

The Leopard

Man

by
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chapter 1

I've been having this dream. I'm in Africa, the motherland. I don't know what country, but I'm in a village, tending to some children. I have on this beautiful red and gold robe that wraps around my body. I remember liking how it blows in the wind. I'm wearing one of those gold choker things around my neck. My mother gave it to me. Personally, I think those things are ugly and very uncomfortable-looking, but in this dream I'm wearing one. My hair has been cut short, and I walk barefoot, but yet I feel no discomfort.

I look up from one child and I see a man enter my town. He is an unbelievable sight, tall and thin, muscular and majestic, onyx skin shining with sun and sweat, covered in a leopard skin tunic. He walks through my village in silence, hands behind his back, looking at everything with what seems like intrigue or wonder. Every woman who sees him swoons. I can hear them all whisper to each other of how they would like to have such a man choose them as his bride, and what they would do for him if he made that choice. I watch his stride, slow, deliberate and confident, and I feel the same way. He looks my way, and I yearn for him to speak to me, imagining his voice as deep and powerful. He says nothing and continues walking, eventually leaving the village. I know that he does this on a regular basis, about once a month, and I decide not to let him pass by anymore. I decide to go after him, and tell him how I feel.

I tell a child a few years younger than me that I will be back shortly. The child looks up at me and says, "Miss, you must not follow him."

Intrigued, I ask the child why.

“That is the Leopard Man,” the child says, “and if you follow him, and you will regret it.” Then I wake up.

The first time I had that dream was about three weeks ago. I got out of bed and looked in the mirror, like I usually did after I’ve had a big dream. Daddy let me read one of his psychology books on the power of dreams, and since then, I had been trying to remember or write down every dream I had. But I always forgot to write that one down, for some reason. I remember following my usual routine: wiping the gunk out of my eyes, rubbing my face to help wake myself up, reaching over to my alarm clock to turn it off before the buzzer sounds, and quickly wrapping a towel around my head for my morning shower. After that, I usually look myself in the eye and tell myself some encouraging words, like, “Ashlynn, you are going to do something wonderful today,” or “Ashlynn, today something really good is going to happen to you.” I can’t remember exactly what I said that day, but it was something to that effect. It keeps me motivated.

After that, I remember racing to the bathroom to get showered before my little brother. I swear Terrance is the most vain human being on the planet. He takes at least an hour to shower and make sure he looks “just right” before going to school. And they say us girls take too long to get ourselves ready. I guess that since he thinks he’s going to be a big football star, he needs to look the part whenever he goes out somewhere. I guess I shouldn’t complain: Mom tells me that a lot of boys Terrance’s age don’t care about their appearance...or their hygiene...at all.

Speaking of Mom, she is usually preparing breakfast while Terrance and I are getting ready. That day, I remember her having some French toast, blueberry muffins and turkey bacon ready for us. She won’t let us eat any pork. I guess you would call my Mom one of those “soccer moms” I hear people talking about on television all of the time, only neither my brother nor I play soccer. In fact, Terrance used to play soccer when he was little, but Daddy told him he would have more fun playing football, so that’s what he’s been playing ever

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since. I run track after school. Mom says that she likes me being on the track team because it keeps me active. She tries to be involved in everything my brother and I do, and I really do appreciate her for that. Really. Everybody tells me how pretty my Mom is: about her being so petite and thin; about her big, dark brown eyes that always look tired—probably from raising my knucklehead brother; about how pretty her long, black hair is; or about how sharp and sophisticated her outfits are. I'm like, "Duh, she works in a bank. You expect her to wear jeans and a T-shirt every day?" but I try to keep my opinions to myself. Sometimes I wish I looked more like her. All I inherited from my mother was her long hair and her dark skin. I got the rest from my Dad. He's got close-set, almost squinty eyes, a round face, a big nose and full lips. I got all of those from him. I also got his thick body, and he always tells me that if I'm not careful and I don't exercise and watch my diet, that I can get fat very easily. That's probably why he wanted me to start running track. I don't mind, though. If seeing me run makes Daddy happy, then it makes me happy.

About an hour after getting out of the shower that day, Mom drove me and my brother to school. Whenever she took us to school, she insisted that we say a prayer before we get in the car. I've been telling her that we don't have time for that. I don't like to be late for class, because if you're late too many times, the teachers will lower your grades, and Daddy always promises to take me shopping if I get all A's. I love my Daddy. He's an officer in the Flint Police Department. In fact, he was just promoted to sergeant last month. I only see him for a brief time every day because he heads to work about an hour after my brother and I get home from school, but we spend lots of time together on the weekends, when he takes me to track practice or meets. He gives the best hugs in the world, and always tells me that I'm the big, shiny diamond in his crown. Whenever my classmates say things to get on my nerves, I remember what Daddy tells me, and it makes me feel better.

Mom usually dropped me off first, and then would take off to get my brother to junior high. I think it's a security thing. She probably dropped him off and watched him go into the school to make sure nobody tried

to abduct him or anything. That's just my guess. Maybe since I'm older, she trusted me not to do anything stupid, like get myself kidnapped.

In any case, I go to Powers Catholic High School, on the north side of Flint, right next to Northwestern Edison. And no, I'm not Catholic. Daddy tells me that it was good for me to go to a private school, because all the major colleges look very closely at what schools prospective students attend and what kind of classes they take. Since the Flint community schools are all rated pretty low by the more prestigious universities, Mom and Dad thought it would better my chances of getting into a good college by attending a school like Powers. It's not so much different from junior high, although I don't see nearly as many students around who I can feel comfortable around. I'm a freshman and one of only a handful of black students at the school. I don't like their dress code, though. They won't let us wear any T-shirts, sweats or jeans. They say it's to promote "neatness, modesty and cleanliness." I think it's more to promote boredom, but that's just my opinion.

I got my first set of books out of my locker and headed to first hour with my friend, Timtoya. Timtoya and I were best friends back in the fifth grade, but she got mad that a boy she secretly liked had asked me out, so she stopped talking to me for about a year. Then we went to separate middle schools. I was expecting her to have an attitude the first time we saw each other at high school, but she ran over and gave me a big hug, talking about how much she missed me and how sorry she was that we didn't keep in touch. I guess absence really does make the heart grow fonder, or at least it makes you forget the dumb stuff you did to be apart in the first place. The fact that there weren't that many black students at our high school didn't hurt, either. Timtoya hadn't changed much since grade school, though. She was still tall and thin, her skin was still milk chocolate brown and smooth as silk, and she still came to school in all the latest fashions. One look at her and you can obviously tell her daddy loves her. My Daddy loves me, too, but he shows it in a different way. He always says he'd rather spend his

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time and money developing my mind and spirit than developing my wardrobe. I always argue that a healthy wardrobe makes for a healthier mind. He doesn't seem to buy it, but it does manage to get a new outfit out of him from time to time. I love my Daddy.

"Did you hear?" Timtoya asked me when I met up with her. "Mr. Nagy's sick."

"Really?" I asked back. "What did he catch?"

With a shake of her head, Timtoya tossed back a mane of long, wavy hair. Then she shrugged her small shoulders, exposed by a Tommy Hilfiger tank top the school's not supposed to allow, but she gets away with wearing anyway. "I don't know, but I've heard that he's going to be out at least a couple of weeks."

My eyebrows raised. "Wow, it must be serious, then. I hope he gets better." I remember the last time I got really sick. This boy who had been sick ran up on me while I was in grade school and kissed me on the lips. Of course, I punched him in the face, but I was mad that they suspended me from school instead of him. And plus, he had the flu, so I missed another week after that. I spend that whole week suffering from headaches, chills, and a nasty dry cough. Mom said my fever was in the hundreds. And my throat was sore, so I couldn't talk much. Mom wouldn't let me out of bed for a week, and she wouldn't let me eat anything but chicken broth for the whole time. I hate chicken broth if there aren't any noodles or meat in it. She wouldn't even let me out of bed after a few days, when I told her I was feeling better. She said she didn't want to risk me getting infected and catching pneumonia. I so wanted to take some aspirin to get rid of the headaches, but she wouldn't even let me take any aspirin because Aunt Terri told us I might get Reye's syndrome. Aunt Terri is a nurse, and she said that Reye's syndrome affects the brain and liver and can cause seizures or even death. And to top it off, I got sick during spring break and recovered just in time to go back to school, so needless to say, it was not a pleasant experience.

We arrived at first hour, and I took my usual seat, close to the front of the class. During my first week at school, one of the sophomores

told me that only nerds and teacher's pets sat at the front of the class. Daddy always told me not to worry about being called a nerd. He always told me that "the people they call nerd today will be the people they call boss tomorrow," so if people don't like me because I'm a little brainy, then it's really not my problem. Besides, when they assign seats, the ones in front are usually the only ones available by the time it's my turn to pick one out. I took out my textbook and my notebook and turned back to Timtoya, who sat directly behind me.

"Hey," I told her, "Have you seen that substitute teacher before?" She shook her head and shrugged.

My first hour class was English One. It's usually a hard class for me to get into for various reasons. I don't have anything against English classes, though. Actually, Uncle Del tells me that I have a talent for telling stories, and I could develop it if I took more advanced writing classes. He says he can tell I'm good at stories because I like to talk so much. But I don't think I'm as talkative as he says I am. As for why I didn't like first hour English...well, first of all, it was early in the morning, and I don't consider myself much of a morning person. More importantly, I didn't like my teacher, Mr. Nagy, that much. Don't get me wrong; he seemed like a nice guy, and I really was concerned about him being sick, but I only had the class for a couple of months, and I didn't like the way he taught. He bored me to tears. He had this monotone voice, and he always talked down to us, trying to walk us through each English lesson as if we were all still in the fifth grade. Now, I've heard my Dad complain from time to time about how some students in the Flint school system would get promoted to higher grades and even be granted diplomas with a much lower learning level. I've heard some students even graduated high school without even knowing how to read. I think that's pathetic. I also think that Mr. Nagy must have been a teacher in the Flint school system, because if every teacher taught the way he teaches, then a lot more illiterate students would be graduating. But that's just my opinion. In any case, I'm not one of those illiterate high schoolers, and I found Mr. Nagy's remedial teaching style to be both a joke and an insult to my intelligence. So, it's not like I was devastated to find somebody new sitting in his place.

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I was a bit curious, though. I turned back to Timtoya and opened my mouth to say something, when I heard a silky smooth tenor voice behind me say, “Hello, everybody.” I turned back towards the front, and the substitute was standing in front of us, writing something on the overhead projector in the front center of the classroom. He was pretty average sized, not too tall or short. He was wearing a brown cardigan and some light brown wrinkle-free Dockers. I could tell they were wrinkle-free because my Dad wears the same kind of pants to work, although he usually wears blue. So I automatically thought he was a nice dresser, but I was a little impressed with the rest of him, too. He was dark, but not too dark, and he was pretty well-built. You could tell even through the sweater and slacks that he had spent a lot of time with weights. He had a pretty handsome face, too. Large, wide-set eyes, a big mouth and small ears. He had naturally red hair, too. You can always tell a person’s natural hair color from looking at their eyebrows, and his were definitely red. I had never seen anybody with naturally red hair before; at least not any black people. I wonder if that was how Malcolm X looked? And why is it that the only black people I see on TV with naturally red hair are men? Just wondering. Anyway, he had very pronounced cheekbones and he was clean-shaven. If he were a classmate instead of my teacher, he would have been the type of guy I would want to ask me out. Except for two things. First of all, he had this scar that went from the bottom of his chin to his left ear. It was as if somebody had tried to slash him with a knife or something, but he moved away at the last minute. It was more than just unattractive, it was downright creepy. On top of that, his nose was too big. I’ve got a big nose, too, and I don’t want to date anybody who has a nose bigger than mine. Think of what my children would look like! I couldn’t bear it. Not that I mind big noses; just don’t have one bigger than mine, that’s all. Aside from those things, though, he looked nice. Real nice.

“I’m sure most of you have heard,” he continued while still writing, “but for those who haven’t, Mr. Nagy has come down with a bad illness and will be out for about a month. In the meantime, I will be your English teacher. My name,” he tapped the overhead projector near

where he was writing, “is Mister Raziel Barter.” He slowly rose up from the projector and walked back over to his desk, peering down at the teacher’s manual as he did. I don’t know, but something about his stride intrigued me. It was slow and almost graceful, and he held his head up high, not in a snooty way, but definitely with a lot of confidence. It was kind of like how Daddy would tell me certain people would walk when they were being brought in after being arrested: how they would try to keep their dignity even after being cuffed. He usually read that walk as either someone who thought they were falsely arrested, or someone who knew a really, really good lawyer. I had never seen many people with that kind of walk, but seeing Mr. Barter walk like that reminded me of everything Daddy said. And anything that reminds me of my Dad can’t be that bad, right?

“Wow,” I found myself whispering, “that man is FINE.”

Heather, who sat next to me, must have heard me, because she crinkled up her nose... which, by the way, looked like it could double as a steak knife... and whispered back at me, “Hmf. I don’t see what you see in him...” I never paid much attention to Heather’s comments. She thinks that pretty much anyone who doesn’t look like Leonardo DiCaprio is ugly.

I shushed her quickly. “Quiet! He’s about to talk again.” I can’t ever remember wanting to hear somebody speak as much as I wanted to hear Mr. Barter. Well, there’s Daddy, but he doesn’t count. I can’t remember Shakespeare ever being as interesting as he was that day.

Practice was a little boring that day. Pretty much it was two and a half hours of the same old same old. First, we spent a good half hour just stretching and warming up. It was the usual drills: touching toes, spreading out, calf stretching and raising, push-ups, jumping jacks and all of that. I actually set a new team record for most jumping jacks that day. It was cool, but Coach didn’t give me anything for it. Next we practiced our runs on the 100 meter, 200 meter, 300 meter and 600 meter. I’m fastest on the 600. I think I’m better at running for endurance than at sprinting. I’m working on my sprinting, though. Coach keeps telling me I need to streamline my running style and to

stop balling my fists up whenever I run. I try to, but it's a hard habit to break. I drank the Gatorade to keep hydrated, but I really don't like Gatorade that much. There's something about the taste of Gatorade that I don't like. It's like you drink it, but it's not really a full taste, like it's watered down or something. It's hard to explain why, but I just don't like it.

You know what? Come to think of it, track practice that day wasn't really that boring. My friend, Tierre, was cracking jokes the whole time, and she is really funny. She kept me laughing the whole time. My favorite joke was when she told me about this black mother and daughter who were on an airplane with the Ku Klux Klan. The plane was too heavy, so the Klan announced that they would have to throw people off the plane, but they would do it in alphabetical order. They yelled off "A" for African Americans, but the mom and her daughter didn't move. Then they yelled out "B" for black people, but the mom and her daughter didn't move. Then they yelled out "C" for colored people, but the mom and her daughter didn't move. Then the daughter asked her mom why they didn't move when the Klan called out their letters, and the mom says, "Girl, we're Niggers today, and N comes after K." I laughed so hard after hearing that; Coach made me and Tierre run an extra lap.

But aside from Tierre's jokes, I wasn't paying much attention to practice. For some reason, I couldn't get my mind off of Mr. Barter. I don't know what it was that I liked so much about him: whether it was his voice, or that he was so knowledgeable about stuff, or maybe just that he was so cute...aside from that scar, but I just could not stop thinking about him that day. It showed, too. I caught a lot of flack from Coach about my concentration that day. Ironically, it was thinking about Mr. Barter that got me through all of those extra drills.

After practice, I hit the showers before waiting for Mom to pick me up. I'm usually really, really hungry after track practice, but today I wasn't really thinking about food. As always, I stopped in front of one of the full-body mirrors and looked myself over before taking off my unis and hitting the shower. I have a certain way of looking at myself in the mirror. I first looked at myself full on, taking a minute to take off

and throw away the nasal strip on my nose. I have a wide nose with big nostril holes. Kids used to make fun of me in grade school, calling me stuff like “Zero nose” and “The schnozz,” but since I’ve started high school, nobody’s made a big deal of it. I’m actually proud of my nose, though: I got my nose from my Daddy.

After throwing the nasal strip away, I looked back at the mirror and frowned, noticing that the skin on my arms was a lot darker than some of the skin that showed from under my tank top. I’m always surprised to see that. Until that time, I didn’t know it was possible for black people to tan. I mean, most of us are already dark to begin with, so how could the sun make us any darker? But sure enough, my arms were much darker than the skin I had covered with my tank top. I had to frown at that. My skin’s about the color of my favorite candy bar, Nestle Crunch. I don’t like it when I have multiple shades of brown all over my skin. I think it makes me look diseased or something. I’m lucky to have relatively smooth skin, with no acne. I’d have really looked awful then.

Still frowning, I turned to my side and took the rubber band off of my ponytail. I put the rubber band in my locker, as my hair cascaded down, stopping a little bit below my shoulders. I looked back at the mirror and took a deep breath. Daddy had always told me that the pudgy stomach I had when I was little would go away when I got older. I’m not fat; it’s just that I’ve always had a round belly, and I would just feel a little better if it were flatter. I could see my stomach flattening out a little, but I really didn’t think the pudge was going away fast enough. To be honest, flattening my stomach was one of the biggest reasons why I started running track in the first place. Well, that and the athletic scholarships I can get if I’m good enough. I’m always thinking about the future.

Eventually my gaze moved down to my lower body, and I couldn’t help flexing my legs to see how toned my calves were getting. I think my butt’s too big. All my teammates called me “Little Flo Jo” because her butt was big, too. Mom keeps telling me that I should be proud of my posterior.

“I think you’ve been hanging around them white girls for too long,”

she would say. “You just don’t realize the power you can have over the minds of these horny boys at your school.” She would then spin around until her back was to me, then look back with a coy glance and shift her stance a little so that her rear end would shake a little. “You do one of these moves,” she would say as she did it, “and half the boys at school will fall under your spell.” Mom affectionately called that little maneuver the “Hypno-bootie.”

I would always respond by asking, “What about the half that don’t fall under my spell?”

Mom would laugh and say, “That half is probably gay.” Of course, she would then follow that up by urging me not to get caught up in boys, dating and sex.

“It’s sinful, for one thing,” Mom would say when I asked her why, “and it’s also a distraction. How are you going to do any good in school if you spend all your time and energy chasing boys? Trust me, all of that will still be available to you after you take care of what’s really important, like your grades.”

I still think my butt is too big, though.

I waited until the shower was almost empty before disrobing and entering. I don’t like having a lot of people seeing me naked. I don’t care if it’s the other girls on my team. Actually, I especially don’t want the other girls on my team looking at me naked, so I try to get as alone as I can in the showers. I had lucked out that day: the only other girl in there was Carla.

“So, Carla,” I said without making eye contact, “do you think we can win that meet at Northwestern in a couple of weeks?”

I turned a knob on the wall in front of me and listened for the hiss of the shower, the thin streams of water tickling me as Carla answered, “Yeah.” Carla never said much when she talked. She would usually just sit there and let me run my mouth. We get along just fine.

“Hey,” I asked while running wet hands through my hair, “what’s your take on the new English sub, Mr. Barter? I think he’s one of the best subs we’ve had so far.”

I heard Carla say “yeah.”

“Heather was picking with me after class today,” I added, “wondering out loud why I haven’t asked my so-called ‘new boyfriend’ out yet. That so-and-so thinks she is so darned funny with her smart-aleck remarks, but she doesn’t faze me.” I paused and balled up a fist, waving it in front of me. “It would be nice if I could just sock that blue-eyed so-and-so one time, right in that cheese wedge she calls a nose, though. But Mom says that would be wrong.” I shrugged. “Whatever.”

All I heard from Carla was a “yep.” I knew she wasn’t too fond of Heather, either. Heather’s the type of person you either want to be like, or beat up. I’m definitely in the latter category. I picked up a small towel I had brought in and rubbed it over my arms, my legs, and the rest of my body. “Besides,” I said while washing my chest, “I don’t even like Mr. Barter like that. He’s a teacher, probably old enough to be my father. I don’t get caught up in that stuff. I heard about this one teacher at Flint Northern who got sent up for statutory rape when he got caught with one of his students. Heard he got her pregnant, too.” I couldn’t help making a disgusted wince at the thought of that. “I mean, how depraved do you have to be to try to go with your own teacher? That’s just sick.”

Carla answered me with a “yeah.”

I shrugged again, “But Mr. Barter is a nice teacher, though. I could learn a lot from him. He’s just the coolest guy I’ve ever met, and I like his style, that’s all.” I turned off the water and reached for my drying towel, rubbing it through my hair. “You don’t think that’s bad, do you? I just think he’s a cool guy, that’s all.”

Carla’s water was still running. “Nah,” I heard her say.

I smiled. “Thanks, Carla. It’s always good talking to you.”

I grabbed my duffel bag and walked out of practice, and Mom was outside waiting for me in the Lexus, like she usually is. I remember when Daddy first bought her that Lexus. I overheard her talking to Aunt Terri about how the people at the bank reacted to her getting that car. They were apparently acting really shocked and surprised, as if someone like my mother wasn’t supposed to have a nice car. That

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really hacked me off. What right do any of them have to say who is and isn't supposed to have nice things, anyway? My Mom and Dad work hard for their money, just like anybody else, and if they want to go and buy a Lexus, then that is their right. Don't get jealous just because you see some black people doing better than you. Stop hating and go out and do better for yourself! But I digress.

Anyway, I was heading out to meet Mom, but a few feet after I walked out of the school, I paused. I saw something out the corner of my eye which made me stop. Over in front of another entrance to the school, sitting on one of the concrete benches we use when we're waiting for the bus, was Mr. Barter, talking on a cell phone. It was kind of weird because every few seconds he would look around and over his shoulder, as if he really didn't want anybody to hear what he was talking about, or as if he had something to hide. Then again, maybe he was just lonely sitting there by himself, and he needed someone to keep him company for a while. Someone like me.

I turned to him and called out his name. "Mr. Barter!" I yelled out. He was busy talking on the phone, so I didn't think he had heard me. "Mr. Barter!" I called out again. This time he heard me, but when he turned to see me, he looked a little startled to see me there for some reason. I just smiled at him and gave my biggest, friendliest wave. I then saw his hand slowly raise up and wave back. It made me happy to see him waving. I actually wanted to walk over and talk to him, but when I took a step in his direction, I heard a car horn behind me. I rolled my eyes and grunted. Couldn't she wait for just a couple more minutes so I could say hi to my teacher? I turned back to Mom to plead my case, but she had one of those "Don't even think about it" looks on her face, so I decided not to even bother. I did get one last wave in to Mr. Barter before I got in the car, though. That was when I decided that I had to find out what this guy was all about.

"So, Ashlynn," Mom said as we drove to pick Terrance up from football practice, "how was school today?"

I couldn't help smiling. "It was nice," I told her. "We've got a new substitute teacher in English today. He's black."

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“Oh really?” I saw Mom make an impressed face while looking ahead at the road. “Is he nice?”

