't a dream. It was a bona fide memory. It came to me one day at Tamara's when I was painting. I was working on a forest with tall redwood trees and slowly the face of a young boy materialized in my mind. That's when I saw myself stabbing him.

Images of the knife sliding sharply, breaking his brown skin, exposing pinkish-white meat flashed across my mind. I could hear the sounds of cracking bones with each explosive thrust. His terrifying screams echoed, but I didn't stop. In fact, I jabbed deeper, more ferociously. I started shaking. Even now, I can feel the anger flush through me. I remember the blood. I tried to wipe it off of my arms. I remember the look in his eyes. I remember my heart as it raced, slamming into my chest. I remember the terror. But more vividly, I remember the relief.

I'd set the brushes down and rinsed the cups out. The reddish-brown paint swirled down the drain and became blurry through my tears. I tossed the canvas in the trash next to my bed. Sulkily, I made my way under the blankets and curled up. My mind worked overtime that day and sweet memories of my baby, so innocent, filtered in. I cried that entire day. I didn't come out of the guest room. Didn't even come out when Henry told me dinner

was ready.

Since then, other memories have come to me. I can now tell the difference between the dreams and the memories. I would get these vivid images with clarity. Memories of what I believe to be family members haunt me. I remember being in jail the morning they told me about the fire. When they told me my family died, I died too. I think I walked around dead until I met Kenny.

Eric was back and Tamara was preoccupied with him today. I spent most of my days in their guest room painting. I have accumulated quite a collection of my works.

Kenny has checked on me periodically since his return from the Maldives but it is apparent that we are not going to get back together. I heard that he actually started dating another woman. We're officially divorced. It was finalized by the courts. He was very fair and split everything with me. I think he just wanted a clean break from me. And in his defense, I guess I can't blame him.

I've prayed. I've meditated. I've cried. I've thought. And then I packed. I packed my stuff and decided to leave. I'm going to go out on my own and start a whole new life. Not sure where I'm going but with the \$240,000 that Kenny said was in my account, and the other \$200,000 from the sale of our house, I'm heading East. Probably take a plane to New Orleans for a few days. Might take a train from there to Florida. Then a boat to the Bahamas, who knows. All I know is that I'll be doing whatever Mennette wants to do!

I'm starting fresh and new. No more worry about a husband who doesn't know me. No worries about a friend who lacks the ability to understand. No aggravation from a brother-in-law who doesn't want me around. This money should sustain me long enough to find someplace to settle somewhere and get a little job. I now know how Mark's twin brother felt when he surged out into the world in search of his own new life. I'm actually excited!

I've made peace with Cecil. The old lady, I actually didn't remember. I feel bad, but I can't seem to pull her out of my mind. I finished writing my three-page letter to Tamara. Included is every-

thing that I can remember about our friendship and everything that I truly appreciated from her and all of the help that she's given me. I hope she doesn't take offense to it, but I've got to go.

I'm different now. It is quite apparent and quite evidently written all over Tamara's face. And I feel different. If I had to pick a word to describe my current situation, it would be stifled. I just don't fit into my old life anymore and I'm tired of making excuses for it. Whatever happened to me that night was of no fault of my own, at least that I remember. And I can't live the rest of my life trying to figure out all the things that my old self did and felt. I've got to live my life for me. I'm the new Menette.

I grabbed my suitcase and slipped out when Tamara and Eric were out for the day, waving at Henry as I did. I took one last look at this beautiful home and got into the Uber that was waiting for me. There was one last stop I needed to make before I went out into the world.

When my Uber driver pulled up to the cemetery, I asked him to turn the music down. "Actually," I said, watching him turn the knob. "Can you turn it all the way off? Please."

"Don't wanna wake the dead, huh?" He chuckled at his inappropriate joke. But in reality, I wanted to respect the dead. Respect my baby. I didn't want to disturb anyone else, like I did in life. I wasn't sure how I was going to feel when I found his grave and the fact that I'm actually going off memory is impressing me.

I've paid the Uber driver extra to drive me and stay with me until I reach the airport. He pulled over to the side of an area I pointed out. He leaned on his car to smoke a cigarette while I traipsed through the sea of gravesites to where my mind's eye directs me. I find it.