“Oh yeah,” I remember sinking back into the plush leather seat, my eyes narrowing into slits as I answered her, “He’s real nice...”

chapter 2

The next day, I couldn't wait to get to first hour. Mr. Barter was dressed in a really cool casual outfit: cream slacks, a black shirt, and a cashmere sweater I thought would look really nice on Daddy. It was a cream SeanJohn sweater with some African print all over it. From a distance, it looked like prison stripes, but if you looked at it closer, you saw a lot of African symbols and Egyptian hieroglyphs in a pattern. I once read in an old textbook that the Egyptians had all the gold they used imported "from Africa." That didn't make sense to me because wasn't Egypt part of Africa, also? It would be like the state of Michigan getting a shipment of car parts from the United States. It's redundant. Grandma says that it was "their" way of trying to make Africans less important, by saying that Egypt, one of the greatest civilizations in the history of mankind, was not part of a continent full of black people. That meant they thought that black people weren't capable of developing an advanced civilization on their own, at least according to Grandma. I'm not sure if I agree with that, partly because it really doesn't make a lot of sense, and partly because Grandma never told me who exactly "they" were to begin with. Then again, seeing how some people have been behaving around me since I started attending this school, I'm not completely discounting Grandma's theory, either.

Class wasn't too spectacular that day, aside from Mr. Barter giving us a summary of William Shakespeare's writings, and Heather bragging to her prissy clique—again—about being elected editor-in-

chief of the freshman yearbook committee. She said she naturally deserved to be chairperson because she was so popular, and she took extra delight in the fact that she beat me out for the position. I didn't understand why she made such a priority of constantly reminding me that I lost to her. In fact, the whole ordeal really didn't bother me at the time that it happened. I just thought the yearbook would be something cool to do on the side, but when I didn't win a spot on the committee, I just got involved in something else, like writing articles for *The Charger*, our school's student newspaper. I did get a little miffed later when somebody told me the reason that Heather got elected. Apparently, she and her entire prissy clique threatened to tell all of their rich fathers to withdraw the money they were going to donate to get the yearbook made if "that black girl" was chosen for the committee over any of them. That was foul. I was going to raise a big stink about it, but Daddy told me not to let it get to me, to get involved in something else, and show everybody at school that I wasn't going to let them stop me. I would have given just about anything to see the look on that blue-eyed so-and-so's face when she saw my first article in the newspaper talking about exactly that.

After class let out, I lingered a bit. I really wanted to talk to Mr. Barter and see what he was all about. I slowly put my books in my bag and walked up to meet him. By then he was sitting on his desk, reading out of his teacher's manual.

"You did really good teaching today, Mr. Barter," I said. I hoped I wasn't sounding as nervous as I felt. "I learned a lot." I had to shove one of my hands in my pockets to keep from clasp my other hand. Mom always tells me that I fidget and wring my hands when I'm nervous, so I've been trying to stop.

He looked up at me from his book and gave me a wide, warm smile. It put me at ease to see that, and I was able to relax a little bit.

"Hey," he said, "it's what they pay me the big bucks for. It's good to know when you're having a positive effect on people. Thank you for letting me know, Miss..." he trailed off. I guessed he didn't remember my name. I didn't ever want him to forget it again.

"Ashlynn," I blurted out. "Ashlynn Wilson."

“Ashlynn,” he whispered. “That’s a beautiful name.” Then he looked at me with this intrigued look on his face. “Do you know what it means?”

I shrugged. “Not really. Mom says I was called that because it was my Grandma’s middle name. It’s a tradition we have in our family. Basically, we take the names of our daughters from the middle names of the women in the generation before us, and we come up with a new middle name to use now, which our grandchildren will use for their names when they are born.” I couldn’t help smiling to myself when I added, “I plan on naming my first daughter Michelle, after my Aunt Terri’s middle name.”

I saw him smile again with his eyebrows raised. “That’s a pretty cool story. But no one ever told you the real meaning and background of your name?”

I shook my head, and he closed his book. “If I remember correctly,” he said while stroking his chin, “your name is a combination of the names ‘Ashley’ and ‘Lynn.’ The name ‘Ashley’ is an Olde English name which literally means ‘meadow of trees.’ Actually, ‘Lynn’ is Olde English, too. It means ‘waterfalls’ or ‘lakes.’ So your name is most likely referring to a meadow of trees near a waterfall or lake. It’s a very calm, serene thing to be named after, so I imagine you as a very levelheaded person who usually doesn’t lose her cool.”

I was amazed at what he just told me about my name. That was almost a dead-on description of my personality! At, least, that’s what people tell me.

“That’s so cool,” I told him. “How do you know all of that?”

He kept smiling at me. “I’m a teacher. I’m supposed to know stuff.” He paused, and started swinging his legs on the desk. “Seriously, I was at an institution up north for a while, studying name history and meanings, so I know a bit about the meanings of names. I’ve also found that oftentimes a person’s name can say a lot about their personality. It’s not 100% true, but oftentimes it is.”

“So what does your name mean?” I asked him.

“Well,” he said, “Raziel is actually Aramaic for ‘My Secret.’ My mother told me that was the name of a man who had shoved her out

of the way of a drunk driver one night, at the cost of his own life. She gave me his name as a way of honoring him.”

That touched me. “Aw,” I couldn’t help saying, “that’s such a sweet story!”

Mr. Barter made a disgusted face. “Yeah, well, I don’t like it. It’s way too ethnic. Did you know that there was a study released where 100 resumés were sent out to companies? The same resumé, except 50 had standard names like ‘Billy’ and ‘Jack’ and ‘Sue,’ while the other 50 had ethnic names like ‘DaJuan’ and ‘Tameika’ and ‘Jamar.’ Would you believe that the resumés with the standard names got twice as many responses as the ones with the ethnic names? And it was the same resumé. I think my mother put me in a bad situation by trying to give me a so-called ‘unique’ first name. It’s probably why I’m a substitute teacher instead of a real one.”

“Oh.” He sounded really bitter about it all. That made me feel bad for liking his name.

“But, then again, what’s in a name?” I heard him muse, his voice a little less somber. ““A rose by any other name would still smell as sweet...””

I was pretty impressed by that quote. “Wow,” I said, “that’s beautiful. Where did you get that phrase? I’ve heard it before, but I don’t know where.”

He chuckled. It was a really nice little laugh, like if you had said “Hmm” a lot of times really fast. It was a little like my Dad’s laugh, but my Dad’s is more of a “hee hee” laugh.

“You *should* have heard it before,” he said while putting his book on the desk. “It’s Shakespeare. One of his most famous lines, from one of his most famous plays.”

“Which one?” I asked. I was a little embarrassed not to know.

He looked at me and gave me this sly smile. “Why, *Romeo and Juliet*, of course.”

“Oh.” Now I was really embarrassed.

“Don’t feel bad,” he said. “Classic literature isn’t really taught until the higher levels of education. Heck, if certain people had their way, it wouldn’t be taught at all. They mostly think that today’s youth are

too used to television, movies and video games to have attention spans long enough to enjoy Shakespearean literature. Also, they believe that today's youth can't identify with anything that goes on in these plays."

I didn't think that was saying much about my generation. "Is that what you think, Mr. Barter?"

He chuckled again. "Of course not. In fact, I think that if everyone paid more attention to the things that actually go on in Shakespeare's plays, you would have a lot more students eager to read them, and certainly more parents campaigning to get them banned."

That blew me away. I had never thought of Shakespeare like that. "Really?" I asked.

"Oh yes." He then leaned closer to me and locked his light brown eyes with mine, almost hypnotizing me. "*Twelfth Night* plays with homosexuality, *The Taming of the Shrew* centers on domestic abuse, *Othello's* underlying theme is racism and *Macbeth* starts with an act of the occult. Heck," he chuckled again, "*Romeo and Juliet* by itself is full of underage sex, forbidden love, adolescent rebellion, gang warfare, premeditated murder, drug abuse and suicide. And we're going to be reading it next week in class." His lips slowly spread out into a smile. "Come to think of it, I think you'd make a nice Juliet. Do you want to read that part?"

I could have died right then and there. He was asking me to be his Juliet! That was the most awesome thing I had heard the whole day. It took my breath away. "Oh, yes, Mr. Barter," I gasped, "yes I would!"

"Good," he said. Then he picked up his book and began reading from it. "I'll make a note of it."

All I could do was stand there and smile. He wanted me to be his Juliet! That was so cool! But then I noticed Mr. Barter looking at me funny.

"Uh," he said, "don't you have a class to go to? The bell's about to ring." That snapped me out of it.

"Oh," I stammered, "yes, yes, I do. I'd better get going, or I'll be late." I backed up a few steps, smiling at Mr. Barter all the way, then turned to leave, but I paused when I heard him behind me.

“Oh, and Ashlynn?” I heard him say. I quickly spun around to see his face.

“Yes, Mr. Barter?”

He smiled at me again, and nodded slowly. “It was a pleasure talking to you.”

I didn’t say anything as I backed out, bumping into a few of the students who were trying to get in for second hour. My mouth was locked into this big smile, and I couldn’t have moved my lips even if I wanted to. The bell rang as I walked away, thinking of how cool Mr. Barter was. It seemed like the loudest I had ever heard it ring, but I tried my best to ignore it.

Later, at home, I was sitting at our dining table, trying to do my Algebra One homework. I always double-write my homework. That is, I first scribble everything down to try to get all the answers, then I carefully rewrite everything on another sheet of paper to turn in. When I want to write stuff down real fast, my handwriting is chicken scratch; really unreadable stuff. I really don’t like writing a lot, but I don’t want people to think my handwriting is sloppy, either, so that’s why I try to rewrite everything more neatly after I’m done getting all the answers and stuff. I was right in the middle of writing the neat version of all my algebra answers when I heard a loud “Hey, sis!” followed by a huge slap on my back that made me scribble all over my homework. In ink. I hate it when Terrance does that, and he does it every time he comes home from football practice.

“How you feeling?” he asked. I felt like strangling him.

“Terrance,” I growled at him, “how many times do I have to tell you to stop doing that?” I make it a point never to look at him when he makes me mad. He has this big smile he wears whenever he annoys me, and that smile always makes me forget what I’m so mad at him about. I reached over to a stack of lined paper near the center of the table and pulled another sheet to write on. “Now I’ve got to start all over again.”

“Sorry, Ash.” Terrance sounds so sincere when he apologizes for something. That’s why it’s always so hard for people to stay mad at

him. One of my uncles thinks he looks like a miniature Cuba Gooding, Jr., with his squinty eyes, big nose and light brown skin, but I don't think he does. I think that would be an insult to Cuba.

"Hey," he said while dumping his dirty, grass-stained football helmet onto the table, "you want to hear how practice went today?" Mom hates it when Terrance puts his football equipment on the dining table. She says it's like taking a big clump of dirt, grass and sod and putting in on your plate next to your steak. But Terrance keeps doing it, and Mom never seems to do much about it other than nag him and make him wipe the table off with soap.

"No," I mumbled while rolling my eyes, "but I'm sure you're going to tell me anyway."

I was right. "Coach taught me a new juke move to use on guys who try to give me bump-and-run coverage." Then he took a step back and twitched like this guy at homecoming who swore he could dance but really couldn't. "Coach said that move will work every time. I'm gonna practice it so I can run all over Carmen-Ainsworth this Friday." Terrance has way too much energy for one human being to have. It especially shows when he's talking about sports, the way he wants to always reenact every move he saw at that time. I'd say he needs to switch to decaf, but he doesn't drink coffee.

"Oh, really?" I replied while starting to rewrite the first problem. "Does Dad think that move will work?"

I heard Terrance make a frustrated noise. "Of course not." Daddy never liked any of Terrance's football coaches. He thinks they're all teaching Terrance the wrong things about the fundamentals of football. Daddy used to play football when he was younger, so he always second-guesses Terrance's coaches, and my brother absolutely hates being in the middle of it. I know I was wrong for bringing it up, but he was wrong for hitting me while I was trying to do my homework. So there.

"Dad says that juke move might work once on a less-disciplined player," Terrance pouted, "but the cornerbacks and safeties at Carmen are trained not to fall for it. Dad says I need to use my speed and timing to get away from the bump coverage and stop relying on

flashy juke moves that aren't fundamentally sound." I sneaked a glance at Terrance. His face was contorted into a frustrated scowl.

"I don't get it, Ash," he said as he walked over to the other side of the table and sat his grass-stained behind on the chair across from me. I knew Mom was going to absolutely hate that. "It's like nothing I ever do is good enough for him. Why is Dad so hard on me all the time?"

I had to look at my beloved brother and sigh. I put my pen down and leaned towards him, saying, "Maybe he's just trying to push you, Terrance. Maybe he knows how good you can be, and he wants you to keep working hard to be that good. Remember, he used to play football when he was your age. I read in one of Dad's ESPN magazines that Barry Bonds had all those Golden Gloves and MVPs and world records, but he couldn't get any approval from his dad until he was about to die from cancer."

Terrance gave me a puzzled look. "Barry Bonds, or his Dad?"

I couldn't believe he had just asked that. I rolled my eyes and said, "His dad, Terrance."

"Oh," Terrance still had that puzzled look. "You actually read one of Dad's ESPN magazines?"

I shrugged. "I was bored, and Barry Bonds is cute." I started copying my homework again. "But seriously, though. Don't get bent out of shape over it. Dad is only trying to make you tougher and more disciplined. It might not seem like it, but he's hard on you because he loves you and wants the best for you. He's hard on you because he wants you to have the right foundation in your life for the way you're going to act when you grow up..." I rolled my eyes, "...if that ever happens."

Terrance looked at me like he didn't understand a single word I had said. "But he's easy on you."

I had to stop writing again. I was losing my patience with this boy.

"Is that what you think?" I asked. "Look, Terrance, he might not micromanage me like he does you, but it's not like Dad's giving me a free pass to do any old thing that I want around here. He always bugs me about where I go and whom I'm hanging out with. God forbid one of my friends being a boy, because he really gets strict then. And since

they started running those stupid ‘stop your kids from smoking’ commercials, he’s always asking me if somebody at school’s been offering me smokes. So I’m not having it that much easier than you. It’s all relative...literally.” Something came to mind, and I had to pause before adding, “Heck, if it really was like that, then I might as well ask why it seems Mom is harder on me and easier on you.”

Terrance just gave me this blank look, and it lingered for a few seconds. I slowly sighed. When he does that, it only means one thing...“What does ‘micromanage’ mean, anyway?”
...that he’s going to say something stupid.

I just looked at him for a few seconds, then picked up my pen and started writing again. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore,” I said.

“But...”

I cut him off. “I’m doing my homework, Terrance! You should be doing yours, too. I’ll talk to you later.”

Terrance grunted, and I heard him slide out of the chair...probably leaving a mud stain, I guessed...and walk out of the dining room towards the hallway. He left his helmet on the table, and the sweaty, grass- and dirt-stained smell of it was in my nose for the rest of the night. Yuck. Sometimes I wish Terrance were my sister instead of my brother.

I had this dream. I was in Africa, the motherland. I don’t know what country, but I was in a village, tending to some children. I had on this beautiful red and gold robe that wraps around my body. I remember liking how it blows in the wind. I used to wear one of those gold choker things around my neck, but this time around I had taken it off. My hair had grown out, and was in braids. I walked barefoot, but yet I felt no discomfort.

I looked up from one child and I saw a man enter my town. I remember seeing him before. He is an unbelievable sight, tall and thin, muscular and majestic, onyx skin shining with sun and sweat, covered in a leopard skin tunic. He walked through my village in silence, hands behind his back, looking at everything with what seemed like intrigue or wonder. Every woman who saw him swooned. I could hear them

all whisper to each other of how they would like to have such a man choose them as his bride, and what they would do for him if he made that choice. I watched his stride, slow, deliberate and confident, and I felt the same way the other girls felt. He looked my way, and I yearned for him to speak to me, imagining his voice as deep and powerful. He said nothing and continued walking, eventually leaving the village. I knew that he did this on a regular basis, about once a month, and I decided not to let him pass by anymore. I decided to go after him and tell him how I feel.

I told a child a few years younger than me that I will be back shortly, and I ran after him. I asked him to stop, or at least slow down, then I begged him to. About a mile away from the village, he did stop. He turned around and looked at me. I think it's a look of sorrow or pity, but I paid it no mind.

"Beautiful maiden," he said, his voice deep, resonating through me, making me quiver, "you have no place out here. Please go home."

I shook my head. "No," I tell him, "you are a magnificent man, and I am in love with you. I will never leave your side, and I will follow you wherever you go."

I saw sorrow in his hazel eyes. "Follow me," he said with a sigh, "and you will regret it."

He continued traveling, and I followed him for miles, through plains and deserts, to the entrance to a forest. He stopped and turned back at me, his voice still somber, pleading with me, "Beautiful maiden, you have no place out here. Please go home." I once again told him that I loved him, and I would follow him wherever he went. His eyes had the same sorrow as he repeated, "Follow me, and you will regret it." Then I wake up.

I had that dream a couple of Sundays ago. I was too tired to get out of bed that morning, so I grabbed my remote and clicked on a DVD I had fallen asleep watching the night before. It was the latest Gabrielle Union movie. I love watching Gabrielle Union movies. She's such a strong, beautiful woman, and she always gets her man by the end of the movie. I often wish I was more like her. I remember Mom

walking in and interrupting me just as Gabrielle was about to kiss LL Cool J. The door swung open, and she poked her head in. I could see what she had on, a cream blouse inside a lavender suit, with sheer stockings and heels. She has about thirty different outfits like that. She hates wearing dresses to church. Also, Dad always tells her that he thinks she's sexy in those suits, and if it were up to him, she wouldn't be wearing them for very long after she put them on. I try to tune them out whenever they start talking like that. The idea of Mom and Dad having sex grosses me out.

I could also see the Bible in her other hand as she growled, "Ashlynn, it is ten o'clock, and you haven't even gotten out of bed! Church starts in a half hour!"

I was tired, and I didn't feel like going. "Mom," I groaned, "I'm tired. I was running all day yesterday, and I had to come home and write a big essay after that. I just want to rest today."

I could see the look of anger in Mom's big, brown eyes. She took her hand off of the doorknob and ran it through her long, black hair. She always does that when she's upset.

"Girl," it sounded like frustration in her voice, "you are driving me crazy. This is the third time in a row you've dragged your feet getting ready for church."

I shrugged. "I don't see why it bothers you so much. It's only church..."

Mom's jaw must have dropped to the floor. She just glared at me for what had to be five minutes, and then she just closed her eyes and shook her head, slumping her shoulders and letting this sigh hiss out of her clenched teeth.

"You know," she whispered, "for a minute your father and I thought that since you're fourteen, you're old enough to start making your own decisions. But you have to understand something. As long as you are living under our roof, the two of us are responsible for you and your brother, both spiritually and physically. When it comes time for me to stand before God and give an accounting, I will not tell Him that I left you uninformed about His will. So like it or not, you're going to church." She bowed her head and added, "Besides, you need to

develop your own personal relationship with God. You need Him in your life a lot more than you think you do.”

I didn't want to hear any more. I took my extra pillow and covered my face with it, telling her, “Whatever. I'll be ready in an hour.”

“Not good enough.” I could hear her say. “You had all morning. You've got fifteen minutes to get in the shower and into some decent clothes,” she paused. I hate it when she pauses, “Unless you want us to take away these DVDs that you value so much that you're willing to ignore church for them...” That's why I hate it when she pauses.

“FINE, Mother,” I growled.

I kept the pillow over my head until I heard the door shut, then I threw the pillow off, grabbed the remote and rewound Gabrielle's kiss. I love my Mom. Really, I do. It's just that she had been spitting out all of this “Jesus” rhetoric since, like, the day I was born, and none of it really appealed to me. Church was boring, and I really didn't understand what the big deal was. So the guy died and came back; big deal. Daddy's friend Desmond was in a coma for a week, and he came back. Nobody started up a religion for him, did they? No, they didn't. I felt all that church crap was just something Mom was making me do so I wouldn't be loafing around the house on Sundays, like I really wanted to do. It wasn't fair; I was finally old enough that they could trust me to leave me alone at the house for a while, but they were still insisting on dragging me to church with them every Sunday. After Gabrielle finished her kiss, I turned the DVD and TV off and dragged myself out of bed.

Church was boring, as usual. The pastor was talking some nonsense about how God forgives people. His main point was out of Romans 6, where he was saying that just because God forgives our sins, that doesn't mean we have a license to do whatever we want. I really didn't care, either way. I mean, don't get me wrong. I liked Pastor Stokes' little jokes. I also thought it was cool when he'd take a break from all that God talk to say something to the men in church about how they should be treating their wives and stuff. I just never really paid much attention to whatever the pastor was getting at in his sermons.

THE LEOPARD MAN

I just wanted the service to be over so I could go home and study...or watch a Gabrielle Union DVD, whichever I felt like the most.

After service, we started making our way out to the car. Dad and my brother went ahead to get the car, but Mom hung back to chat with some of the other church members, and she made me stay with her. I hate it when she does that. I wanted to get out of that church as soon as possible, and she was standing there catching up on old times with these people, as if she didn't already see them every week. I glared up at her while she was talking to the director of the choir like "Can we just go, now?" Of course, she didn't see me looking at her. Actually, she wasn't looking at anything for too long. Her gaze shifted around, and she kept looking in the direction Dad went off in, like she really didn't want him to leave her side, or she was trying to make sure he was nearby. Come to think of it, it did seem kind of paranoid of her to act like that, but at the time, I wasn't thinking of any it. I stood back, folded my arms and rolled my eyes, waiting for her to finish, when out of the corner of my eye I saw Tesenga come my way. I know my face must have lit up, because I love hanging out with Tesenga. She's one of the only reasons why I could even possibly look forward to coming to church. She's always happy about something, and it feels good to hang around somebody who is happy all of the time. It rubs off on you.

Tesenga had on this really pretty outfit. Well, just about anything looks pretty on her, but this outfit was really nice. It was a really shimmery silver two-piece, with lots of little black "V" shapes running up and down the outfit in rows. The front zipper was in a lighter silver area, and up top there was a collarless V-neck. The sleeves were long, and ended in big, light silver cuffs at Tesenga's wrists. The top was actually long enough to be a skirt unto itself, although certainly not the type of skirt you would wear to church. She wore a long skirt under the top which has the same shimmery material...I think it was rayon...and silver/black pattern. The skirt stopped just short of her ankles, where you could see her sheer silver stockings going into a pair of short, black leather dress boots with a low heel. She also wore silver fingernails, a white gold bracelet on her left wrist and a matching pair of white gold earrings to accessorize. All in all, a very sharp outfit. It

looked like something my mom would wear, or something I would like to wear...once I lose this pudge, that is. Dad had made it a point to teach me how to be observant of details. He tells me that you never know when you'll need to be able to remember details, like if you have to make a statement or testify in court or something. So I always try to be extra observant of things. I don't let any details get by me.

"Hey, Ashlynn!" Tesenga almost yelled out as she walked up towards me and wrapped her arms around me. She's got this cool, high-pitched voice. She sounds like she's singing when she talks.

"Hey, girl," I said back to her after she let go. "How are things?"

"Oh, things are just great!" She's one of the few people who can say that and sound like they actually mean it. "My uncle just announced his wedding, and his fiancée wants me to be a flower girl! I'm, like, so honored!"

"That's cool," I replied.

"Pa was a little miffed, because the wedding falls on the weekend that he's supposed to spend with me, but Ma told me she should be able to work something out where they can switch weekends," she paused, "that's if Pa's wife doesn't give Ma a hard time over it." Her smile then got even wider, if that was at all possible. "You know, Ashlynn," she added, "when I get married someday, I want you to be my maid of honor!"

I giggled. "Okay," I told her, "and I'm going to hold you to that, too."

"Ashlynn, are you ready to go?" I fought off the urge to grunt. Of course, Mom would pick the moment when I'm talking to somebody to decide it was time to leave. Figures.

The head of choir was a small, light man, who I'm sure was a very handsome guy...before the gray hairs started popping up in his beard and he needed glasses. He looked at Tesenga and me and smiled. "Hello, Ashlynn and Tesenga!" he said. "God bless both of you." We both smiled back at him. I think only one of our smiles was sincere, and I'm sure it wasn't mine. He turned back towards my mother.

"Those are two very fine young ladies, Mrs. Wilson. I see them doing very special things in time."

I saw Mom smile at him. "Keith and I are very proud of our

daughter, Pastor Parker, and Tesenga is absolutely precious...”

“Oh, yes, she is,” Pastor Parker chimed in, smiling back at Tesenga and making her blush. “She is so radiant. I remember her when she was just a little girl, and I think we all figured she would grow into a pretty young lady, but I honestly think she’s even prettier than any of us thought.” Mom nodded in agreement, and he shot another smile at Tesenga, whose cheeks had turned fire red. “It’s a good thing God’s in your life, little lady; otherwise you could be a big-time heartbreaker.”

I’m sure Mom and Pastor Parker were too caught up in gawking over Tesenga to notice me rolling my eyes and sighing. Tesenga had always been the prettiest one out of all the girls in the church. She’s got these big, hazel eyes and pouty lips, and her hair is long, black and just a little curly. She’s naturally thin and had blossomed, or as Daddy calls it, “got visited by the breast-fairy,” earlier than all of the other girls. And then there’s her skin: butterscotch yellow-brown, smooth and soft as fine cotton, with not a single blemish on it. Her skin is actually a lot like my Aunt Terri’s. What gets me is that every time she heard somebody tell her how pretty she was, she always acts as if that was the first time she had ever heard it...and she actually looks generally surprised to hear it! I don’t know how she pulls that off. But she’s always been “the pretty one.”

And me?

“And your daughter, Mrs. Wilson, is so smart!” Yep, I’m the smart one. Always have been. “It just amazes me how well she has done with her grades. You might very well have the next Condoleza Rice here in your daughter.”

“Thank you,” Mom replied with a grin. “Yes, we are very proud of our daughter’s achievements. God really blessed us when he sent us her...” I couldn’t take any more. I tuned them both out and started talking to Tesenga again.

“You know,” I mumbled towards Tesenga, “you’re lucky. Everybody thinks you are so pretty. I’m so jealous...”

Tesenga gave me a warm smile and mumbled back, “Ash, you know this is the wrong place for jealousy. Besides, I’d trade places

with you in a heartbeat. You've got both your parents, and they treat you with so much love..." She saw me roll my eyes. "No, really! You just don't see it because you're so close to it. But I wish I had what you've got, and yes, I do wish people would see me as more than just a pretty face. Nobody is talking about me being the next anything, much less Condi. If anybody here should be jealous, it's me."

I shrugged. "Whatever."

"Besides," Tesenga added, "You *are* beautiful. You've got pretty eyes, and you've got your mother's long, black hair, and you're in such good shape from running track." She rubbed my arm. "If my uncle were here, he would say," she leaned back narrowed her eyes, smiled and tried to drop her voice an octave, "girl, you are dark and sharp!" She giggled, but I couldn't bring myself to laugh with her.

All I could really do was shake my head, wave at the rest of the church and say, "Then why don't *they* believe that? Tesenga, I'm tired of being 'the smart one.'"

She gave me a sympathetic look – I hated it when she looked at me like that – grabbed my hand and pulled me close to her. She wrapped her arms around my back and hugged me, putting her mouth close to my ear and whispering, "God made you the way you are for a reason, Ashlynn, and God doesn't make mistakes."

chapter 3

I was so excited that Monday. We were going to read *Romeo and Juliet*, and Mr. Barter had already picked me to read Juliet! That had to be the coolest thing in the world. I remember getting out of bed and telling myself in the mirror, “Today, you are going to be a star!” before rushing to the shower to start getting ready for class.

I couldn’t get to English fast enough, picking up a Shakespeare book from a stack near the door, and rushing to my seat as the bell rang. I ruffled through the pages of the old leather book until I came across Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*” on page 199. I then pulled a pen and paper out of my backpack for taking notes. I always take notes in pen. Pencil smears too much, and makes my notes unreadable.

I looked up, ready to start, and there stood Mr. Barter. He stood tall and proud, almost heroically, preparing to speak. The blue walls of our classroom were electric, more so than on any other day prior. I couldn’t wait for him to speak.

“Okay,” he said, “today we are starting on another one of Shakespeare’s most famous plays, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Miss Ashlynn has already requested to play the part of Juliet, and I chose Randall over in the back to play Romeo.” As he named off the other cast members, I felt kind of strange. It was almost as if there was nobody else in the classroom except for Mr. Barter and me. I didn’t even hear any other students around me. It was kind of exciting.

“If you haven’t seen any of the movies of this play yet, one thing you

will notice about it,” Mr. Barter told me, “is that each line of dialogue has a certain rhythm to it, and there is a definite, complex rhyme scheme that goes throughout a given scene. Shakespeare writes the majority of this entire play in iambic pentameter. It’s as if the entire play within itself is a poem, which should make this a very intriguing play to read for all of you students who are into hip-hop and rap music.” I saw him chuckle to himself. “I guess you could say William was his era’s Eminem.” I heard a muffled sound behind me. Were people laughing? I couldn’t tell.

“Mr. Barter,” I asked him, “do you want me to read my part like poetry, or just read it straight?”

“Whatever you are comfortable with, Ashlynn,” he answered in his tenor voice. “This is English class, not Acting. You’ll probably get to take that in a couple of years, if you want, though.” He looked up past me. I wondered why, because after all, it was just he and I in the classroom, right? “However,” he said, “if all of you want, I can give you all an example of how the play was originally intended to be read. Everybody, turn to Act One, Scene Five, towards the end of the party. I’ll be Romeo, and Ashlynn, you read your part as Juliet.” He threw a warm smile at me, which gave me this really warm feeling all over. He slowly rose out of his seat and picked up an old, dusty copy of Shakespeare’s plays. I actually saw his lips pucker up, and blow the dust off of the cover of the book. Then he stepped through the dusty mist like a rock star walking out through a cloud of smoke, holding the open book in front of him like a sage or an oracle offering precious knowledge. It took my breath away as he came closer.

“If I profane with my unwortheiest hand,” he said, his voice soft and silky smooth,

“This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:

“My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand

“To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.”

He sounded so alluring when he spoke. I just wanted to melt. I read my part from my book, looking up into his eyes at every other word, the dialogue rolling off of my tongue as if I had known Shakespeare all of my life,

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“Good pilgrim,” I said, my voice a sing-song murmur, “you do wrong your hand too much,

“Which mannerly devotion shows in this;

“For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,

“And palm to palm is holy palmers’ . . .” I paused, my voice turning into a whisper as I said, “kiss.” I can’t quite describe how I felt when I saw that word. It was like a weird anticipation or something. I felt almost as if Mr. Barter had wanted me to read that specific part. It was the weirdest feeling I had ever had, but I liked it. I really liked it.

Closer he came to me, his head bowing nearer to mine. I could see my reflection in his deep brown eyes. They mesmerized me.

Without looking down into his book, he asked, “Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?”

I don’t even remember looking into the book, either. It was as if the words were just popping in my head, and what I told him was simply the natural thing to say. It was like Mr. Barter and I were having our own private conversation.

“Ay, pilgrim,” I answered breathlessly, “lips that they must use in prayer.”

He smiled, like he was reaching his favorite part of the story.

“O, then, dear saint,” he said, his voice getting even softer and smoother – if that was at all possible, “let lips do what hands do;

“They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.”

He had completely taken my breath away, but I was able to answer him with, “Saints do not move, though grant for prayers’ sake.”

Mr. Barter was still smiling! It was driving my senses crazy for some reason. Maybe it was the cologne he was wearing. Stetson, I think, the same brand that my Daddy wears when he’s taking Mom out to dinner.

It seemed as if his face was getting closer to mine as he said, “Then move not, while my prayer’s effect I take.

“Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged.”

I then said, “Then have my lips the sin that they have took.”

His smile turned into this really devilish grin and he said, “Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged!” He then leaned in even closer to me and hushed, “Give me my sin again.”

His face was so close to mine, and the Stetson on him had completely filled my nostrils, and that's a feat, because I've got some big nostrils. I was so intoxicated by him, I was almost lightheaded. I closed my eyes, and within seconds, I could have sworn I felt his lips on mine. I had never been kissed before. Not a real kiss, at least. This must have been what it was like. I leaned forward into the kiss, pressing my lips harder against his. Then I opened my mouth slowly, and felt his tongue slide into my mouth, searching for mine before wrestling with it. It was so intoxicating. I remember asking Mom about her first kiss with Daddy, and she said it had happened just like this. It felt so good, the whole world seemed to melt away with that kiss. I didn't want to stop, but his tongue and lips left me. I kept my eyes shut tight, trying to savor the moment, and I must have made the biggest smile I had ever made. Ever.

"You kiss by the book," I managed to gasp out. I think I was still smiling.

"Ashlynn," I heard him whisper into my ear.

"Yes, Raziel," I whispered back. I felt the warmth of his breath on my neck.

"Ashlynn," he whispered again.

"Ooh, yes, Raziel," I whispered back. I couldn't help it. Having him that close felt so good...

"Ashlynn," he whispered a third time, "are you okay?" Wait a minute. That wasn't in the script. Why would he say that?

With a "Huh?" I opened my eyes and found myself hunched over my desk with Mr. Barter standing over me with a puzzled look on his face. There was no dusty book anywhere near him, and the clamor of giggling I heard from around the room told me we weren't in that classroom alone.

"I was asking if you were okay," Mr. Barter said. "You were doing good with your readings, but then you started to drift."

Oh no... I had been daydreaming. And I bet the entire class had just heard me moaning the teacher's name. Great. Just great.

"Uh, I'm fine, Mr. Barter," I said, trying my hardest to regroup myself. "I was just, uh, uh..."

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I was just wanting to find the nearest hole and jump in it.

He chuckled and looked back up the rest of the classroom. “Hey, everybody. I know you all want to drift off like Ashlynn just did. Back when I was your age, we used to call it ‘zoning.’ Hey, I know this Shakespeare stuff is boring as heck, and all of these ‘thines’ and ‘thous’ are enough to drive a person bonkers.” He then patted me on my shoulder, still looking at the rest of the class. “But give me a chance. I promise you that by the time I leave here, I will have shown you these plays in a way that will make Shakespeare the absolute coolest stuff you’ve ever read. Will you all trust me?” I heard a chorus of “yeahs” from the rest of the classroom. He then looked back down at me and asked, “Will you trust me, Ashlynn?”

I smiled up at him weakly and answered, “Yes, Mr. Barter.” I almost immediately heard more giggling from the rest of class. I remember making a note to myself: from now on, catch your breath before you say Mr. Barter’s name.

Lunch hour couldn’t come fast enough. After the scene I had made in first hour, I wanted to get this day over with as soon as possible, get home and forget this day ever happened.

Of course, that meant that somebody was going to pick with me about it. Sure enough, no sooner had I sat down and opened my lunch pack, than Heather and her clique of snooty girls were standing in front of me with evil smiles on their faces.

“Smooth moves, Ash,” that blond, blue-eyed so-and-so said, “You really put on a show in English this morning. It figures,” she added, “I mean, isn’t something as refined and sophisticated as William Shakespeare a little over your head? Maybe you’re more comfortable reading *Jet* magazine, or do you prefer *Black Hair Monthly*?”

As they all did their best hyena impersonations, I narrowed my eyes at them and seethed. Inside, I was begging Daddy to let me sock her, just once, and I would never ask again, but Daddy’s words wouldn’t let me do anything. All I could let myself do was roll my eyes and get back to taking my food out of my lunch pack. I was trying to ignore them. They still wouldn’t go away.

“But seriously,” I heard her say with mock concern, “I wonder what Mr. Barter thinks of his little teacher’s pet now that he caught her daydreaming in class? This could seriously affect their relationship, don’t you think, girls?”

The girls in her prissy clique started laughing, and I even heard the redheaded one tell Heather, “Good one, Heather,” before they all walked off to another table in the corner of the lunchroom. I wanted to sock Heather so bad, but as she disappeared into the mob of hungry students, I couldn’t help thinking about what she had said. I did make myself look bad in front of Mr. Barter, and I didn’t want to do that. I sank my fork into Dad’s leftover pot roast and twisted off a piece, letting the aroma of roasted beef fill my nostrils before taking a bite. I love Daddy’s cooking. Everybody talks about how good the women in my family can cook. Mom, Grandma and Aunt Terri get a lot of credit because they really can cook, but people forget that Dad can do his thing in the kitchen, too. I think I was really lucky to get two parents who can both cook.

I chewed slowly on the roast and nodded to myself. As soon as I got the chance, I was going to go make amends with Mr. Barter.

My chance came shortly after school. I raced out of Science 101, zipping past my locker on the way to Barter’s class. I normally stop by my locker to drop off my unneeded books before heading to the bus or track practice, but this time I was in a hurry. I actually almost ran over this boy on the way, knocking his books out of his hand and onto the floor. I didn’t even notice until I heard them thud on the ground.

“Oh, my God!” I said as I turned around, “I am so sorry!”

He was bending over to pick his books up, and told me without looking up, “You know, you really need to watch where the hell you’re going. Ain’t nothing that freaking important that you got to run around like a bat out of...” He looked up and his eyes locked with mine. His voice started softening mid-sentence, “Hell...”

He paused for a second, and so did I. He was a pretty handsome boy. His skin was medium to dark brown, and he had these huge, hazel eyes, framed by bushy eyebrows, a thin mustache and long, black cornrows.

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“I’m sorry,” I said while crouching, “I was in a hurry. Let me help you pick those up.”

I picked up the first book. It was an Algebra Two book. He must have been a sophomore.

“Thanks,” he replied. His voice sounded pretty close to me, so I looked up to see him crouched right along with me, picking up his other books. “Hey,” he said, “aren’t you on the track team?”

“Yeah,” I replied. We stood up and I handed him back his book.

“Were you late for practice, or something?” He had a really deep voice. I bet that if he wanted, he could be a really good rapper, or something like that. But I couldn’t dwell on that, I had somewhere to go.

“Yeah,” I said, “I am.” I really wanted to get going to Barter’s class, but I didn’t want to be impolite. I wished he would just shut up and let me go, though.

“I see you all the time at the meets,” he said. “You’re pretty nice out there, you know? My name’s Calvin.” He extended his hand out to me, like he wanted to shake mine. I didn’t have the time for that.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I’ve really got to go.” I turned around and ran off. I didn’t want Barter to leave before I could talk to him about what happened earlier that day.

All of my track running paid off, because within a minute I was at the other side of the school at Mr. Barter’s class. I had to stop for a second to catch my breath, but I was there, and so was he. I walked in to find him grading some papers, comparing notes with his teacher’s manual.

He didn’t notice that I had entered the room. I was hesitant to say anything to him. I didn’t know what to say, really, and I felt kind of embarrassed disturbing him like that. Luckily, he glanced up once and saw me.

“Hello, Ashlynn,” he said in his tenor voice. “Is there anything I can help you with today?” He sounded a little bothered that I was there. Was he that mad at me for what happened in first hour? I hoped not.

“Hi, Mr. Barter,” I said, eyes cast toward the floor. “I just wanted

to come in and apologize for the way I was acting earlier today. I must have really made a fool of myself in first hour.”

He shook his head. “Think nothing of it. Shakespeare has a way of doing that to young people.” He looked up from his book and smiled. “I remember the first time I had to study Shakespeare. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I didn’t understand a word of what was going on in that play, and it drove me right to sleep in class.” He looked at me warmly and quipped, “Once you are able to get the full understanding of what he writes about, you’ll be able to be more attentive.”

I remember grimacing, and replying, “Well, Mr. Barter, I kind of like to think I have a pretty good understanding of what *Romeo and Juliet* is all about. At least, the love story part.” Oh my God; I couldn’t believe I had just said what I said. Mr. Barter shot me a glance like he couldn’t believe it, either. I couldn’t tell if his look was surprise, or suspicion, but I do know that the silence for the few seconds after I let those words come out made me really uncomfortable. If I didn’t say something and change the subject, I might start fidgeting and wringing my hands. Mom says I fidget a lot when I’m nervous.

“Uh,” I stuttered, “do you need any help? I could put some of these boxes away for you, if you want.”

He still had a suspicious look in his eye. “Aren’t you going to miss your bus, or something?”

“Nah,” I said. “I’ve got track practice in a half hour, so I have some time to kill.”

He responded with “Oh,” and pointed at a crate over in the corner of the room. “If you could move that crate of materials to this closet, I’d appreciate it.”

I smiled at him and nodded, then went to grab the crate. I was relieved. He wasn’t mad at me after all. I relaxed a little, and as I was walking the crate over to the closet, my mouth started running.

“You know, Mr. Barter,” I said, “it really is good to see a teacher like you in this school. I mean, there aren’t very many black boys in this school. It’s like they’re trying on purpose to keep them out. I remember seeing a few black boys on my way to homeroom on the first day of school. The next day I hear they were transferred out for

some reason. I think there's something going on, but I don't know what. Anyway, It's good to see such a positive black male influence here in the school. You should hear some of the garbage they say about us around here. Sometimes I want to jump in their conversations and say something, but Daddy always told me, 'You know how evil they can be, Ashlynn, don't give them any excuses to make you a target.' So I usually just keep my mouth shut and go about my business. But having you here makes me feel a little bit better."

He grunted. "Well, don't get too attached to me, Ashlynn. I'm only going to be here for about a month."

I shook my head. "I hope not. I'm going to go to the principal before you leave to see if she can find a place for you on the permanent staff."

He smiled at me again. I really like his smile. It's not a perfect smile. In fact, he's got a big gap between his two front teeth, and his teeth are more of a mother-of-pearl than an actual white, but it's still a pretty smile. It's a smile like someone who knows what he's doing and has a good plan of how to pull it off. "Oh really?" he said. "You have that kind of pull, Miss Missy?"

I liked it when he called me Miss Missy. I thought it was cute. I returned his smile, shrugged and tried not to blush. "I don't know, Mr. Barter, but it is worth a try. I'll see if I can pull a few strings." I wanted to get closer to him. I don't know why, I just wanted to.

Just then I saw him frown and look down into his lap. "Is something wrong?" I asked.

Without a word, he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a cell phone. It looked like a Motorola but I couldn't quite tell. He put it up to his ear, and for a minute seemed completely oblivious that I was in the room.

"Yeah, what?" he said into the phone. It was weird, because his voice was different, somehow; harsher, with more bass. "You found him? Good, good. Where's he hiding at? Nah, don't do it yet. I want this to be just right." He paused, then added, "Come by my apartment tonight, and we'll make the plan. And hey, thanks for helping me get this guy." I couldn't help being a little concerned; it was weird hearing him talk like that.

Practice was a little livelier than last time. I was happy to get that whole issue of what I did earlier that day behind me, so it was a little easier to focus on my running. Coach always seems to pay more attention to me than anybody else for some reason. Daddy says it's a good thing that he's always pushing me to do better, so that it will instill discipline in me. I'm thinking Dad just thinks it's cool because that means he doesn't have to be as hard on me as he is on Terrance. Anyway, one time during practice, Coach came over to me smiling. My coach was a big roly-poly guy who wore these big, dark, thick prescription sunglasses and a worn-out, way-too-tight, red St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap. He had this thick, wooly mustache and the widest, toothiest smile you have ever seen. One time Daddy and I watched some old *Saturday Night Live* reruns on satellite TV, and they had these guys called "Superfans" that looked just like my coach. He also talked with the thickest St. Louis accent you have ever heard. I knew it was St. Louis because he made all of his "ares" sound like "urrs." I found out that St. Louis people talk like that from all the St. Louis rappers I hear on the radio. I saw him out of the corner of my eye while I was stretching my quads and wondered why he was smiling at me as he started walking in my direction. I couldn't help smiling a little, too. I thought that maybe he was pleased with how well I was training.

"Ashlynn, you're doing it all wrong." Or maybe not.

"However, I'm really pleased with your focus today," he said as he approached me. "Your concentration is a lot better than it was at the last practice. But your technique is still off. That just won't do."

I stopped stretching and looked at him quizzically. "But Coach," I said, "I'm trying real hard to get in better condition, and I'm working as hard as I can on the stuff you've been teaching. Doesn't that count for anything?"

He folded his arms and grimaced. "Well, Ash, I do appreciate you for working so hard," he stammered a little bit, like he was trying to find the right words, "but I want you to work smarter, not harder. It does you no good to waste a lot of time training and training and training

the wrong way. When you do that, then you just get really good at doing things the wrong way. Do you see where I'm going?" That was his phrase. Every time he said it, he made the "where" sound like "whirr," but he always said it to make sure he got his point across. It was his punctuation to every statement he made, like my uncle Bryce ends every sentence with "You know what I'm saying?" I hated to admit it, but what Coach said actually made a lot of sense. I had to nod.

"So what am I doing wrong," I asked him, "that's so different from what you've been stressing?"

Coach unfolded his arms and started moving his hands in odd gestures, like he always did when he talked. "Well, Ash," he said, "you've got the basics of the program down, but you need to straighten up your posture when you run. You're sitting in the bucket too much."

"Sitting in the bucket?" I asked. "What's that?"

"That's when you run with your hip and butt being pushed back into a sitting position. You're doing it all the time. It puts your feet out in front of your body with a weak push-off from behind. It's going to hurt you as the runners get more and more advanced. I mean, you're doing okay so far, but you need to keep your hips pressed forward. You do that, I bet you'll place a lot higher in your next few meets."

I didn't say anything; I just raised my eyebrows and nodded my head in agreement.

"Also," he added, "I need you to try to start running more upright. You're leaning a little too far forward. That makes a braking action with each step you take, and it also wears on your knees and back." I couldn't say anything; I just nodded and tried to absorb what he was saying to me. "Imagine a line perpendicular to the ground, passing through your ear and straight down through your hips. You need to keep your hips pressed forward and your butt tucked in. Visualize standing face-first against a wall. Press your hips forward so that the bones of your hip touch that wall. Running like that will make your knees lift higher, and with less effort. Do you see where I'm going?" I was overwhelmed by everything he said. That was a lot of information to absorb in a very short period of time, and I told him as much.