His grave was unkempt. Like nobody had cleaned it in quite some time. My heart is so heavy it took me a few moments to kneel down next to him. My baby. I picked the weeds from the side of his plaque, making sure to snap them at the base and yanking them all the way up until the roots were exposed. It took a moment to

get the tough dandelions, breaking them and exposing the milky center which seeped over my fingers.

Once this was done, I dusted the plaque, digging into the thick crusted dirt with my nails and fingertips. I pour water from the two water bottles I brought and move the mud from side to side until I can feel the metal plaque. The more I scrubbed with my hands, the more my tears came. I scrubbed until I could finally see his name. Then I dumped the rest of the water over it until it rinsed off and I smeared my palms over it until the information was clear.

CECIL BELL

BORN APRIL 2, 1989

DIED MAY 11, 1992

HERE LIES AN ANGEL

I sat, watching the other families mourn their loved ones with a discernible amount of envy. Although my memory conjured up sweet flashes of Cecil, it refused to play an entire movie of him. A fuzzy image of his beloved face visited me throughout the day but I was unable to remember the sound of his voice, or even his cry. These revelations made my heart weep. I sent a silent prayer up and left some fresh flowers on his grave with the thought that I'd never visit again.

Currently, I'm in the air. The pleasing sound of the pilot's voice has announced that we can unstrap our seatbelts for the remainder of the flight and move about the cabin. I cleaned myself and scrubbed my nails clean of Cecil's gravesite dirt in the Oakland airport bathroom before boarding. I feel and look like a new woman. My mind is roaring ahead a million miles a minute and my next destination is New Orleans. I have no idea what I'm going to do once I arrive, however my body is tingling with anticipation and my mind is wandering through different scenarios.

I have plans to change my name. I have to figure out how. I don't

want to be found. Will I ever go back? Back to Antioch? Back to Kenny and Tamara? Who knows. Right now the answer is no. Although I appreciate all that they both have done for me. I have no desire to continue to live that life. It's not my own. It belonged to the old Mennette and frankly, I don't know how she did it.

I'm sketching in my drawing notebook. My wrists flick back and forth as I work on a waterfall. Nature is my favorite subject to create. It's calming. My mind is full as well as my heart. The flight attendant is finishing her conversation with the man in front of me and when she gets to my row, she leans down so I can hear her.

"Hello dear. Would you like something to eat? You have a choice of chicken or steak today for your meal." I look up from my waterfall and watch her smile grow wide and bright. I wonder if she enjoys her job and her life. If she has to choose between what she likes and what people say she should like. Her eyelashes are long and wave at me like spider legs. She reminds me of an older, plumper Lindsey Lohan. I think for a moment before responding.

"Both." I finally say with certainty. "I deserve both."

She nods then chuckled. "I'm sure you do. A glass of wine with that?"

"Two glasses please." I hold my two fingers up for her to see and wiggle them.

"Red or white?"

"One of each."

One of her eyebrows raised up. I can tell she is amused. She smiled again and tapped her fingers on her tablet, swiped her finger up a few times and muttered, "White and red." Then winked. "Vacation?"

"Something like that." I took a deep breath, letting the air travel to my brain and then leaned back, melting into the plush first-class seats. I smiled, reflectively.

"Starting my life over." It's as if I'd been holding my breath all this time. So, I finally exhaled.



THE AUTHOR WANTS TO THANK...

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A LETTER TO THE READER

This work of fiction has been a long time coming. It is the catalyst for the next phase in my life. I love writing, reading, talking, and laughter. I would love to hear your thoughts.

I hope you enjoy *Affairs to Remember* as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Rayna Sun

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You'll love getting a sneak peak of Rayna Sun's next novel,
Unforgivable Deception.

Visit **linktr.ee/raynasun**
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*B*orn and raised in California, Rayna Sun pours her colorful imagination into her stories to the delight of her readers.

When she is not reading, this free spirit can be found skipping across the globe, trying to discover as many places and people as her passport will allow. She loves vacations with beaches, water, and sun. But most of all she loves being a mother to her comical teenager.

She is currently working on her next project.