“Wow,” I said, “I don’t know if I can make all of those changes just off hearing you tell me them just now. This might take a while.”

He smiled again, “I don’t expect you to turn into Marion Jones overnight, Ashlynn. I just wanted to point out where you needed improvement, so you’ll have those things in mind as you train. I’ll be here every step of the way to help you get better.”

I smiled back at him, “Okay, Coach. If it will make me a better runner, then I’m all ears.”

He looked out over the rest of the girls who were stretching. “I just wish these other knucklehead girls were as coachable as you are. Most of them are just on the team to get their parents off their backs about having an after-school activity. For them, track is just something to do. They just don’t understand the importance of training and preparation.”

“Is it really that important?” I asked.

“Of course it is!” he fired back. “How else are you going to get better at something? I know it’s a lot of hard work, and you may not think shaving a fraction of a second off of your time is much to work so hard for. You’d be surprised at how important that fraction of a second can become to you later on down the road.”

That was an interesting thing to say. “What do you mean by that?” I asked him.

He put his hands on his hips and leaned towards me a little. “Think about it, Ash. That fraction of a second you’re working so hard for could be the difference between first place and second place this Saturday at Northwestern.” I thought I saw a steely look in his eyes under his dark glasses, like he knew he was about to say something that I would instantly understand. “Or, better yet,” he said, “that fraction of a second could be the difference between you getting that athletic scholarship and the next girl getting it.” He was right. That one hit home in a big way, and I nodded at him to show I understood. He then shrugged and smirked at the same time. “Heck, you never know. God forbid you’re in a situation where you’re running for your life; that fraction of a second could be the difference between life and death.” I couldn’t help shrinking back a little when he said that. It was a little creepy, coming from him.

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“Hey,” he said, waving his hands at me apologetically, “I didn’t mean to scare you, Ash. What I’m trying to tell you is that when you train and prepare, you never really know what you’re really training and preparing for. This track meet could be an immediate reward for all the training you’re doing, but what you’re doing to improve yourself now will benefit you for much longer down the line than that. Do you see where I’m going?” I smiled and nodded, more than anything to humor him and end the conversation.

“Good,” he said as he leaned in close enough for me to smell the horseradish on his breath. “Now, one other thing I think you need to do is relax your face more.” It would have been a lot easier to relax my face if I wasn’t smelling his horseradish breath.

That night, I decided to change my study habit a little bit. Usually, I do my homework at the marble dining room table next to the kitchen, but on a whim, I decided to change my routine. I guess since all I was doing was reading for my classes, then none of my homework required me to write anything. Therefore, I felt I didn’t need the table. I moved my study area to the den, which is actually in the same room with the kitchen and dining area. Our house is very peculiar that way. Where normally you would have the den, kitchen and dining room separate from each other, in our house all three are actually in one big room, with the floors of each area being different heights. It’s really convenient, and is actually pretty cool, especially when Daddy throws his big Superbowl parties every February. Everyone on Daddy’s side of the family would come through and we would have lots of fun, but oddly enough, only a few of the people on Mom’s side of the family would be invited: namely, Grandma, uncle Del, uncle Bryce, Aunt Terri and her husband. I always wondered why Mom didn’t invite the other uncles on her side, but I never bothered asking.

Anyway, I was sitting on the long couch in front of the flat screen television in the den, my body sinking deep into the plushness as I read out of my book. The television was off and Terrance was outside playing basketball. I don’t like having any distractions when I study.

I was still distracted, though, because I felt somebody’s presence

near me. Have you ever been able to tell when somebody was standing near you, without seeing or hearing that person? That's how it was with me at that time. I just knew that somebody was standing over me as I was reading. I rolled my eyes up, intent on letting whoever was standing over me—I thought it was my knucklehead brother, back early from his pick-up games—see that I was not pleased with him invading my personal space. I was right about one thing: somebody was standing over me. However, I was wrong about whom. Instead of Terrance, I saw a round, oval-shaped face highlighted by big, sleepy dark brown eyes and smiling, pouty lips, framed by silky long, black hair that hung down towards me. It was Mom.

“Hey, Ash,” she said in her best “nicey-nice” voice, “Whatcha reading?”

“*Romeo and Juliet*,” I mumbled. “We’re reading from it for English class, and I want to make sure I know my parts.” I wanted to tell her that she was ruining my concentration, and I didn’t appreciate that. I held my tongue, though.

“Wow,” she said, “*Romeo and Juliet*. I didn’t get to read that until I got into college.” So Mr. Barter was right, after all, “How do you like it so far?”

I shrugged, and shifted my eyes back to my book. “It’s okay,” I replied. “I like the rhythm of the poetry of the story. Mr. Barter taught us about iambic pentameter today, and I’m just studying that aspect of the story for class tomorrow.”

Without looking at her, I felt Mom’s presence leave me. I figured she must have gone to the kitchen, because I heard the refrigerator door open and shut.

“You seem to be enjoying English a lot more,” I heard her say, “since this Mr. Barter guy’s been teaching. You must really like him, huh?”

I put my book away and leaned forward towards Mom. “What’s not to like?” I said emphatically. “Mom, Mr. Barter is so cool! He knows so much, and he’s real easy to approach and talk to. I think he is the most awesome teacher I’ve ever had!”

Mom was opening some ground beef, and I also saw some spices

and taco seasoning on the counter in front of her. She raised her head up from the beef, smirked and gave me a curious look.

“Well,” she said, her smirk turning into a sly grin, “could that maybe be because Mr. Barter is the only black male teacher you’ve met at Powers?”

I made a face. What was she trying to imply by saying that? “No,” I said indignantly, “Mr. Barter really is a good teacher. He’s articulate, he’s well-read, and he really cares about the students.” I took a scrap piece of paper and put it in my Shakespeare book to hold its place as I closed it. I then stood up and walked through the den area, into the kitchen to get closer to Mom. I wanted to make a point.

“I think you would understand him a little more,” I said as I approached her, “if you actually met him. There’s a PTA conference after school tomorrow. How about, when you come to pick me up from school, you come inside and give me a chance to introduce him to you?”

Now it was Mom who was making a face. “I don’t know...” she whimpered.

I dropped my shoulders and balled my fists. “Oh, come on, Mom!” I said, making sure I got my point across without yelling. “What do you have to lose? At the very least, you get to see for yourself what I see in him, and you might even like him, if you give him a chance.”

Mom dropped her shoulders, too, then bowed her head and smiled.

“Okay,” she said with a laugh, “if this is that important to you...”

“Yes it is!” I added.

“...then I guess I don’t see any harm in saying hello to him.”

I made the biggest smile I could muster, wrapped my arms around Mom and gave her the biggest hug I could possibly give her.

“Thank you, Mom!” I said, my face buried into her chest. “I promise you won’t regret it. Mr. Barter is an awesome teacher, you’ll see!” After that, I happily ran back into the den, plopped myself back on the couch, and grabbed my book as I sank back into the plushness of the couch.

“So what are you planning on cooking for dinner?” I asked as I reopened my book and tried to find my place. “If it’s tacos, I want to help fry the tortilla shells.”

 chapter 4

School breezed by the next day. It was nothing out of the ordinary, really. In first hour we read some more of *Romeo and Juliet*, and once again at lunch Heather and her prissy clique picked with me. Heather actually doesn't bother me much during class, but between classes and at lunch, whenever her prissy clique surrounds her, she's able to muster up enough courage or nerve to say her smart-aleck little comments to me. Like I said, she doesn't have nearly as much to say to me when she doesn't have her little friends backing her up. She needs for someone to just sock her, right in that spearhead she calls a nose. That would straighten her out pretty well; but I digress.

The highlight of the day was being asked by my counselor to help make preparations for the parent-teacher conferences that they were about to have after school. My counselor is awesome. She's one of the few black faculty I see at Powers, but she is everything I would want to be like when I'm an adult. She's witty, knowledgeable, and she doesn't let anybody push her around. She actually reminds me a lot of Gabrielle Union; she even favors her, a little. She had been really helping me as far as choosing the right classes and developing the right study habits. Once I told her I was thinking about taking some vocational classes at the Skills Center over on the other side of town, and my counselor almost blew her top! She was mad that too many black students are satisfied with simply "training for jobs" at the Skills Center, when they could use that same energy to pursue higher-paying careers by preparing for college. She made a REALLY big deal about

it, so I decided I wouldn't bug her about going to the Skills Center anymore.

So, on my counselor's behalf, I was excused from sixth hour to prepare a reception area for the parents in the cafeteria. I helped fold up and move the lunch tables out of the way, trying in vain not to touch the parts of the table that were sticky from spilled food and soda pop. I made a mental note to make sure the tables were wiped down well before I touched them in this way ever again. After we finished that, I worked with a couple of other students to set up some serving tables, and we put out some hors d'oeuvres. It wasn't anything too fancy; just some assorted cheeses and crackers, some finger veggies with dip, and the chalky cookies they serve us at lunch. There was some punch, too. After that, we put up a bunch of banners that said "Welcome Parents," and had a bunch of helium balloons all over the room. After that, we set out a bunch of pamphlets and feedback cards, put up a map of all the classrooms and which teachers were where, and voila! Our school was ready for Parent Visitation Day. Now all we needed were the parents.

They started filing in about fifteen minutes after the final bell rang. I was one of the greeters, so I stood at the door wearing a smile and a custom-made "Parent Greeter" button that had my name and my grade point average on it. It was my job to tell the incoming parents hello and that our school appreciated their visiting us as they walked through the doors. I would then direct them to the cafeteria, where refreshments and directions were waiting for them. It was actually pretty boring, but I didn't mind doing it. I was basically waiting for my mom to show, so I could have someone else come and take over my spot for me.

Mom didn't disappoint, although she was a little later than I expected her to be. As soon as I saw the Lexus pull up and park at an open space in the parking lot in front of the school, I ran back and grabbed one of the students in the cafeteria. I told him to stop pigging out on the cookies and fill my spot for me. Begrudgingly he took my button and went out, grumbling to himself the whole way. Serves him right: I didn't see how one person could eat so many of those chalky cookies anyway.

I greeted Mom with the biggest smile and hug I could muster and bid her to follow me to Mr. Barter's classroom. As we walked, I made a point to tell her all of the cool things I was learning about Shakespeare from him: about Shakespeare's early life, how he disappeared for a few years, and where the inspiration for some of his plays came from. I was sure that all of this was impressing her.

We arrived at his door, and before I walked in, I stopped Mom and said, "Now, when you first meet him, Mom, try not to talk with him for too long. Mr. Barter is a very busy man, and I don't want to take up too much of his time. I just want for you to meet him, find out just how awesome he is, maybe talk for a bit about how well I'm doing in class, and then we can go home."

Mom grinned, like she was amused at what I was saying. Maybe she just didn't understand how important it was. Before I could reiterate, though, she said, "Okay, Ash, I won't try to be too long. But don't you want to visit with any of the other teachers after we see him?"

I waved that off and said, "Nah. I'm not struggling in any of those classes and I really don't care whether you meet any of those teachers or not. Mr. Barter is the one I want you to meet."

Still wearing that grin, she shrugged and said, "Okay, Ash. If you say so." That annoyed me a little bit. This was monumental for me, but she was acting like it was no big deal. I made a mental note to remember that the next time she brought over a guest that she wanted me to get excited about.

We walked in, and there was Mr. Barter, wearing a navy blue Ralph Lauren outfit that complemented the baby blue-painted room and fit around his trim frame very nicely. He was standing next to his desk, talking to the parents of some kid I didn't recognize. He had such a sincere look on his face as he spoke, and you could tell by the way he slowly gestured his hands to coincide with what he was saying that he was a man of great knowledge. At least, that's what I expected Mom to see. Within a few minutes he had finished talking to that family, and he leaned back on his desk as they walked away. I smiled at them, but as soon as they passed me, I made a beeline right at Mr. Barter, with Mom in tow.

“Hello, Mr. Barter,” I said in my most cordial voice, “how are you doing?”

He looked down at me and smiled, before answering, “Oh, I’m doing very well, Miss Ashlynn. I just got word that an old friend of mine is in town, and I’m looking very forward to meeting him again.”

I looked up and behind me, grabbed my Mom by her wrist and pulled her forward. “This is my Mom,” I told Mr. Barter. “I brought her up here because I thought you two would get a kick out of meeting each other.” Whoa. I thought that came out wrong. So he wouldn’t get the wrong idea, I added, “My Dad would be here, too, but he’s with my brother at football practice.”

He smiled at me and said, “Oh, that’s fine. Meeting your mother is fine enough.” Then, he looked at Mom and extended his hand, “A pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Wilson.”

Mom took his hand and shook it, replying, “The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Barter. My daughter speaks very highly of you.”

Mr. Barter’s smile grew wider, and I thought I saw a hint of red in his cheeks, as he said, “I’m flattered. I try to give these students a memorable experience, so that they are actually learning something in my class, and not just doing busywork until Mr. Nagy returns from his illness.”

Now it was Mom’s turn to nod. Was it me, or did Mom seem a little unenthusiastic about talking with Mr. Barter? I couldn’t understand how someone could talk to a man as awesome as Mr. Barter and not feel energized, so maybe it was just me.

“Ashlynn has never been into anything Shakespeare-related before,” Mom said. “I was impressed to see her taking such an interest in his plays. She says she is learning a lot from you.”

“Glad to hear that,” Mr. Barter replied. “It’s always good to know your work is having a positive impact, isn’t it?” Mom nodded, and he continued. “By the way, your daughter is doing an awesome turn in the role of Juliet.” Wow, that was a really nice compliment coming from him.

A chuckle from Mom before she said, “I expect no less from her.” Wow, that was an even nicer compliment. I started wondering if I was blushing yet from hearing them talk like that about me.

“You have quite the thespian in your daughter here,” he told Mom before shifting his gaze to me and smiling. “Who knows? Ashlynn might wind up as one of the great actresses of her time. I think it would be awesome to be the next Gabrielle Union, don’t you, Miss Missy?”

I squinted, smiled and nodded. If I wasn’t blushing before, I was positive that I was blushing at that moment. Part of it was because he had just compared me to Gabrielle Union, but it was mostly because he had called me “Miss Missy.” Every time he did that, he seemed a lot less like a teacher, and a lot more like a close friend. I liked that. However, as I opened my eyes, I caught a glimpse of Mom’s face. For a second, I thought I saw her eyes narrowing into slits, as if for some reason she didn’t approve of the rapport I had with Mr. Barter. I thought I was just seeing things, so I didn’t make a big deal of it.

I also decided not to make a big deal of how abruptly Mom ended the meeting. Out of nowhere she said, “Ashlynn and I have to go now, Mr. Barter, but it was a pleasure talking to you.”

Mr. Barter nodded and waved. “Likewise, Mrs. Wilson.” And that was all they said to each other before Mom turned and shooed me towards the door. Like I said, I didn’t make a big deal of it, but it bothered me very much that she did that.

As we neared the front door of the school, I looked up at Mom with pride and the biggest smile I could muster. Surely, she thought he was the most awesome guy in the world...next to Daddy, of course.

“Well?” I asked her, “What do you think of him?”

She had this unsure look on her face as she stammered, “Well...”

Maybe she was on the fence about him, so I thought maybe telling her how cool he was to me would reassure her. “Isn’t he cool? I think he’s the coolest teacher I’ve ever had.”

Mom stopped walking. I turned back to see her sigh and slump her shoulders. “I don’t know how to tell you this,” she said, her head shaking slowly from side to side, and what appeared to be a frustrated frown on her face, “but I don’t really like him.”

I frowned back at her, obviously shocked at what she had just told me. How could she not like Mr. Barter? “Don’t like him?” I said. “Mom, you just met him! How could you just not like him right off the bat?”

Mom shrugged. “I don’t know, Ashlynn, I just don’t like him.” She made this disgusted look and turned back to look at Mr. Barter. He was talking to my classmate Paul’s parents, I assumed about the homework he never turned in. “There’s just something about him... I can’t put my finger on it... but something about him just isn’t right.”

I couldn’t believe I was hearing that from her. This was a woman who bragged to me and everybody else how she started falling in love with Daddy from the moment she met him, how apparently she sensed “something in his spirit” that told her he was going to be her future husband. Well, if she had gotten that much from Daddy from just meeting him, how come she didn’t get that from just meeting Mr. Barter? I was getting heated.

“But Mom,” I growled, “you don’t even know him! I told you I’ve already learned so much cool stuff from him outside of regular class stuff. You’re not even giving him a chance!”

Mom turned and put her hands on her hips. She gave me a perplexed look and huffed, “The way you’re talking about this guy, it sounds like you want to be his girlfriend.”

I remember blushing. “No, Mom, that’s not it at all. I just think he’s a really cool guy, and you’ll like him too, if you just give him a chance.”

Mom cast another suspicious glance in his direction. “I’m sorry, Ashlynn, but I’ve got a bad feeling about Mr. Barter, and I don’t think you should be spending too much time with him.”

I remember grunting at her. The conversation was getting nowhere, and I wanted desperately for Mom and Dad to see how cool a person Mr. Barter was. Of course, with Mom not approving, it became a personal crusade. She must have thought I wasn’t a good judge of character or something. Well, I was determined to show her that I was.

“Mom,” I pleaded with her, “just give him another chance. Let me invite him over for dinner with us. He’s a really nice guy, you’ll see.”

I saw Mom grimace, but after a few seconds pause, she nodded and waved me off in Mr. Barter’s direction. I was overjoyed.

“Thank you, Mom! You won’t regret it!” I beamed, and then

sprinted over to Mr. Barter's classroom. By then Mr. Barter had just locked his room up, and was walking towards the back of the school. I caught him before he could leave.

"Mr. Barter!" I yelled, "Mr. Barter, wait up!"

He stopped in mid-stride and quickly spun around to face me. It almost seemed like he was shocked to hear his name, like he was a little jumpy. I paid it no mind. He stood before me, right shoulder close to me, sublime and majestic, a certain power in his stance and posture. I could have mistaken him for one of those Centurions I read about in World History, having just returned triumphant from a conquest. If he was my age, I would have asked him out, even though I had told myself that when Mom finally lets me start dating, I would make it a point not to ask boys out. Mom says it's unladylike.

"Ashlynn!" He sounded genuinely surprised to see me again. "Did you forget something?"

He smirked at me, and all of my nerve vanished. "Well, Mr. Barter," I stammered, "me and my Mom were wondering if, uh, you would be interested, uh, in joining us for dinner sometime this week."

He looked at me quizzically. "Are you sure you want to have me over for dinner?"

"Oh, it would be great! My mom is the best cook in the world, and you'd get a chance to meet my dad. It'll be great!"

He shrugged. "Well, if it's okay with your parents, then it would be an honor to break bread with you and your family. How does Thursday sound?"

I looked back and was relieved to see Mom back at the other end of the hall. I was kind of caught in the middle of them, actually. I looked back at Mom and mouthed the word "Thursday." She nodded. Mom's good at reading lips, even from a distance. She's been teaching me how to do it. I turned back towards Mr. Barter and said, "Thursday would be wonderful, Mr. Barter."

"Great," he replied. "I'll see you then."

"See you then!" Giddy, I turned and ran back to Mom, with both my thumbs pointing high in the air. "Everything's a go!" I chirped. "Just you wait, this is going to be great!"

I looked up at Mom, and noticed she wasn't looking at me. Her gaze had been trained on Mr. Barter all along. "We'll see," was all she said. I didn't like the tone of voice she used when she said it.

We were riding home that day, and we weren't saying much to each other. Actually, we didn't say anything at all to each other. I just looked out the side of the window, planning in my mind how the dinner was going to be. We got on the highway at Carpenter and drove all the way through town. We stay on the south side of the city, and it takes about twenty minutes to get home from school in the Lexus, not counting traffic. It takes fifteen minutes if there are no police on the road when Mom is driving. I got tired of the silence and turned on the radio. WDZZ was playing some old school rap music. "Teenage Love" by Slick Rick, if I remember correctly. As soon as Mom heard Slick Rick's voice, she made this weird face: the kind of face you make when your leg cramps up or you get an unexpected charley horse. Mom looked as if that voice was causing her physical pain. She even lost control of the car for a few seconds. The tires screeched as the Lexus swerved across two lanes, sending me lurching from side to side, urging a chorus of angry honks from the other cars on the expressway. My eyes got so wide right then. I didn't know what was scarier at that time: Mom's wild driving or her strange behavior. I swear that I had never seen her react like that before.

"Turn it off!" Mom yelled at me. "Turn it off NOW!" I looked at her with pure shock and terror. I couldn't ever remember seeing Mom like that before. I quickly reached to the radio and turned it off. I didn't know what was going on. It was like Mom was possessed or something. She winced hard and concentrated back on the road. She seemed to have calmed down when she told me, "Ashlynn, please, let's not listen to the radio right now, okay?" She wasn't all the way calm, though: her voice was shaky.

All I could give her was a weak "Yes, Mom," in response.

We rode in silence for what seemed like an hour but was only a few minutes, up until we got to the last part of the highway before my neighborhood, where the highway forks off to go to either Lansing or

Detroit. Usually Mom takes the Lansing exit. This time, though, she drove right by it on the way to Detroit. That was unusual.

“You know what I feel like right now?” I heard her ask. Her voice was chipper for some strange reason. I turned to look at her, and saw her with this huge smile on her face. Her eyes got wide as she glanced back at me and yelled out, “ICE CREAM! Let’s go to Baskin-Robbins!”

Ice cream? At the end of fall? Oh, why not? I couldn’t help but smile back. “Sure, Mom,” I said, “let’s go.”

The Baskin-Robbins we went to was the only one left in the county. All the other ones had closed down. Businesses have a tendency to do that around here. I’ve seen about three record stores, two hair salons, Two Rally’s restaurants, a Shlotchky’s Deli, all the Hot n’ Now restaurants, two chicken restaurants, three car dealerships, a diner and a soul food restaurant all close within months of starting up here in the Flint area. I think it’s sad. The Baskin-Robbins wasn’t very busy, but then again, how busy could an ice cream restaurant be at the end of fall? Mom and I went in, and we both ordered two big cups of black walnut ice cream. Everybody in my family loves black walnut, at least the ones I know about: Mom doesn’t allow me to talk to a few of my uncles and cousins, and she won’t let any of those relatives come over to visit. Actually, I don’t remember her having words with them at all. Even at family functions, she would always avoid certain members of the family, but she never told me why. Anyway, Aunt Terri is the one who got me, Mom, Grandma and Terrance hooked on black walnut. Mom and I took our ice cream to a booth in the corner of the store, where we sat down and started eating. I saw the lady who served us the ice cream out of the corner of my eye. She was giving us a funny look, as if she had never seen two black people eating ice cream together before. I paid it no mind. We were in Grand Blanc Township, a suburb of Flint, and I was used to people in that area acting like that around me. Their problem, not mine.

While we were eating, something was on my mind that I wanted

to ask her.

“Mom,” I said between spoonfuls of ice cream, “did people think you were pretty when you were my age?”

Mom gave me this peculiar look, like she didn’t expect me to ask her anything like that. She gulped down the ice cream she was eating and replied, “If you count all the knuckleheads at school throwing catcalls and tired pick-up lines my way, then yeah, I guess you could say they did. Why do you want to know?”

I looked down at my ice cream and twirled some of the softer parts of it around with my spoon. “Well,” I said, “sometimes I see how boys act around some of the other girls at school and at church. Like, at school my friend Timtoya...”

Mom interrupted me, “I remember Timtoya. She’s tall and thin, right?”

I nodded. “Well, sometimes she tells me about when she goes to the CLC skating rink on Saturday nights, and how all the boys approach her to ask for her phone number.”

Mom interrupted me again, “Are you worried about boys asking you for your number?”

I was getting tired of her interrupting me. “No, Mom! Can I finish, please?” Mom made an amused smile and held her hands up in mock surrender. I continued, “It’s not just that. Like, in school, I always see Heather and her clique getting approached by boys who ask if they can carry their books or do their homework for them. And even in church, I see the boys walking up to Tesenga and talking to her, telling her how nice she looks, and how pretty she is and stuff...”

Mom gave me an empathic gaze and added, “But the boys don’t say nearly as much to you—”

This time I cut her off. “No! That’s not it!” I reneged on that. I guess in a way that was what bothered me, but I didn’t want her to think I put a lot of importance in that. I was confused, and I probably sounded that way, too. “It’s just,” I said, “it’s just that these girls are getting a lot of attention just because of their appearance. I mean, when people talk to me or about me, all I hear is ‘oh, she’s so smart,’ and ‘look at how high her grades are,’ and all of that, like that’s all there

is to me. It's really bad in church." I took a small bite of ice cream and said, "I'd be lying if I said it didn't bother me a little."

Mom looked at me like she was wondering if I was finished yet. I nodded, and she blurted out, "So is that why you've been dragging your feet so much to go to church?"

She was really annoying me. "Mom..." I said in my best "You're starting to annoy me" voice.

"Okay, okay, okay," she said. "I think it's just an issue of approachability. All these girls you're talking about: Timtoya, Heather, and the like, they put themselves in a position where they are always visible to boys. Even your friend Tesenga is always seen because of how often her father takes her shopping. When people—especially boys—think of them, they think of their appearance. But that's because those girls constantly put themselves on display. They're always at the places where the boys are, and they're always going to be in a position to draw attention to themselves, whether it be with the clothes they wear, or the way they dance, or the way they act around people, or something like that."

Then she gave me her usual "understanding mother" look and added, "That doesn't make them any better than you, sweetie. It's just that boys give those girls more attention because in a lot of ways they seek it; even your friend Tesenga."

I rolled my eyes and said, "I never said they were any better than me." Did Mom think I had some kind of self-esteem issue, or something? Boy, was she mistaken.

"What bothers you," she continued, "is that you think people are ignoring you because they don't think you're as pretty as the girls you mentioned, and all they see you as is smart."

I shook my head, "I don't think any of those girls are prettier than me, either..."

Mom interrupted me again. "But that's what you think everybody else thinks. Like I said, sweetie, it's just a matter of exposure. Those other girls may be desirable to boys, but that's because they put a high priority on making themselves desirable, probably at the cost of something more important. I guarantee that if you put yourself out

there the way they put themselves out there, you'd have boys all over you, too.

"But that's the difference. You have your priorities in a different place. While Heather is out socializing, you're in studying. While Tesenga is shopping, you're at track practice. While Timtoya is dancing at the skating rink, you're writing for the school newspaper. Most of the boys you meet don't see as much of you, so they may not think you're as approachable as the other girls you just mentioned are. It's not that being social is bad, everybody needs to socialize, but unlike a lot of people, you understand that there'll be plenty of time for socializing after the work is done."

"But Mom," I asked, "how do I know when the work is done?"

She smiled. "When all the boys who ignore you," she leaned a little closer to me, "turn into men who adore you." I had to smile at that. That was a very clever way of putting it.

Mom took another bite of her ice cream and continued. "Besides," she said, "you really do have more important things to worry about than whether you're getting any attention from boys or not. The problem with a lot of girls is that they get caught up so deeply in popularity and attention-getting that it becomes their god. I've seen a lot of women like that crash and burn once they came to the realization that the world didn't revolve around them." She took another bite. "But that's not going to happen to you, because you have a better destiny in store for you."

I shrugged, and took a couple of ice cream bites myself. The ice cream was starting to get really soft by then. "I guess," I said.

"Did you know," Mom added, "that I used to be one of those types of girls?"

That surprised me. "Really?" I asked.

She nodded emphatically. "Oh yeah. After your grandfather left, I would do just about anything to be the 'it' girl with all the boys at school." She paused. "I wouldn't have sex or do anything overtly sexual, but everything else was fair game. I was so mean, Ashlynn."

Mom was blushing. She wiped an embarrassed hand over her face and continued. "Everything you complained about those girls doing, I

did. The way I dressed, the way I acted, where I hung out at, that was all to get the attention of boys. And I was so manipulative! It was really bad my senior year at high school. Boys put themselves through a lot of humiliating things to gain my favor, but I treated them all like dirt. It's a good thing I found Jesus when I did, or I might have gotten into a lot of trouble."

Wow. I had never known any of this about Mom. And it was Jesus that turned it around? I had a hard time believing that.

"So," I said, "It was Jesus who stopped you from being that way?"

She shrugged. "Well, Jesus and your father. Him and me were friends even through all of that mess I was into. One day, he just sat me down and told me that I was acting so mean because of how badly I had been hurt..." she paused, taking a deep breath and staring out into space for a few seconds before making eye contact and speaking again, "by your grandfather leaving, that is." For a minute, I thought she was about to say she was hurt by something else, but I didn't know what. I paid it no mind as she continued.

"Your father suggested I get some counseling at the church he attended. Talking to Pastor Stokes about everything I had been through was very therapeutic, and it helped ease a lot of the pain of what I had been going through. I liked the people there so much. It didn't take me long to join the church and give my life over to Christ. I've been a much better person ever since."

It was hard to imagine Mom going through something so traumatic that she would need counseling *and* Christ, but it was an amazing story nonetheless. "Wow," I said, "Daddy really helped you like that?" She nodded, and I added, "That's amazing."

She nodded again. "Your father is a pretty amazing guy, isn't he? One of your father's favorite stories is the one when he was catching a flight from Johannesburg to London." Mom tells me this story all of the time, but she never tires of talking about it. I never tire of hearing it, either.

"He said he had just gotten into his seat and was actually starting to write a letter home to me, when this old white woman, about 50 years old or so, sat next to him on the aisle seat."

I always humored her. “So what happened?” I asked.

“Well, for a good five minutes, your father saw her giving him this look, like she had just stepped in something. He was like, ‘Woman, what is your problem?’ but he didn’t say anything, right?”

“So he just minded his business?” I chimed in, like I always did. “Just like he always tells me to do when people pick on me, right?”

Mom nodded, “Yep. That’s exactly what he did. But she just kept staring at him, right? Then the stewardess walks by, an Indian girl, I think.”

I humored her some more, and took a bite out of my ice cream. “So what happened, Mom?”

Mom’s eyes went wide, and she leaned in, like she was telling me the world’s biggest secret. “Well, the old white woman got the stewardess’s attention. When the stewardess asked what was wrong, the old woman said,” then Mom made her best “stuffy white woman” voice and said, “‘Don’t you see it? You placed me next to a black man. I do not agree to sit next to someone from such a repugnant group. Give me an alternative seat.’”

I couldn’t help but smile. That, and wonder if the word “repugnant” was really used in that situation. Mom continued.

“So the stewardess,” she said, “was like, ‘Be calm please. Almost all the seats on this flight are taken, but I will go to see if another place is available,’ right?”

“Well, the stewardess went away and then came back a few minutes later. She said, ‘Madam, just as I thought, there are no other available seats in the economy class.’”

Mom paused for dramatic effect—like she always does—and said, “‘I spoke to the captain, and he informed me that there is also no seat in the business class. All the same, we still have one place in the first class.’”

Then Mom cracked this extra-wide smile and added, “‘Before the old woman could say anything, the hostess said, ‘It is not usual for our company to permit someone from the economy class to sit in the first class. However, given the circumstances, the captain feels that it would be scandalous to make someone sit next to someone so obviously disgusting.’”

“So the stewardess turned to your father and said, ‘Therefore, Sir, if you would like to, please take your hand luggage because a seat awaits you in the first class.’”

We both couldn’t help laughing at that. It was one of Daddy’s cooler stories. But Mom wasn’t done. “And then, all the other passengers stood up and started cheering for your father as he got his stuff and went up to first class. I thought that was so awesome when he first told me about it.”

I could imagine. Mom and I couldn’t stop laughing at the whole thing. Daddy says that he likes it when Mom and I laugh together. He says we sound like we’re in harmony. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the girl working behind all the ice cream make a smart-alecky face, like we had just offended her or something. Well, if it did offend her, then that’s just too bad for her. If I can deal with that kind of treatment for an entire year at school, she can put up with it for a few minutes. Get over it.

Eventually, Mom’s laughter died down, and she looked at what was left of her ice cream. “You know, Ashlynn,” she said, “sometimes I envy you. I know that envy is a sin, and I shouldn’t feel that way, but sometimes I just can’t help it.” I was a little surprised to hear Mom say that.

“How’s that so?” I asked before taking another bite of ice cream.

“Well,” she paused a bit before continuing, “you’ve got so much going on for you right now. You’re running track, you’re getting such good grades, and everyone is so impressed with how mature and well-behaved you are.” I saw Mom blush. Mom hardly ever blushes. “You know, if I had everything to do over again, I would have been more disciplined, like you are. It would have saved me a lot of grief.” I had never expected this from Mom. I was fascinated. “Were you that bad, Mom?”

“A little, I guess. I was young, and I think I was just so insecure over what I was going through. I just had to do something to keep everybody’s attention on me. I got in trouble a lot. It got to the point that nobody thought I would amount to anything.”

I took another bite of ice cream. “But you proved them all wrong, didn’t you, Mom? You’re so successful, you’re so beautiful, and you did so well. I wish I can do as good as you when I get your age.” Mom got choked up. “Thank you, Ashlynn. That’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me in years.”

“I shouldn’t have to say it for you to know it. That’s what women’s intuition is for.”

Mom giggled, “Yes, Ashlynn, I did prove them wrong. But you...you’re doing so much better than I could even imagine at your age! Sweetie, the whole world can be yours if you want it. I just don’t want you to make any foolish mistakes and lose all of that.” Her eyes shifted away from me, and I heard her mumble, “Like I almost did.” Mom started wiping her eyes, and I was a little worried about her. “Mom?” I asked, “are you okay? What happened?”

She tried to regain her composure, and said, “Oh, it’s nothing, dear, nothing at all.” She then took another big bite of ice cream and tried to wipe the excess off her mouth with her napkin, before saying, “You know why I really envy you, though? Every time I see you and your father spending time together, that’s when I envy you the most.”

That intrigued me. “Why, Mom?” I asked.

She looked out the window for a few seconds before turning back to me and saying, “Your father is such a wonderful man, and he loves you and Terrance so much. He tries so hard to be a good father to you two, and I appreciate him so much for that...”

She trailed off, and I heard her sigh. “Do you ever wonder why you never see your grandfather on my side of the family, Ashlynn?”

I shrugged, “Not really. Didn’t Grandma say he left when you were young?”

“Yeah,” Mom replied, “but I bet she never told you how young. I was a little older than you were when he walked out. Right before my junior year, as a matter of fact. I loved him so much, Ashlynn, but he just turned and walked away from me, from your grandma, from your uncles, and from your aunt. I’d try to call him, I’d try to send letters, I even sent him little homemade Christmas cards, but not once did he ever try to get in touch with me. He wouldn’t even come to give

me away at my wedding, after your father convinced me to invite him.” I saw her make a face. “He wouldn’t even come to your christening. Not yours or Terrance’s.”

Mom looked like she wanted to cry. “And all the time I would hear about all the wonderful things he was doing for his new wife and all the children he had by her. And I always thought, ‘What was so wrong with me that my father gives all his love to his new children, but not me? Why wasn’t he there when I needed him?’ It really hurt, Ashlynn. It really, really hurt. I mean, can you imagine what it’s like to have somebody that important in your life just turn his back on you? To just act like you don’t exist anymore?”

I tried to picture Daddy not acting like I was alive. As hard as I tried to imagine it, I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. “No, Mom,” I said, “I can’t.”

I heard Mom sniffle. “Good. Because I don’t ever want you to. In fact, on your eleventh birthday, I had a talk with your father. I told him, ‘Keith, you know what I’ve been through, and what I’ve had to deal with. You have to promise me... you have to promise me that no matter what happens between you and me, you are not going to turn your back on your children. They deserve better than that.’” I heard Mom’s voice get a little shaky. “‘Keith, you have to promise me you won’t leave them, even if you leave me.’”

She paused, and looked out the window of the store. A little smile crept across her face, catching what looked like a tear that had been streaking down.

“Do you know what he said?” She was really starting to get choked up, “He said, ‘Honey, those children are my life. They are my legacy, and nothing in this world matters if I don’t have them. Terrance is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased; Ashlynn is my Rose of Sharon, my lily of the valley. I would die a thousand deaths before I let this world do any harm to them. I will NEVER turn my back or leave my children.’”

I was impressed. Daddy really said that? Wow. I’d have been even more impressed if I had known what a Rose of Sharon was.

Mom looked like she could burst into tears at any moment. “And

then,” she said, “he told me ‘And I will NEVER leave you.’” A few more sniffles from Mom. “Ashlynn, I could have just melted then and there. Your father is such a wonderful man, Ashlynn. I thank God every day for him. I thank God for you and Terrance, too. God has blessed me so much with all of you; sometimes I can’t even believe He’s been so good to me. Sometimes I don’t even think I deserve it...” she trailed off and went to pick up her napkin, but it had ice cream all over it. I smiled and offered her mine.

Eventually we finished our ice cream and got up to leave the store. I walked out and held the door open for her, before telling her, “Oh, Mom, you’ve still got some ice cream on your face.”

She giggled and wiped it off, before smiling at me and wiping the napkin on my nose.

“Now you’ve got ice cream on your face, too,” she said with the biggest smile I had ever seen on her.

“Like mother, like daughter, right?” I asked while opening the door for her.

As she walked by me and out the door, I could have sworn I saw her smile turn into a grimace. “Yeah,” she whispered, “Like mother, like daughter.”

“Ashlynn!” I heard Mom yell a few hours later, “get the phone!” I ripped a piece of paper out of my notebook and slid it into the crack between the pages I was reading in my Shakespeare book, and closed it before jumping out of bed and walking into the kitchen.

“Who is it, Mom?”

Mom answered me with a smirk. Actually, I knew the answer before I even asked the question. There’s really only one person Mom and Dad let me talk to on the phone after 7:00, and I’m always happy to hear from her. She brightens my day whenever I talk to her.

“Hi, Ashlynn,” she said as I put the phone to my ear.

“Hey, Tesenga,” I answered back. “How are things going?”

“I’m alive,” she answered, “so that’s something to be thankful for.” Tesenga wasn’t sounding like her normal, cheery self for some reason. It was like something was bothering her.

THE LEOPARD MAN

“Are you okay?” I asked her. “You don’t sound like you’re in a very good mood.”

“I’m not.” Whoa. That was pretty heavy, coming from her.

“What’s wrong? Are you on your period?” It was the only reason I could think of for her to not be the way I usually see her. I remember when I got my first period. I was about twelve, and I really didn’t know what was happening to me. Of course, Mom and Dad said to just grin and bear it. It was a natural part of growing up from a girl to a woman. Well, it sure as heck didn’t feel natural. I felt so lousy during those days, and EVERYBODY got on my nerves, even Daddy. I always woke up feeling bloated, I had those horrible cramps on my sides, and in the afternoons I felt as if I could die if I didn’t eat some chocolate. And I didn’t even like chocolate that much back then. And the blood! That totally freaked me out the first time I saw it, and it totally ruined my favorite pair of jeans. Aunt Terri didn’t comfort me that much when she explained to me what I was going through. “It’s actually what your body does if you don’t get pregnant during a certain period of time,” she told me. “It happens to every woman, so welcome to the club!” and she actually sounded like it was something to be proud of, like it was some weird rite of passage or coming of age, or something like that. Then again, I guess I could have more reason to be worried if my period never came. But still, it was not a pleasant experience.

“No,” I heard Tesenga say, “it’s not that.”

“Then what’s wrong, Tesenga?” I was really worried about her. “Talk to me, girl.”

“Well,” she paused, then blurted out, “Ash, does your mother mind if I came over and did my homework with you?” That was weird. Whenever Tesenga had problems with her homework, we would usually talk them out over the phone. I didn’t see any harm in it, though.

“I’ll go ask Mom,” I told her. Then I went to Mom and asked her if it was okay for Tesenga to come over and do her homework with me.

“Just so long as the only thing you two are doing is homework,” Mom said. “I know how you two can get when you’re together. You’d talk all night about nothing if you had the chance. And she can only stay

until 10:00. You two do have school tomorrow.” She smiled at me, though, and added, “I do think it will be good for both of you to study together more often. I think you can learn a little from her.” Mom walked past me to the kitchen, patting me on my head as she passed by. “And I know she can learn a lot from you.” I guess. I really don’t see what’s so different about what I do than other people my age. I mean, doesn’t everybody want to be a straight-A student? Daddy always says you should strive to be the best at everything you’re involved in. If you come up short, you won’t be disappointed in your effort; and sometimes your best effort actually is good enough. If everybody gave their absolute best effort at everything, like I try to do, then you’d have a lot less deadbeats in the world. That’s just my opinion, though.

I ran back to the phone and delivered the good news.

“That’s awesome,” Tesenga said. Strangely enough, she sounded more relieved than excited to hear that from me. “Ma will drop me off in a few minutes.”

When Tesenga arrived, I was happy to see her. As soon as she walked in, I ran up and gave her a big hug. She did have this look on her face, though, as if something was bothering her but she was trying to hide it. Mom told her mother that she would drop her off at around 10:30, and her mother was okay with that. Of course, Terrance made a complete idiot out of himself trying to look and sound cool in front of Tesenga before Mom shooed him away, telling him to stay out of our way, lest he have his video game privileges suspended for a week. My brother is a world-class knucklehead, but he becomes really attentive and obedient when his video games are threatened. I did think that Terrance had a crush on Tesenga. He just wouldn’t admit it because it would make him look bad at school if he acted like he wanted a girl. “It doesn’t fit his idiom,” or at least that was how he put it. I was surprised the word “idiom” was even in his vocabulary. I figured that meant his image depended on girls chasing after him and not the other way around. I think it’s silly that the boy was thinking about his so-called “image” and he hadn’t even started high school yet. In any case,

whatever and whoever he chased after really wasn't much of my concern.

I escorted Tesenga to the dining room, and we got our books out and started studying. About five minutes into it, Tesenga started fidgeting, like something was really, really bothering her.

"Is something wrong, Tesenga?" I asked.

Tesenga sighed, and her chest—which had blossomed earlier than any other girl I knew, except for maybe Heather—heaved up and down slowly. There was obviously something really important on her mind, and she was about to tell me what it was. I braced for bad news.

"Well," she stammered, "I, uh, I kind of like to listen to the radio when I do my homework. Do you mind putting your radio on the smooth jazz station? If it's a problem, then don't worry about it."

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little relieved to hear that's all that was bothering her. "No, I don't mind," I said with a smile, "but honestly, I really can't study to music. It distracts me. It's like when I'm trying to read for my English class, and instead of focusing on the words in the book, I find myself humming along with the song on the radio or singing the lyrics. When I study and do my homework, I've got to have complete silence. It lets me concentrate harder on what I'm working on, and I actually can finish quicker." Tesenga made a "touché" face, like she understood what I was trying to tell her.

"Okay," she said, "I'm not used to studying without music, but if you do it, then from now on I'm going to do it, too!" I giggled a little, but stopped when I looked into her eyes. She was serious!

"Well," I told her, "you don't have to do something just because I do it."

"Hey," she said with a smile, "there's only one girl at this table who has a 3.9 grade point average, and it's not me. Obviously the study habits you have work better than mine, so I want to learn to do things the way you do them."

I guess there wasn't much I could say to that, except for "Okay."

We worked and studied for about another fifteen minutes without really saying much of anything to each other. I did offer her some of our fruit for a snack, but Tesenga declined.

Then, suddenly, Tesenga looked up at me from her math book and spoke to me.

“Ashlynn?” she asked. Her voice seemed a little nervous, more so than I’m used to hearing from her.

“Yes, Tesenga?” I said.

She closed her math book and tapped her pencil on top of the cover. “Remember when you and your mother gave me a ride home from school last week?” Don’t I ever. It was raining, and Coach made all of us run suicide relays in the rain after school. On top of that, I had two pop quizzes, I was late for sixth hour, and that blue-eyed so-and-so Heather and her prissy clique were picking with me the whole day. I just want to sock her so bad, I really do. All in all, it was one of the more rotten days I’ve had this year. It was by pure luck that I saw Tesenga sitting on the steps in front of Northwestern Edison as we drove by it. Mom and I picked her up and gave her a ride home. After the day I had, seeing Tesenga smiling gave me a reason to smile.

“Yeah,” I told her with a nod, “I remember.”

Tesenga made a face and tapped her book again. “Well,” she was starting to sound even more unsure of herself than before, “My Ma called my Pa up and really got on his case for leaving me stranded. She was like ‘I don’t care what your situation is, what you did was flat out wrong. You agreed to pick Tesenga up from school when I had to work overtime. You don’t call me at my job, an hour before she gets out of school, to say you can’t pick her up because your new wife took your car. That’s irresponsible and spineless, and I thought you were better than that.’ Then she said, ‘Do you realize that your daughter was waiting outside the school for an hour for you to show up? She could have walked home in that time, but she waited for you because you gave her your word that you would pick her up. I guess you were too busy living it up with your new wife to care about your old daughter, huh?’”

Tesenga looked like it was really hurting her to tell me this stuff. This amazed me, because I was so used to seeing her smiling.

All I could say was, “Ouch.”

Tesenga shook her head and sighed. “So Pa was feeling really bad

about it all. He picked me up from school earlier today, and took me shopping.”

“Really?” I said, “That’s cool! What did you get?”

Tesenga smirked and rolled her eyes. She really didn’t seem very excited at what she got. “A couple pairs of Guess jeans, a Pelle Pelle jacket, a Gucci bag and some Girbeaud boots. He also bought me a sapphire ‘Daddy’s Girl’ pendant, the new Beyoncé CD, and a DVD of the latest Gabrielle Union movie.”

My eyes must have been totally wide open. All I said to her was, “Wow.” I wish Daddy would spend that much money on me if he felt bad about something. The most I get is him saying how sorry he is, how he’s human and can make mistakes like anybody else, and how he would like to humbly ask for my forgiveness. I’d also get a big hug. And a new DVD, but that’s usually about all I get. Not that I’m complaining, but Tesenga would get A LOT of stuff when her dad wanted to apologize to her for something.

“It’s really not that big a deal,” Tesenga said with a shrug and in a disappointed tone of voice. “I mean, all this material stuff is nice. But I would rather have him being there for me when I needed him in the first place, instead of trying to make up for not being there after the fact.”

That was deep. And I was thirsty. I stood up and walked over to the counter in the kitchen, pulled out two cups, and poured them half-full with Gatorade. It was some new flavor, and both Daddy and Terrance swore by the stuff. I really don’t like Gatorade that much, but it is good to drink after practices and meets, and plus it was the only thing in the refrigerator at the time that wasn’t water. “Do you think he was trying to buy your forgiveness?” I asked as I brought the cups back to the table.

“I don’t know what the hell he’s trying to do.” Tesenga snatched a cup out of my hand and took a big, angry gulp of the Gatorade. There was a harshness in her voice I didn’t normally hear from her. “All I know is that the only time he shows me any love is when it’s convenient for him, or when he’s feeling guilty, or if he gets my stepmother’s permission. It’s not fair.” I heard a lot of anger and

frustration in her voice. That was when I remembered that this really wasn't the first time I had heard her like this. This had happened before.

"Like just last week," she said. "I was heading over to spend some time with Pa. He took me to Taco Bell on the way there, and I picked up a chalupa meal. We were actually having a good time, like we usually do when it's just him and me. But as soon as I walked into the house and his wife saw the Taco Bell, she caught an attitude! She was saying stuff like 'Oh, so my cooking isn't good enough for you?' And crazy stuff like that. Ashlynn, that woman NEVER cooks for me. Whenever I come over to visit, she'll say she only cooked enough for her and Pa, and I should have eaten before I came over. But I get some food before I come and she wants to act like she's been feeding me? To make things worse, Pa didn't say one thing in my defense, and he knows what that woman has been putting me through!"

I didn't know what to say to that. It's hard to believe that there are people in the world who are that mean-spirited and full of hate. I couldn't imagine what it's like to live like that.

"Did you know," Tesenga added, "that I went over to visit Pa last month, and my stepmother didn't say anything to me? She didn't even say 'hi.' I said hello to her, and she ignored me. So I figured she just didn't hear me, so I said hello to her again. Would you believe she just gave me this mean look, like I was out of line for even talking to her?"

She sat there for a few seconds and seethed. I had honestly never seen her so angry about something. Her brow was all scrunched up, her eyes were fiery and her cheeks were puffed out, almost as if she was about to blow out a birthday candle that wouldn't go all the way out. Through clenched teeth. "And get this:" she growled, "after she made it clear that she didn't want to speak to me, I let her know that I didn't appreciate that. I just said 'Fine, if you want to be that way, then go ahead and be that way.' Pa turns around and gets on *my* case for giving *her* attitude!"

I know I had heard her like this before, but at the time I honestly couldn't remember when.

She continued. "So basically what he's saying is that he doesn't mind that woman treating his own daughter like crap, but whenever

I'm around his wife, I'm obligated to kiss her..." she trailed off for a second, and grimaced before adding, "Ashlynn, it's just not fair. I have every right to spend time with my Pa and not be harassed or made to feel uncomfortable, you know what I'm saying?"

She looked on the verge of tears. I thought that maybe I could offer her some advice. "Well," I said, "maybe you could tell your dad that you feel uncomfortable at his house, and maybe you shouldn't go there anymore if you're not feeling welcome there. Could that work?"

"I've told Pa something like that," she answered in a dismissive tone, "but all he does is promise it will be better the next time I go over there, and then buy me something to make me feel better. Or maybe it makes him feel better." She turned her head and looked me square in the eyes, squinting her own and frowning. "That's the problem with some people, Ashlynn. They think if they have a problem, then it will go away if they just throw enough money at it. But as much as he promises it will get better, it never does. Ever. Last year I got a call from his wife where she told me flat out that he wasn't going to come to my junior high graduation. She said she wasn't going to let him. I asked her why, and she wouldn't tell me, she kept saying, 'Just don't expect to see him there.' I mean, is that spiteful, or what? Ashlynn, I never did anything to that woman. Why does she hate me so much?"

I still didn't know what to say to her. "I don't know, Tesenga," I stammered. "It's hard to believe, but some people in the world are just like that. All you can do is hold your head and...and..." Heck, I didn't know what to say to make her feel better. Some friend I was.

Tesenga folded her arms on the table in front of her, and buried her head in them. I heard a snuffle. "I'm sorry, Ashlynn," she said. "I know you don't normally hear all of this out of me. I try to keep my issues to myself and just deal with them, you know? But it's hard sometimes."

I reached over to her and rubbed her back. "Hey," I said as softly as I could, "it's okay. I'm your friend, Tesenga. It's what I'm here for."

"It's just so hard sometimes." She sniffled again, and her voice was starting to sound like sobs. "I mean, is it too much to ask for my

Pa's love and support? All he ever gives me is money. He can keep his damned money. I couldn't care less if his wife had all of his money and he couldn't spend one penny on me. All I want from him is some love and some support." She looked back up at me, and I saw red streaks down the side of her cheeks. "Is that too much to ask for, Ashlynn?"

"No," I said while slowly shaking my head, "it's not."

"That's what I'm saying." Tesenga looked down at the puddle of tears she created on the table and wiped her face with her hands and forearms. It was as if she had wiped the bad mood away from her, because when she next talked, it was closer to the cheery voice I was used to hearing from her. "Well, thanks for listening to me vent a little, Ashlynn. It makes me feel better when I know someone can listen to me without judging or anything. You're a really good friend to me."

I was a little flattered to hear that, especially since I really didn't say anything that could help her situation. "It's nothing, really," I said with a shrug. "That's what friends are for, right?"

"Exactly!" she was getting more cheerful the more she spoke, and her frustrated, angry face had turned into a beautiful, radiant smile. "I hope you and I stay friends forever."

I smiled modestly, "Me too."

"No, really! Ashlynn, you are the most awesome person I know!" The scary thing is that she really sounded sincere when she said that. "It's just so cool to be friends with somebody who has it all together, like you do. I'd trade places with you in a..." she paused, and then corrected herself. "No, I take that back. I wouldn't wish what I'm dealing with on my worst enemy. Let's just say I would give anything to have what you've got."

That baffled me. What did I have that was so special? I even asked Tesenga as much.

"You have EVERYTHING!" she said, and she looked and sounded really excited to say that. "You're one of the best runners on your school's track team, you get good grades all of the time, Boys like you..."

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Wait a minute. Did she just say what I thought she said? “Who told you that boys like me?” I asked her.

“Oh, come on, Ash!” she acted shocked that I said what I said. “You can’t honestly tell me boys aren’t trying to ask you out all of the time.” Actually I *could* tell her that, but I let her talk. “At my school, the boys only talk about wanting to ask out a few girls, and your name comes up all of the time. I can’t believe you don’t get more of that at your school.” I didn’t tell her that at my school, most of the boys are trying to ask out Heather and her little prissy clique.

“Anyway,” Tesenga continued, “you also have your Ma and your Pa under one roof. They love each other and they love you. They care about you and they support you in everything you do. Whatever you do, Ash, don’t ever take that for granted. Do you promise me you’ll never do that?”

I couldn’t help but smile as I said, “Yes, Tesenga, I promise.”

“Good!” now she was really cheery. “I’m going to hold you to that promise, too. Now, the reason why I wanted to study with you is because I’ve got these math problems I can’t figure out...”

 chapter 5

I had a quiz the next day in sixth hour. It wasn't too bad, just a few science questions based on a simple experiment we were supposed to do at home with baking soda and a lemon. When the assignment was given out, Heather, who was in the class with me, said out loud that someone like me should be plenty experienced with using baking soda. I didn't get the joke until I came home and asked Daddy about it. He said that she was referring to drug dealers, who use baking soda a lot to turn cocaine into crack. That hacked me off. Somebody really needed to sock that blue-eyed so-and-so, if only to fatten up those thin lips of hers. But I digress.

Anyway, right before school let out, Mrs. Anderson posted all the test results for the entire class. As the bell rang, I made my way up to the list of scores and searched for my name. No surprise; I was the only one who got all the questions right. I smiled, but as I started towards the door, I saw Heather near there, probably waiting for her prissy clique to arrive, giving me this venomous stare. I wondered why...but then it occurred to me to look back at the list of test scores. Sure enough, there was Heather's name...with a big, fat negative one next to it. Mrs. Anderson only gave negative grades to students whom she caught cheating on their exams. She must have noticed Heather looking over the shoulder of the boy sitting in front of her during the quiz, while the boy leaned to the side so that Heather could get a clear view of what he was writing. I looked back at Heather and gave her a wide, toothy smile. I think I smiled so wide that my eyes started to

squint. Heather's face got even angrier, then she turned around and stormed out of the classroom in a huff. I shrugged and snickered to myself a little. That wasn't the first time she and I have had these exchanges, and I was pretty sure it wouldn't be the last.

I went and picked up my books. I took my time doing that, mainly to make sure that Heather and her prissy clique had left the area before I tried to leave the classroom. It's not that I was afraid of them or anything. It's just that when school is out, I'm trying to get out of that building as soon as possible, and I have little patience for dealing with people who obviously have nothing better to do with their time but pick with me. On the way to my locker, though, I saw somebody who I felt compelled to talk to. He was standing next to a locker, having a conversation with one of the football players, and he hadn't noticed me. I thought it would be a wise thing to do to speak to him, since I hadn't talked to him in a while. I walked up behind him as the football player left, and called out his name.

"Hi, Calvin," I said. He turned around and seemed genuinely surprised to see me.

"Uh, hey," he stammered. "What's up?"

I shrugged. "I never did apologize for being so rude to you a few days ago, and I just wanted to let you know that it wasn't because of you. I was trying to get to one of my teachers before they left, but I shouldn't have behaved the way I did towards you, and I just wanted to apologize."

Calvin made a face like he was impressed with what I said. He stroked the peach fuzz that had started growing on his chin. He then returned my shrug and said, "Hey, it's no biggie. Stuff happens. I appreciate you coming through, though. A lot of girls wouldn't have even bothered. It takes a lot of maturity to say what you just said."

"Thanks," I said, then I turned around to leave.

"Uh," I heard behind me, "hey!"

I wondered what he wanted, so I half-turned back around, just enough to see his face.

"What lunch do you have?" he asked.

"I've got B-lunch."

He smiled. It was actually a nice smile, partly because it was framed by that mustache. “I’ve got B-lunch, too. What do you say to you and me meeting up for lunch? I’d like to get to know you a little better, if that’s okay with you.”

I nodded and softly replied, “I’d like that.”

He seemed very pleased to hear that. “I’ll look for you, then,” he said before waving goodbye and leaving the other way. I couldn’t help smiling. I had a date! Kind of. Mom and Dad don’t think Terrance and I should start dating until we’re old enough to drive. Mom in particular told us that the only purpose for dating was to see if a person was suitable to marry. To her it was like a job interview for a potential spouse. Therefore, she and Dad feel that if one isn’t ready to marry, then one shouldn’t bother dating. I want to argue that, but I could see the logic in their reasoning. Besides, if you date someone with the intention of finding a husband, then it helps weed out boys with questionable character or motives. Still, having lunch with a handsome sophomore was pretty exciting to think about.

At home, I was just finishing up my home economics homework when Daddy and Terrance walked through the door. I could tell from the mud and grass stains all over him that he must have been at football practice.

Daddy walked over to me at the dining room table and kissed me on my forehead.

“Hey, sweetie,” he said. “Your mom still here?”

“Yes, she is,” I heard from the back. “I was waiting for you to come home before I took off.” Aunt Terri’s husband says my family reminds him of the Huxtables for some reason. He always tells me that he thinks everything about my family is so neat and nice, like we are the epitome of everything a perfect African-American family should be. I usually just tell him that spending a few weeks living with my brother would change his mind on that pretty quickly.

“They tried me out at safety today. I got really dirty playing on the defensive line. Cool, ain’t it?” And that’s why.

I just sighed and rolled my eyes as both Terrance and Dad went

back into the hallway, Terrance to take off his uniform and take a bath, and Dad probably to mess with Mom. Within a few minutes I heard Mom and Dad talking in another part of the house.

“So,” Mom said, “could you get the day off?”

“Oh, come on!” Dad answered. “When have I not been able to get our anniversary off?”

“Yeah, but that was before you were promoted to sergeant...”

“Don’t worry about it. They’ve got everything taken care of at the precinct. We can drive out, do a little dining, do a little dancing... and maybe even do a little something else, if you know what I’m saying...”

“Keith!” Mom sounded like she was a little shocked and embarrassed at what Daddy said. “The children are in the other room!”

“So?” Dad was really nonchalant. He’s always this way when he’s having fun with Mom. “They already know about the birds and bees, and they already know how they got here. They’re not hearing anything from us that they’re not exposed to all of the time on TV, anyway. Besides,” his voice lowered, but not low enough for me not to hear him, “if everything goes the way I expect it to, they might get a new little sister out of the deal in about nine months.”

Next I heard Daddy say “oof,” which usually meant that Mom thought he was getting too playful.

Daddy chuckled it off, and then asked Mom, “So how did you and Ashlynn like Bible study?”

I heard Mom’s voice sound disappointed. “I enjoyed it, but Ashlynn wouldn’t go.”

“She wouldn’t go?” Dad sounded upset now. “Why not?”

“She said she was tired, and that she didn’t see the big deal of going to Bible study.”

“She really said that?”

“Yes, she did. She was like ‘Well, since I already go to church on Sundays, what’s the point in going back to church during the week? I’ve got better things to do.’”

I didn’t say those exact words, but that’s what I said in a nutshell. I mean, really, what’s the point in going to church during the week?

You'd just get the same message as you would get on Sunday, right? I do enough studying for school; I shouldn't have to study anything else.

Daddy sounded really mad that I wouldn't go to Bible study, though. "Are you saying she doesn't think studying the Word of God is important? Just give me a minute, and me and her are going to have a little talk..."

"Keith!" I heard Mom say, "wait! Now is not the time for that. She just doesn't understand why it's so important, honey. Give her time, okay? Just give her some time." I didn't care. She could have let Dad come and try to "straighten me out." I didn't see the need for Bible study, and I was sticking to my guns on that.

"You're a good one, honey," It sounded like Dad was backing off, "Personally, I wouldn't stand for it. When I say they need to do something, then they need to do it, period."

"Oh, whatever." Now it was Mom who sounded playful. "The minute Ashlynn gives you that 'please daddy?' look, you would have given her whatever she wanted from you on the spot."

Daddy laughed loudly. "You keep believing that, Patricia."

"I don't have to 'believe' anything! The evidence is in plain view!" Mom giggled. "Ashlynn didn't get all those DVDs she owns on just her birthday, did she?" Silence for a few seconds, and then Mom added, "I rest my case."

"Whatever, man," Dad immediately retorted. "I'm going to go order the kids a pizza now. The only 'please daddy' I'm going to be hearing tonight will be coming from you, once we get to that hotel."

"KEITH!" I could tell Mom's teeth were clenched.

Daddy laughed again. "And I'll be hearing plenty of that, too." I just had to shake my head and laugh at those two while I picked up my algebra book. Maybe Aunt Terri's husband was on to something, after all.

It took about a half hour for Terrance to finish his bath. I made sure that I had my math homework finished in time for him to come out so I wouldn't have him messing up my concentration or my rewriting the assignments in ink.

THE LEOPARD MAN

“Homework done?” he asked while walking into the kitchen. I could hear the soft scrape of him wiping his hands on his bathrobe, as well as the slow drip of the body parts he couldn’t reach with his drying towel dripping water all over the floor. Terrance has to be the only preteen boy who likes taking baths. Mom had scolded him a few times for using her soothing therapy bath oils when he takes baths, but he still uses them anyway. Sometimes I think Mom is too lenient on him.

“Just about,” I replied without looking up at him. “In a minute, you’re going to have to do yours.”

“Don’t remind me,” he said, before sniffing the air and asking, “Hey, is the pizza here yet?”

“Terrance,” I always got annoyed when he did that, “how can you ask if the pizza’s gotten here, knowing you already smell pizza in the air?”

Terrance shrugged, “It might be the anticipation of pizza that makes me smell it like it’s already here.”

I rolled my eyes, “Whatever.”

“Never mind, I see it.” He then walked past me into the kitchen area to grab a slice. The pizza was half pepperoni, half Italian sausage. Terrance knew better than to take any of the pepperoni side. That was my half of the pizza. What I didn’t eat right then was going to be my lunch the next day.

So, Ash,” Terrance said through a mouthful of food, “Dad tells me we’re going to be having company tomorrow. What’s up with that?”

“He’s Mr. Barter,” I answered matter-of-factly. “Only the most awesome substitute teacher I’ve ever met. I invited him over so he could meet Daddy.”

I heard Terrance swallow the pizza he had been chewing on. “Oh, like when a girl takes her boyfriend home to meet the parents?”

“NO!” I yelled while hurling one of my unsharpened pencils at him. He stuck a hand out and caught it in midair, gave me his “it’s mine now” shrug and stuck it in his robe pocket.

“I know what you’re trying to insinuate, and it’s wrong. He’s a teacher, and I’m a high school student. The idea is simply ridiculous and a little perverted, if you ask me.”

I looked at him, and he had a devilish grin on his face.

“What?” I asked him indignantly. He walked over to me, until we were a few inches apart.

“Ash and teacher,” he started chanting, “sitting in a tree,” I couldn’t believe this boy was saying all this stuff, “F-U-C...”

I quickly socked him in his arm. There was no way I was letting him finish what he was going to say.

“Ow!” he yelled. “You didn’t have to hit me so hard. I was just playing.”

“That’s your problem, Terrance,” I said, “you play too much.”

“Well, dang,” he said, “if it bothers you that much, I’m sorry I said anything.” He started rubbing his arm, and added, “It just seems to me that you’re really hung up over this cat, and he ain’t nothing but a substitute teacher. I mean, if it was, like, Marvin Harrison or Lebron James or even your boy Bow Wow, I could understand, but just a substitute teacher? Come on.”

I still couldn’t believe I was getting into this with my little brother, of all people. “Oh, like you don’t tell me and your friends how much you like girls like Alicia Keys or Nia Long.”

He shrugged, and went to the cupboard to pull out a box of his favorite cereal, Peanut Butter Crunch. I don’t see how he can eat that stuff. My favorite cereal is Lucky Charms. Daddy hardly ever buys it, but Grandma always has a box of it at her house for when I come around to visit or spend the weekend. Mom used to always tell Terrance not to eat his breakfast food at any time other than breakfast, but he never listened. Now he even uses his allowance to buy his own Peanut Butter Crunch, so he can eat it whenever he wants. Once he started doing that, Mom gave up on discouraging him, and now she just bugs him about cleaning up his crumbs when he’s done eating.

“Yeah, I think they’re pretty,” he said as he shoved a handful of peanut butter corn puffs into his mouth, “but you don’t see me getting all obsessive about them, do you? I didn’t even buy the last Alicia Keys CD when it came out. Mom and Uncle Del told me that there’ll be plenty of girls like that for me after I’m rich and famous, so I’ll worry about girls after I’m in the pros.” Look at him. Not even out of junior

high, and already talking about being in the pros. I had half a mind to tell him just how small his chances were of getting into the NFL, but Daddy always told me to support my brother's dreams. Of course, he never bothered telling me why.

"I am not hung up over my teacher!" I yelled. "You just don't understand how it is being a black student at an all-white high school. You don't even understand how high school is like."

He shrugged. "How much different could it be from junior high? You go to class, you go to practice, you come home and do your homework, you go play your game on Saturday. What's so different?"

I shook my head. "It's just different, okay? You just don't understand how it is with me and Raziël—"

Terrance made a face. "Raziël? Is that your teacher's name? Since when did you start calling teachers by their first name? Is it that bad?"

I couldn't say anything. I just grunted. He walked over to me and grabbed my shoulders. "Sis, you know me. You know I'd go to war for you, despite all the times you be getting on my danged nerves. I have never seen you bugged out like this over anything, much less one of your teachers. I'm just a little concerned for you, that's all."

I shook him off and started towards my room. "Well, don't be. I'm doing fine. I know exactly what's going on."

I heard him say behind me, "That's exactly what I'm concerned about."

I left the kitchen mumbling under my breath, wondering why Terrance couldn't have been my sister instead of my brother. I mean, Daddy says brothers are cool because they will fight for you if somebody ever tries to hurt you, but I personally would have rather had a sister. You know, someone I could talk to about stuff that's important to me. Someone I could share secrets and clothes with. Someone I can get manicures and pedicures and makeovers with. Someone I could watch Gabrielle Union movies with without them saying how boring the movie is or complaining about how bad it makes men look. Or even worse, watching them drool over how pretty they think Gabrielle is and

talk of all the perverted stuff they would do to her if they could go on a date with her. That really annoys me, by the way. In any case, the only people in my family I can talk to about girl stuff are my Aunt Terri—who doesn't really count because she's only a few years younger than Mom—and my cousins, most of whom are girls. And actually, Mom wouldn't even allow me to talk to some of my cousins. She said she had some "issues" with the fathers of those particular cousins, and she would explain what was going on to me when I was a little older. Whatever.

I had gotten halfway to my room, when the thought came to me to ask Mom and Dad if they were going to be able to make it to my track meet that Saturday at Northwestern Edison. I figured I should go ahead and ask them at that moment, before they headed out to celebrate their anniversary. I knew that on some weekends Mom and Dad are too busy to make it, with Dad coaching peewee football and Mom occasionally having to work weekends. I didn't mind, because it didn't happen often that neither one could make it to my meet, but I liked to know what the deal was beforehand, so I wouldn't feel let down if they couldn't make it.

I took a detour from my room and slowly approached theirs. I try not to knock too loudly. I don't want to just barge in and interrupt whatever they're doing in there. Heck, for all I knew, they could've been in there making that sister for me, and I certainly didn't want to stop them from doing that.

I slowly crept to the door, and was about to knock. I had actually balled up my fist and was in the motion of putting my fist on the door when I suddenly stopped. I was hearing voices from the other side. It seemed as if Mom and Dad were talking to each other. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not a nosy person by any stretch of the imagination, but I couldn't help feeling a little curious. I was wondering if they were talking about me. I slowly, gently moved my hand away, and placed my ear on the door instead.

"Keith," I heard Mom say, "I'm worried about her. I mean, have you seen the way she's been acting lately?"

Then I heard Dad say, "It's natural, sweetie. She's a young girl

who's starting to take the first steps to becoming a woman. She's trying to branch out, and find her place in the world." I was shocked. They *really were* talking about me! They must have been.

"I don't like it," Mom answered, "She could be putting herself in a lot of danger..."

"There's danger everywhere, sweetie."

"I guess you're right." A heard a rustle of sheets. "Am I wrong, Keith? Am I being too hard on her? I just want to protect her."

I was thinking, *Protect me? Protect me from what?*

"I know, Patricia," Dad said. "Don't get too bent out of shape over it. You're concerned, just like any other normal parent would be. It's natural."

"But I've never seen her behaving this way before. She's never been this rebellious." Rebellious? How the heck could she think I was being rebellious? She was the one who was giving me a hard time! Just because I wasn't being her little robot, she considered that rebelling? That didn't sit well with me at all.

"That's because she's never been a teenager before," I heard Dad say. "These are the years where she will try to discover her own identity and develop her sense of self. You remember what that was like, don't you?"

"How could I forget?" Mom sounded really sad and really angry at the same time, like Dad had touched a nerve when he said what he said.

I could have sworn I heard Daddy mumble "I'm sorry" to Mom before saying a little louder, "Are you afraid that what you went through will happen to her?"

"How could I not be?" I heard Mom snap back. "She's acting all lovey-dovey over a substitute teacher who hasn't even been in her life for more than two weeks! That guy could be a child pornographer, for all we know." I took exception to that. I think I'd know a child pornographer if I saw one. Her voice softened up, "Keith, if anything ever happened to her..."

"I know, sweetie. I feel the same way. All we can do is keep trying to guide her, and keep praying for her and Terrance. God will watch over them until they find their way. He helped you find yours, right?"

Mom sounded like she was pouting. “I still don’t like how she’s acting around this guy. It’s too close to what happened with me. Way too close.” Now I was curious. What happened to her that was so bad? Of course, there was no way I could ever find out, because if I asked her, then she’d know I had been listening in on their conversations, which would spell instant T-R-O-U-B-L-E for me. I guessed I’d just never know.

Daddy said, “But we’re going to do everything we can to make sure that never happens again, right?” A pause. Mom must have nodded, because he then said, “So we’re going to have a little more faith, right?”

“Keith,” Mom whimpered, “every time I think of what happened, it still hurts. I thought God was supposed to take the pain away, but it still hurts.”

“Come here,” Dad told Mom. I heard a rustle of sheets, and then Dad said, “I know it hurts, honey. The scars of what happened that night might not ever go away for good, but don’t ever think God isn’t healing you. Heck, if he wasn’t healing you, I might not be here with you, and the children would definitely not be here. So God is healing you.” God was healing her? Healing her from what? Was it that bad? Then for some weird reason I remembered a family reunion we all went to at Forest Park when I was little. I can’t remember much, but I do remember Mom acting weird for the whole time; acting really shaky, a little jittery, and snapping at people who tried to talk to her, especially a few of my uncles. I think Dad was trying to talk to her the whole time, but she just kept acting hysterical, until Dad had to take her home alone, and Grandma had to drop me off at home later. It was the strangest I had ever seen Mom behave back then, almost as strange as what happened on the highway. I was starting to wonder if that incident at Forest Park could have something to do with what Mom and Dad were talking about.

“Remember when we first got married,” Daddy said, “and on our first night together you said how safe you felt in my arms?” He paused. Mom must have nodded. “Do you feel safe now?”

“Yes.”

THE LEOPARD MAN

There was silence for a few seconds, and I was about to leave and go on to my room, but I heard them start talking again. I couldn't tear myself away from that door.

"Patricia," Dad said, "did I ever tell you the real reason why I joined the police force?"

Mom answered. "Countless times. But honey, you can tell me again."

"Well, after what happened to you that night, I had decided that there was no way I would ever let that happen to you again. Or to anybody else, for that matter. My badge is my promise to keep you and everybody else I love safe from the evils that this world throws at you. No matter what, I am here for you, and I will never leave. Ever. Do you understand that?"

I barely heard a weak "yes" from Mom.

"You know I love you, right?" I heard from Daddy, just as weak. "You're my world."

"And you are the sun," Mom said. "I love you, too. More than you'll ever know..."

Okay, they were starting to get mushy, so that was my cue to leave. I decided to just leave a note for them on the kitchen table the next morning about who was going to be at my track meet. I finished a geology worksheet that was due the next day and then changed into the Mardi Gras pajama shirt that Aunt Terri bought for me last year. I went to bed wondering what Mom and Dad were talking about a while ago, and I couldn't get it out of my mind for the rest of the night.

I was so excited the next day; I could barely contain myself. Mr. Barter was coming over to have dinner with me! Nothing that went on in school could dampen my spirits that day. Track practice breezed by, and I couldn't wait to get home. Mr. Barter was actually coming to have dinner with me! Was that awesome news, or was that awesome news?

I barged into the house barking orders. "Is everything ready?" I blurted. "He'll be here in a couple of hours, so we don't have much time to get things ready!"

I walked into the kitchen to see Dad cooking some of his famous T-bone steaks on his George Foreman grill, and Mom had just joined him to put the finishing touches on some mashed potatoes, candied yams and collard greens she had been cooking prior to picking me up. Aunt Terri had donated a pound cake she had baked the night before, which we already had set on the dining room table.

“Good, good,” I said when I saw them cooking, but then I noticed something was amiss. “Where’s Terrance?” I asked with great concern. The last thing I wanted was for that knucklehead to start acting like a knucklehead in the middle of my dinner and making me look bad in front of Mr. Barter.

“He’s hanging out with your Uncle Bryce over at Grandma’s,” Mom said with a smirk while seasoning her greens. “Did you want him to participate in this dinner? We can call him if you want, and I think your Aunt Terri can still bring him over in time.” Very funny, Mom.

I shook my head and started looking around the den. “The house hasn’t been cleaned yet!” I roared. “Do I have to do everything myself?” I added, before seeing what I was looking for: Mom’s Rainbow machine. For a while Aunt Terri’s husband did a stint as a salesman of this machine that he said “cleans everything in your house using water—even the air you breathe—without getting anything wet.” I thought he was just saying that as a sales pitch, but when he actually showed it to us, we had to have one. It’s this really cool thing that looks like a miniature coffeemaker, but filters all of the dirt, allergens and pollutants out of the air with this small bucket of water. It also came with a bunch of attachments that allowed us to clean our drapes, couches, beds, tables, chandeliers, carpet and refrigerator coils. Daddy was a little skeptical until Aunt Terri’s husband attached the hose from the Rainbow to Daddy’s brand new Kirby vacuum cleaner and turned both machines on. We were all amazed that the Rainbow pulled all of the air out of the bag on Daddy’s Kirby! It was pretty cool.

So I grabbed the Rainbow out of the broom closet and filled the water basin with cold water, then I attached it to the Rainbow and put a few drops of deodorizer in the water to take the smell of Mom and Dad’s cooking out of the air. After that, I started going through the

house, starting with the den/dining room/kitchen. First I cleaned the blinds, the tables, the entertainment system and the ceiling fan with the dusting attachment. Then, I put on the upholstery tool and cleaned all the couches and lampshades, as well as Daddy's La-Z-Boy. After that, I used the long hardfloor attachment to clean the tile floors of the dining area and kitchen area around Mom and Dad, and I finished by attaching the power nozzle and going over the carpet in the den. By the time I was finished, the water in the Rainbow was this thick, dark gray mud that looked disgusting but smelled like the deodorizer. I ran to the bathroom to dump it out in the toilet, making sure not to touch any of the sludge that was in that water basin. After that, I rinsed it out, and restored the Rainbow. It was paramount that the house looked presentable for when Mr. Barter arrived.

Six o'clock came before I knew it, and Mr. Barter was at the door right on time. I ran to the front door as soon as the doorbell rang, opening the door and flashing Mr. Barter the biggest smile I could muster.

"Hi, Mr. Barter!" I said. "So glad you came."

He stood at perfect attention at the door, like Daddy said he had to do when he was in the army. He looked really nice, wearing a trench coat over a gray S. Carter sweater and blue khakis. I opened the door wider and gestured for him to come inside.

Once he was in, I ran behind him and took off his coat. "Let me get that for you," I said as I put it away. Then I led him to the dining room/den/kitchen, where Mom and Dad were waiting at the table. They had smiles on their faces, but I thought Mom's smile looked forced. In the back of my mind I was saying, *Please do not mess this up, Mom. I won't forgive you if you embarrass me.*

"Mr. Barter," I said as soon as we entered, "you've already met my Mom, but this is my Dad. My brother is away at another engagement." To Dad I said, "Daddy, this is Mr. Barter, the substitute teacher I told you about."

Dad stood up and reached a hand out to shake Mr. Barter's hand. They clasped hands and Daddy said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Barter."

“Likewise.” Mr. Barter said. I was so proud. My Daddy was meeting my teacher! It was cool.

“My Dad’s a sergeant in the police department.” I added, “He was promoted just a month ago.”

“That’s wonderful!” For some reason, Mr. Barter’s voice sounded different when he said that, and the broad smile he had on his face before then wasn’t nearly as broad. Did what I said make him nervous? Why would Dad being a police sergeant make anybody nervous? I figured I was just being overly observant.

“I’m sure Mr. Wilson here is excellent at his job,” Mr. Barter said.

“I try,” Dad replied with a shrug. “I just do what I can to protect the innocent, and make sure the thieves, rapists and killers get what’s coming to them.”

“Right.” Did Mr. Barter sound a little uneasy when he said that? Nah, I must have been mistaken.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Mom had gone over to the kitchen area to get the food and was nodding her head to get my attention. I nodded back: whenever she did that when company was over, it meant one thing.

“Food’s ready!” I said to Mr. Barter. “So, what would you like on your plate?”

Within minutes, the four of us were sitting at the dining room table eating.

“Mr. and Mrs. Wilson,” Mr. Barter said with a pleased look on his face, “this dinner is excellent! I haven’t eaten food this good in a long, long time.”

Mom smiled cordially. “I’m glad you like it. Keith cooked the steak.”

Mr. Barter gave an emphatic thumbs-up and said, “My compliments to the chef.” I thought it was kind of cute that he did that.

Mom sliced a morsel off of her steak before looking up at Mr. Barter and asking, “So how long have you been in Flint?”

Mr. Barter waited until he had finished chewing and swallowing some steak before answering. “Actually,” he said, “I just came here

when I was called in to sub. I was looking for work, and a friend of mine got me hired within the school system. Ultimately I would like to get myself established here in the city, and maybe try to get a full-time teaching position somewhere in the area.”

Mom said, “That’s very admirable of you.”

Mr. Barter shrugged modestly. “I try.”

Daddy stirred some pepper into his mashed potatoes and said, “Well, I think you are doing a good job as a teacher. My wife tells me how Ashlynn is learning so much from you in class.”

Mr. Barter shoved a forkful of greens in his mouth and made a face like he was in ecstasy, then replied to Dad. “Well, Mr. Wilson,” he said, “I believe that teachers have a responsibility to challenge their students. Young people in general are reluctant to learn anything that they don’t feel they can actually use in their lives. That’s why you see so many young inner-city children neglect school and get into the drug trade. They feel that the school system is trying to ingrain in them skills that are obsolete in the worlds they live in. They want to know how to make lots of money now, and they feel that our school system can’t or won’t teach them those skills.

“Our responsibility as teachers is to make the lessons and knowledge we offer appealing to them, so they may see the usefulness of learning this information, and they can not only absorb the knowledge, but also put it to practical use in their lives.” He took a bite of macaroni and cheese. “I believe this will encourage learning, and that is the approach I take when I teach my classes. I apply what I teach to the issues that my students are currently dealing with, and I make it fun for them.” That made a lot of sense to me. You do have to give kids some kind of motivation to pay attention in class. I thought Mr. Barter did a masterful job of that, though. After all, he got me interested, didn’t he?

Mom swallowed some greens and said, “Ashlynn tells me that you were living up north for a while. How was that like?” I could tell by the look on Mr. Barter’s face that he did not enjoy hearing that question. I wondered why. He bit his bottom lip and frowned, as if the question was really troubling him. I was furious. Why did she have to

open her big mouth? Great: she was going to make Mr. Barter upset. I vowed to never forgive her if she embarrassed me in front of Mr. Barter.

It took a few seconds for Mr. Barter to answer, but eventually he did. “It was a pretty...complicated situation that led me to move up there,” he said. “I wasn’t too fond of living up there, actually. If it were up to me, I would never go back.” He paused a little before adding, “Um, do you guys mind if we change the subject? It wasn’t a pleasant experience, and I’d rather not talk about it.” Mom and Dad nodded, and I was determined not to give Mom another chance to make Mr. Barter feel uncomfortable.

“So, Mr. Barter,” I said as cheerfully as I could, “what made you choose Flint over other places to stay at?” I thought that was a pretty good conversation question to ask. I was pretty proud of myself.

Mr. Barter shrugged and simply replied, “This was the first city to hire me, honestly.” So much for great conversation.

Mr. Barter must have seen how I felt, because he quickly added, “Also, I figured while I was here in Flint, I’d look up an old friend that I knew who I heard had moved here. Thought maybe we could catch up on old times.” He then cut off a bit of Dad’s steak and slid the morsel into his mouth. After that, he washed it down quickly with a drink of punch. I was amazed at how fast he drank the whole cup. It was as if he hadn’t had punch in years.

“This old friend of yours,” Mom said between mouthfuls of potatoes, “have you known him or her for very long?”

Mr. Barter nodded. “We go way back.”

Mom smiled, “You know, I know some people who work for the county; maybe they can help you find your friend. Is it an old business partner, an old lover?” I had to look at Mom funny. Why was she asking these questions?

Mr. Barter looked down at his food and mumbled, “I’d rather not say. Thank you, but I think I can find my friend on my own.” Way to go, Mom. She had made him upset again. After that, I was definitely not forgiving her.

We spent the next few minutes eating in silence. Mr. Barter ate like

this was the first time he had ever had any home cooking. I thought it was a little peculiar, but then I remembered that Mom and Aunt Terri's cooking usually had that effect on people. I spent a lot of my time glaring at Mom.

After a while, Mr. Barter leaned back in his seat, wiped his hands with his napkin and threw the napkin onto his plate—the telltale sign that a person is finished eating. “Well,” he said, “I am stuffed. This has been an excellent dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson. I have to depart because I have a...business...meeting to attend, but I totally appreciate your hospitality.”

Of course, Dad wasn't finished eating. He placed another slice of Aunt Terri's pound cake on his plate, then looked up at Mr. Barter and smiled. “Oh, don't worry about it! Ashlynn thinks very highly of you, so that makes you a welcome guest in our home.”

Mom stacked up all of the empty dishes and took them to the kitchen area. While putting them in the sink and pulling out some Tupperware for the leftovers she asked, “Would you like to take any of this food home with you, Mr. Barter?”

Mr. Barter rubbed his hands and nodded emphatically. “I would like that very much, Mrs. Wilson.”

Well, at least she offered him some food to take home, so it wasn't a complete disaster.

Mom gave him a little of everything on a Styrofoam plate that she wrapped in Saran Wrap. Meanwhile, I went to the closet and pulled his coat out. I was so furious at Mom. How could she embarrass me like that? Now I had to apologize to Mr. Barter for her behavior. “Well, Mr. Barter,” I told him as I approached him and handed him his trench coat, “thanks for coming by and having dinner with us. I'm sorry about how my parents acted...”

He cut me off with a laugh. “Ashlynn, there's nothing to apologize for! I found your parents to be very delightful, and I enjoyed them just as much as I enjoyed you. Your mother is an awesome cook, and your father is a very intelligent, astute man. It's not hard to see why you've been so successful at school. You come from good stock.”

“If you say so,” I said with a shrug. Then I changed the subject, “Hey, I rented the movie of *Romeo and Juliet*, the one with Leonardo Di Caprio. The first time I saw it was a few years ago, on television. I didn’t understand anything about it back then, but since we’ve started reading the play, I checked the movie out again, and I understood a lot more about what was happening.”

Mr. Barter chuckled. “Well, Miss Missy, if I am able to enhance at least one of my students’ movie-going experiences, then I know my teaching will not have been in vain.” Miss Missy must have been a pet name he called women and girls he felt comfortable around. I liked it when he called me that.

“I’ll see you in class tomorrow, Mr. Barter,” I said as he walked out the door. He smiled and waved goodbye, and I closed the door behind him, smiling back.

That smile vanished as soon as the door shut. I remember frowning as hard as I could, my hands balling up into tight fists. Mom had made me absolutely furious. What made me even madder was that I couldn’t really do anything about it. I had been trained so deeply in that “respect your elders” and “honor thy mother and father” crap, that I didn’t even really have it in me to tell them about it whenever they crossed the line; at least, that’s what I think. I marched to the dining room table to clean it up. Mom was already there, wrapping up the last of the leftover food to put in the fridge. I made sure the frown stayed on my face while I grabbed the last of the plates to take to the kitchen.

Mom seemed nonchalant about the whole deal. It was almost as if she had deliberately intended on embarrassing me that night. I wouldn’t have put it past her.

“Well,” she quipped, “I think that went pretty well, Ashlynn, don’t you?” I paused for a moment and gave Mom a scowl. Now she was mocking me. I remember thinking she must have taken great pleasure in ruining this night for me. It was probably a vendetta for me giving her a hard time about going to Bible study.

“Your teacher seems like a pretty nice man.” She wasn’t even looking in my direction as she talked. I wanted to make eye contact with her so she could see how mad she had made me. But now she

was avoiding my gaze. I assumed she already knew. “He’s very intelligent and articulate, but I expect no less from a teacher. He’s also pretty charming: I can see why you like him so much.”

I didn’t say anything. If she thought so well of Mr. Barter, then why the heck didn’t she act like it while he was here? That made me even angrier.

“I still think you would be better off not getting too close to him, though,” she added. “He’s a busy man, and you obviously have your own issues to concern yourself with. Having a healthy relationship with a teacher is an awesome thing to have, but there is such a thing as overkill. And besides, he’s just a substitute, right? You don’t want to get too attached to a guy who won’t even be around that long, right?”

She took a cloth with some Pledge on it and bent over the table, wiping up some loose crumbs where the breadsticks were. Her head was bowed, so her long, black hair hung off of her head like black drapes. After a few seconds, Mom skittishly rose her head back up in my direction and said, “Doesn’t that make sense, Ashlynn?”

NOW she looks me in the eyes. I saw that taunting look on her face, like she wanted me to contradict her so she could “set me straight.” I didn’t intend on giving her the satisfaction. I thought she wanted a fight. Well, I wanted a nice dinner with my parents and Mr. Barter. I guess we can’t all get what we want. So, I decided at the last minute not to say anything that might start a fight. I gave up: I heard the saying “you can’t beat city hall,” and I think it applies to parents, too. I would change the saying to “You can’t win an argument with Mom.” I fought off the urge to roll my eyes, and grunted off a “Sure, Mom,” before grabbing the plates and getting out of her presence as soon as I could.

I put all the dishes in the sink and poured in a glob of Dawn. Mom and Dad insist on using Dawn for dishwashing. They say it’s the only thing that really works. I let the suds fill the entire left half of the sink before setting the plates in, then the bowls, then the cups and finally the silverware. Then I snatched the washcloth from on the faucet and began scrubbing the silverware as hard as I could. I had to take all of that frustration out somehow.

A few minutes later, I felt massive, muscular arms wrap around my shoulders, and I didn't feel as angry anymore. Daddy's hugs have a way of doing that to me.

"When's the last time I told you I love you, Ash?" he asked with a wide, toothy smile.

"A couple of days ago," I replied. I couldn't help smiling back at him.

"Well," he said, "I'm telling you now. You have no idea how proud I am to have two children as wonderful as you and Terrance. When other people say how wonderful you two are, that just confirms what I already know to be true." Daddy always tells Terrance and me how proud he is of us. I never tire of hearing him say that, either. I was curious about something, though.

"So?" I asked Daddy. "What do you think of him?"

He took a step back, like he had forgotten about the disastrous dinner we just had, but it was just coming back to mind. He shrugged, and gave me one of his nonchalant looks. "Seemed like an okay guy to me." He then wiped a couple of fingers across his chin and added, "He did seem a little secretive about his past, though."

"Oh, that's nothing," I said to reassure him. "I'm sure everybody's got a skeleton or two in their closet that they don't want to talk about." I smiled. He didn't.

"Yeah, Ashlynn," he replied, still wiping his chin, "but there are skeletons, and then there are SKELETONS. Big, fossilized, dinosaur skeletons. Skeletons that belong in a museum, not somebody's closet." I didn't know what to say to that, but then Daddy said, "But aside from that, he seems okay. I couldn't get a read on anything particularly off about him, and I read people for a living." That reassured me. If he was okay by Daddy, then he must be okay.

"Yeah," I concurred, "so what's up with Mom? Why is she tripping so bad?"

Daddy looked back at me, intrigued. "What has she said?"

"Well, she said she didn't like him." With one hand on my hip, I waved the other in the air. "She said something about him was off, but she couldn't tell me exactly what. That's probably why she was acting

so weird at dinner.” I folded my arms and grunted, “I just don’t get her sometimes.”

Daddy looked down on me and smiled. He seemed amused at me for some reason. But then the smile quickly vanished as he said, “You know, sweetie, she may be on to something.” My jaw dropped. I turned and looked at Dad with complete disbelief. How could he take her side so easily?

“I always thought your mother had a gift for discerning the spirit of a person. I think it comes from all that time in church, but she can just TELL if something’s wrong with you just from meeting you. It amazes me sometimes.”

That’s when it occurred to me. Of course he would take her side. She’s his wife.

Dad smiled warmly and patted me on my head. He always does that when he sees me pouting. “Oh, don’t be like that, sweetie,” he said. “You’re a good girl, and you know your mother and I are proud of you. We trust your judgement, and whatever you do, we’re behind you.” I had to ease my pout a little when he said that, but then he added, “And it’s not like the guy’s doing anything inappropriate to you while you’re with him, and not telling us.” Daddy raised an eyebrow. He always did that when he was unsure of something. “You *would* tell us if Mr. Barter was doing anything like that to you, right?”

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “Dad,” I grunted, “I’m fourteen years old. I’m not a baby anymore. If he even tried to touch me like that, of course I’d tell you... after I punched him in the face. I don’t play that—”

Daddy backed off a little, and raised his palms towards me. “Hey, just making sure. But seriously, if your mother has a bad feeling about this guy, then you should pay attention to that. You know how women are with their intuition, because you’re going to be a woman yourself. In fact,” he stroked his chin one more time, “I think if you keep following this guy around, you might regret it later.”

Something in what he said rang a bell. I squinted and asked him, “What did you just say, Dad?”

Dad probably thought I just didn’t hear him. I often overhear him

talking to Mom about how me and Terrance never listen to them. He repeated what he said, but much slower. “I said,” he said, “that if you keep following him, you might regret it.” I was shocked at what he said. I knew I had heard that line before, but I couldn’t pinpoint where or when. He added, “So just be careful, okay?” and I nodded.

Daddy looked down at his watch. “I’ve got to go to work,” he grumbled, then he wrapped his big arms around me and kissed me on my forehead. I love Daddy’s hugs. I just feel a little safer when he hugs me. “Now,” he said, “you be a good girl and don’t get into any trouble, okay?”

I nodded and said, “Okay, Dad,” as he let go of me.

chapter 6

I had this dream. I was in Africa, the motherland. I don't know what country, but I was in a village, tending to some children. I had on this beautiful red and gold robe that wraps around my body. I remember liking how it blows in the wind. I used to wear one of those gold choker things around my neck, but this time around I had taken it off. My hair had grown out, and was in braids. I walked barefoot, but yet I felt no discomfort.

I looked up from one child and I saw a man enter my town. I remember seeing him before. He is an unbelievable sight, tall and thin, muscular and majestic, onyx skin shining with sun and sweat, covered in a leopard skin tunic. He walked through my village in silence, hands behind his back, looking at everything with what seemed like intrigue or wonder. Every woman who saw him swooned. I could hear them all whisper to each other of how they would like to have such a man choose them as his bride, and what they would do for him if he made that choice. I watched his stride, slow, deliberate and confident, and I felt the same way the other girls felt. He looked my way, and I yearned for him to speak to me, imagining his voice as deep and powerful. He said nothing and continued walking, eventually leaving the village. I knew that he did this on a regular basis, about once a month, and I decided not to let him pass by anymore. I decided to go after him and tell him how I feel.

I told a child a few years younger than me that I will be back shortly, and I ran after him. I asked him to stop, or at least slow down, then I

begged him to. About a mile away from the village, he did stop. He turned around and looked at me. I think it's a look of sorrow or pity, but I paid it no mind.

"Beautiful maiden," he said, his voice deep, resonating through me, making me quiver, "you have no place out here. Please go home." I shook my head. "No," I tell him, "You are a magnificent man, and I am in love with you. I will never leave your side, and I will follow you wherever you go."

I saw sorrow in his hazel eyes. "Follow me," he said with a sigh, "and you will regret it."

He continued traveling, and I followed him for miles, through plains and deserts, to the entrance to a forest. He stopped and turned back at me, his voice still somber, pleading with me. "Beautiful maiden, you have no place out here. Please go home." I once again told him that I loved him, and I would follow him wherever he went. His eyes had the same sorrow as he repeated, "Follow me, and you will regret it."

He made his way deep into the forest, so deep that I couldn't tell where the forest began or ended. I was right behind him. At last, he stopped at a large tree which I thought was at the very center of the forest. On the ground in front of the tree was another leopard skin, much like the one he had been wearing. I looked up from the leopard skin and I saw him standing before me, naked. He was not ashamed of his nakedness, nor was I ashamed to see it. He bowed his head, and slowly crouched, all the while singing in a melancholy baritone.

I couldn't quite make out the words, but the melody was sad and hypnotic.

By the time his song was done, there was no man before me, but a savage leopard, who snarled at me and looked with murder in his eyes. I was terrified. I turned and ran as fast as I could, trying to retrace my steps and make it back to the edge of the forest. But I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings when I followed him into the forest, so quickly I became lost. I did not stop running, though, as I hear the leopard's footsteps and snarling breath right behind me. He got close enough for me to feel his hot, steamy breath on my back when I woke up.

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A glooming peace this morning with it brings;
The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head:
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things;
Some shall be pardon'd, and some punished:
For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and Romeo.

We had just finished reading *Romeo and Juliet*, and I was pretty impressed with how good the story was. I probably wouldn't have ever taken that much interest in it if not for Mr. Barter, and I practically said as much when we were discussing it in class.

"I think this illustrates how love can conquer everything," I said. "The Montagues and Capulets both had these hateful prejudiced ideas about each other, and yet Romeo and Juliet were able to see past that and find love for each other." I leaned back in my chair and tapped my chin with my ink pen, like Daddy does when I see him trying to do the family's taxes. "I think that proves that love is the one human emotion which is truly pure and strong enough to overcome all."

Mr. Barter gave me a sly grin, like he had just caught me saying something I shouldn't have said. He was wearing some dark blue Dockers and this dull orange dress shirt which almost reminded me of the top of a prison uniform. "Maybe," he said, "but look at the after-effects of what this supposed love has done." He stood up and walked around in front of the class, addressing all of us. "First and foremost, it drove Romeo into a situation which killed his best friend Mercutio, and drove him to murder Tybalt, Paris and later himself. This supposed pure emotion drove Juliet to deceive and plot against her own people and eventually stab herself. What may be more important, though, is that this love drove both Romeo and Juliet to break their family traditions and the rules set by their parents. So if their supposed love for each other is so much stronger than their love for their parents that they would outright defy them and their rules, then was a love like this really a good thing for either of them? And remember, these two star-crossed lovers were no older than any of you. Had they succeeded in running away together, they may have been ill-prepared to deal with

the harsh reality of their world.” He paced around and tried to look all of us directly in the eye. “Laws protecting adolescents in the working world were not introduced until well into the twentieth century. There were many countries up until then that worked children to death. In fact, Japan had a profession called ‘geisha.’ It was nothing more than a prostitution ring, where little girls had their virginity sold to the highest bidder around the age of 12 or 13.” Wow. None of us had anything to say to that. I didn’t know whether I was more shocked, disturbed or disgusted, but what Mr. Barter told me did not put any pleasant thoughts in my head. Mr. Barter continued. “Think about it. If you supposedly love somebody to the point where you’re willing and eager to disregard the greater, more established love you already have for your own family, then what does that say about the stability within your family structure, and what does that say about your own character as a person?” The entire class stayed silent. I guess none of us knew how to answer that.

Mr. Barter just walked back to his desk and sat on it like he normally did, smiling at us, waiting for one of us to answer, probably knowing that none of us would. It was a very uncomfortable twelve seconds that passed before the bell rang.

“Tell you all what,” he said as we all got ready to leave, “I want you all to think about that question tonight and write your answer in a two-page essay, which will be due Monday. Class dismissed.”

I was one of the last to leave the class, and as I walked out, I saw Heather and her prissy clique standing next to the door. I decided to pay them no mind, and I kept walking to class.

I had to slow down a bit, though, when I heard Heather talking to her friends behind me.

“There goes Juliet,” she said mockingly, “The school’s next great lesbian...” She deliberately said loud enough for me to hear. I had to stop and look back at her for that

“Oops,” she said in a mock apology once my eyes met hers, “I meant great thespian. Silly me.” I had half a mind to go back there and tell her off, but I remembered Dad telling me not to let any of the students

here get to me, and I kept thinking, *She's not worth it, Ash, she's not worth it.* I had to repeat it a few times in my head for me to be able to just roll my eyes at her and turn to leave.

I couldn't take one step before I heard her again. "Well, personally, I don't see why he allowed *you* to read that role anyway. That part was obviously not written for people like you. Maybe he was just being nice to his new girlfriend." I heard her prissy clique giggling. I stopped again. People like me? Now she was just asking for it. I slowly turned around and walked back up to that blond-haired, blue-eyed so-and-so, trying to decide what to say to her. Should I have addressed her little issue with a black Juliet? Nah, that's probably what she would have wanted me to talk about. She did say something about me being the teacher's girlfriend, so maybe I should have mentioned something about the different "boyfriends" she had in her other classes doing all her homework for her and helping her cheat on exams. Nah; knowing her, she probably would have been proud of that. No, I had something better than that, and I waited until I was almost nose-to-nose with her before I said it.

"You know, Heather," I told her with a smirk, "You sound real convincing, telling everybody in the hall how much of a problem you have with Juliet being black. But come on, that's not the real issue, is it? I know the real reason why you're so upset." I leaned in just a little closer to her. Oddly enough, all of the commotion going on in that hallway had died down. Had everyone stopped to listen in on my little conversation with Heather? Good.

"The real reason you're so mad," I said as calmly as I could, "Is that the teacher simply thought I was better suited for the lead role and not you. You played one of the nurses... a bit part, at best." I gave her my warmest smile, even as I saw the venom building in her eyes. She gave me a hard look, but instead of answering me, she started seething, probably trying to think of a comeback.

And that was just my wind-up.

I backed off on my way to class, raising my voice a little so everyone could hear me, "But hey," I said, "Don't feel bad. Being an inferior actress is nothing to be ashamed of! Maybe, if you're real nice,

I can teach you some acting techniques. Or then again, maybe you can just get by using a couple of your . . .” I looked down at her chest, “other talents. It’s not like you haven’t done that before, right?” As I heard a chorus of “oohs” from the rest of the hall, I delighted in seeing the eyes of all the girls in that prissy clique—especially Heather’s—wide open and all their jaws—especially Heather’s—dropped to the floor. I smiled at them one last time and even winked and politely waved at them before turning and walking away. The black student I passed by offered me a high-five for sticking it to the girl like that. Gabrielle Union would have been proud. Heather, consider yourself socked.

Surprisingly enough, neither Heather nor her prissy clique said anything to me for the rest of the day. I felt pretty contented with that. My uncle Del once told me that “Seventy percent of people who pick on you or bully you just think you’re an easy target. Show them that you’ll bite back if bitten, and they won’t bother you nearly as much.” I asked him about the other thirty percent, and he replied, “Those people are just looking for a fight. If they want a fight that bad, then give them one, but do it on your terms, with the odds stacked in your favor.” He recommended I check out two books which would help me deal with bullies and people in general: *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, and *The Prince* by Machiavelli.

“And, no, not THAT Machiavelli,” I remember him telling me. “I’m talking about the ancient renaissance writer, not the dead rapper.” I’m glad he mentioned that, because that’s exactly what I thought when he mentioned that name.

The rest of the day was pretty uneventful, except for lunch, when Calvin finally sat with me and we ate our lunch together. He was very nice, and it was pretty easy to like him. He had an anecdote that related to everything I told him I was interested in, and it was really fun talking with him. He was a bit of a geek, though. He seemed to know everything that was going on with all the latest movies. Not that it was a big deal, but he knew a little bit more about the behind-the-scenes stuff than anybody else I knew, with the exception of maybe my Aunt Terri’s husband. But he’s a geek, too. A lot of kids around my school—

namely, kids like Heather—thought that any sign of geekiness was uncool and should be avoided at all costs. But I didn't mind; I actually thought Calvin's geekiness was kind of cute. He said he would come to see me at my next track meet, if his job at Meijer's didn't call him in to work. I thought it was cool that he had a job at such an early age. It would be nice to have a little part-time job so I wouldn't have to rely on Daddy so much to buy me what I want. The problem is that I'm so involved in extracurricular stuff that I can't fit the time in for a job.

After school, I picked my books up, said goodbye to Timtoya, and waited near the front of the school for Mom to show up. She was usually pretty punctual, but this time around she wasn't waiting for me when I got to the front door. I thought that was peculiar. So I sat on the steps, and while the other students walked around me rushed over to their respective buses, I reached into my duffel bag and pulled out my notepad and started writing the essay that Mr. Barter wanted us to write while I was waiting. Nothing major, just some ideas on what I wanted to talk about and how I would word my answer. I had been thinking about his question for the whole day, and I had a few theories. In fact, I thought his whole point about abandoning one's family was moot. After all, doesn't Mom's Bible say that a man should put aside his old family to start a new life with the woman he loved? But as soon as I started scribbling that down, I started thinking of Tesenga. Her father did that to her, in a sense: he put aside the family he had already set up to start a new family with his new wife, and had started neglecting Tesenga. Maybe I had the scripture wrong: maybe I could ask Mom what the verse actually said, and what part of the Bible it was from. I'd ask her as soon as she arrived to get me, which should have been any time now.

Fifteen minutes passed, and still no sign of Mom. Where could she be? I started to wonder if this was how Tesenga felt when her father left her stranded that day Mom and I picked her up. Nah, it couldn't have been as bad as that. Tesenga was waiting for him for at least an hour. I hadn't been waiting that long. Still, I didn't want to wait that long for Mom to show if I didn't have to.

"Hello, Miss Missy," I heard behind me. Only one person ever

called me “Miss Missy,” so that could be only one person. “I thought you’d be on your way home by now.”

“Hi, Mr. Barter,” I said without looking up at him. “I’m just waiting for Mom to come for me. She’s a little late.”

He looked intrigued. “Really? Well, how late is a little late?”

I shrugged. “Only fifteen minutes, but it feels like forever.”

“Wow,” he said, a look of astonishment on his face. “Well, I’m about to head out. If you need a ride home, I’d be happy to take you.”

Whoa. Mr. Barter was offering me a ride back to my house? That was so cool! If anything, that would really show Mom and Dad that he was an okay guy. It would also make Mom look really silly for being late to pick me up.

“Really?” I was really excited that he offered me, and I’m sure it showed. “That would be AWESOME!”

“Now,” Mr. Barter said cautiously, “your Mom and Dad won’t mind me taking you home, will they?”

“Nah,” I said as I packed my duffel bag up and stood up. “They probably forgot to pick me up anyway. Let’s go!”

Mr. Barter took me to his car, parked out in the parking lot in front of the school. It was an all-black coupe, a Mazda from the looks of it. It looked pretty nice, but it was a little beat up from years of wear and tear. And were those bullet holes on the door? I couldn’t tell, and I didn’t ask. I was just happy to be getting in the car and riding off with Mr. Barter.

Once we were on the road, he smirked, and looked back at me.

“Hey, I’m hungry. Are you hungry?” I was so busy talking to Calvin at lunchtime, I didn’t eat very much, so I nodded. “Do you like McDonald’s?” he asked. Of course, I nodded. I mean, who doesn’t like McDonald’s? Well, my Aunt Terri doesn’t, but she’s extra picky about where she eats anyway, so she doesn’t count.

He smiled at me and asked, “Your parents wouldn’t mind if we stopped to get a bite to eat, would they?” I shook my head. I didn’t think they’d mind. After all, it was my teacher, and he was nice enough to give me a ride home from school, so it shouldn’t have been a very big

deal, right? “Good,” he said. “Let’s go to this one down the street, my treat. Okay?” I emphatically nodded. McDonald’s is always good to eat, especially if someone else is paying for it.

We pulled up into a combination McDonald’s and gas station at the corner of Carpenter Road and Saginaw Street. It used to be an old, run-down Amoco until some Middle Eastern guys bought up the area and renovated it. My Grandma had an issue with that, mainly because some black people tried two times before to buy the property, but they got denied both times. My Grandma thinks it’s a conspiracy. I don’t know enough about what went on to judge either way.

We parked, went inside and ordered our food. I had a double cheeseburger, a small Sprite with no ice and a small order of French fries. I told them to hold the tomatoes and onions. I don’t like either of them. It’s something I inherited from my Mom. He ordered a double quarter pounder meal, with extra fries, a vanilla milkshake and two apple pies. I guess he must have been used to super-sizing until McDonald’s phased that out. I never understood what the big fuss was all about. Daddy told me they phased it out because people were threatening to sue them over their obesity. I think it’s sad that people aren’t taking responsibility for themselves and are blaming the food companies for making them fat. The food companies made the food and advertised the food, but didn’t all of those fat people have the option to not buy the super-size fries? It’s not like anybody put a gun to their head and ordered them to pig out all of the time, and it’s not like they were addicted to the food, like it was some sort of drug. Those people are just fat, lazy and irresponsible. I’m smarter than that, though. I know I have a big appetite. I got that from my Dad. But I’ve been trying to control my diet, and I exercise a lot from being on the track team. In another year or two I expect to look something like Serena Williams. After all, she’s got a big nose, too.

We sat at a table towards the front of the restaurant. Mr. Barter insisted we sit near one of the doors, because “You never know what can happen.” He sounded a little paranoid, but I just chalked that up to people’s eccentricities. As we ate, he didn’t talk much. He just dove right in to his food. He ate so fast, it was like he was inhaling it. I used

to eat like that, but both Mom and Dad told me not to. Mom said it was “rude and uncouth” to eat like that, and Dad said that if you eat fast, you’re more likely to get fatter. Dad’s reason resonated more with me than Mom’s, partly because I was young, and at the time I didn’t know what “uncouth” meant.

While he was gorging himself on his food, I occasionally heard Mr. Barter mumble to himself between big mouthfuls. He muttered stuff like, “Oh yeah, that’s the spot right there,” and, “I missed this so much...” I was starting to wonder what he missed so much about McDonald’s. I mean, there’s one everywhere, right?

He must have seen the face I was making, because he then said, “You just don’t understand, Miss Missy. When you’re away for a long time and on a fixed diet, you start to really miss things like a simple McDonald’s double quarter pounder meal with extra fries and a vanilla milkshake with two apple pies. I want to enjoy every bite of this as much as I can.” He then took another hunk out of his sandwich and chewed with ecstasy, gleefully humming a McDonald’s commercial song I recognized from when I was about six years old. I was still a little unsure what he was talking about, but I didn’t press the matter. He had called me “Miss Missy,” and I liked it when he called me that.

Just as we were finishing our meal, I heard a tune coming from Mr. Barter’s direction. If I remember correctly, it was “Jailhouse Rock,” by Elvis Presley. I was surprised. I didn’t know Mr. Barter liked Elvis.

He reached down near his waist and pulled up his cell phone. It was definitely a Motorola. One of the new ones, too, with the color screen you can play video games on. My Aunt Terri has one like it, but it’s a Nokia.

The minute he turned that phone on, it was like I wasn’t even in the same building as him.

“Yeah, what?” he said, his voice becoming harder than I was used to hearing from him. “Have you scoped the spot out yet?” A pause, and his face scrunched up. “What do you mean, you couldn’t get around to it? What is so important that you couldn’t take five minutes to scope the spot out?” Another pause. “Look, I don’t care one iota about your baby mama drama. I will not be denied this. Do you hear

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me?” Another pause. “Good. I’m going to go ahead and scope out the spot myself. You just make sure you have the equipment ready.” He made a move to turn off his phone, but stopped, and said into it, “And DON’T mess this up!” He hung up, and I was astonished. I had never heard him that forceful before. It was actually kind of cool to hear him be that authoritative. It reminded me of Daddy when he’s coaching peewee football on Saturdays in the summer.

As soon as he put the phone away, he looked back at me with a warm smile and asked, “So, you ready to go?” I smiled back and nodded.

On the way to the car, Mr. Barter looked back at me and said, “If you don’t mind, Ashlynn, I’d like to take one more, small detour. I won’t be long.”

I didn’t see any harm in it, so I said, “Sure.”

He grinned and said, “Thank you. I just want to check something out.”

A minute later we were in his car and on our way. I noticed we were going away from the highway Mom normally takes toward my house, and going back in the direction of the school. I was wondering where he was taking me, but I wasn’t too worried. After all, this was Mr. Barter, my English teacher, not one of those random psychos you see in the educational videos warning kids not to talk to strangers. I trusted him completely.

We got back on Carpenter Road, but as we approached Powers High School, he turned down Dupont Street. We rode down Dupont for a while, until we reached a huge area of trees, about as long as five city blocks. He slowed the car and pulled into a patch of dirt right in front of the trees. He got out of the car, and I followed him. From our vantage point, it seemed as if the rows and rows of maples, birchwoods and oaks went on forever in every direction. It would be a strange sight to anyone unfamiliar with the area: a large wooded area of pure nature in the midst of the cold, manmade city. But I knew this place well. It was Forest Park.

“Just give me a minute,” Mr. Barter said. He walked back in forth

in front of the park. From the look on his face and the expressions he was making with his hands, I assumed he was taking mental notes for some reason. He did a lot of nodding, and a lot of wiping his left hand across his chin, like he was doing some mental calculations. After a few minutes of this, he walked back to me, a satisfied look on his face.

“Yes,” he was saying, “this will do. This will do nicely.”

“This is your first time at Forest Park?” I asked him. “My family had a family reunion here a few years back. It’s a pretty cool place to hang out at, I guess. My mom doesn’t like this park, though.” That’s when I remembered Mom telling me I should never go near this park alone. Ever. She was really emphatic about it, too. I felt kind of bad, but then I figured I wasn’t there alone. I did have Mr. Barter with me, right? I was sure he wouldn’t let anything bad happen to me while I was here with him.

“No, Miss Missy,” he said, “I’ve never been here before. I do like the park, though, especially that part over there.” He pointed to a clearing of nothing but tall weeds.

“That’s the marsh,” I told him. “My Daddy says it’s a wildlife conservatory, and not a lot of people are allowed access there.”

He grinned, and mumbled, “Perfect.” Then he just stood there for a while, staring at the marsh. It was a little creepy watching him stand there silent like that.

Then, without warning, he turned to me with a smile and asked, “Ashlynn, have you ever been double-crossed?”

Now it was *really* creepy.

“Uh, no, Mr. Barter,” I said, unsure of where he was going with that question. “At least, not to my knowledge. I’ve had some people do some sneaky stuff behind my back—”

“Nah,” he said, “I mean *real* double-crossing. Like when you trust somebody to do something for you, and then they turn around and betray your trust deliberately. Like, if I just up and stranded you here after I promised to take you home, you wouldn’t like that, would you?”

Why would he say something like that? Now I was extremely uncomfortable. “Certainly not,” I said.

He nodded, and added, “You’d want retribution for me leaving you like that, wouldn’t you?”

THE LEOPARD MAN

I was still uncomfortable, and I still didn't know where he was going with this. I had to shove one of my hands in my pockets to keep from clasping my other hand. Mom always tells me that I fidget and wring my hands when I'm nervous, so I've been trying to stop. I didn't want to be stranded at Forest Park, so I went along with him.

"I guess," I said.

"That's exactly how I feel, too." He rubbed his hands together as he talked. "When somebody betrays you, then it's only proper for you to take revenge against them, right?"

He looked down at me. I don't know how I was looking at him, but I'm sure there was concern on my face. I had never seen him like this in the two weeks I had known him. It was disturbing, to say the least.

"Yeah," he said as if I had agreed with him, "I think so, too. If somebody betrays me, then it is my natural right to seek revenge against that bastard." He concentrated his gaze on the forest ahead of him. "But it can't be just any revenge, oh no. It has to be a revenge that matches the same magnitude of the betrayal. It has to be a revenge that is well-planned and well-executed. It has to be a revenge that leaves a mark."

He looked back down to me as if I actually enjoyed hearing him talk about taking revenge on somebody.

"See, I've heard often," he said, a disturbing enthusiasm creeping into his voice, "that revenge is a dish best served cold. I used to disagree with that sentiment, but over time, I have begun to appreciate the idea. You see, the average revenge killing or gang retribution or something like that only involves taking a life for a life, but there's not any real impact in that. All the person knows is that you're out to get them. What you really want to do is make them understand exactly why they brought this retribution on themselves for their betrayal. Then, and only then, is the revenge complete." He paused. He then looked back to the forest, seeming to have again forgotten that I was right next to him as he continued his soliloquy. "I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong."

He chuckled again, as if he had just remembered I was next to him, and said, “Edgar Allan Poe, *The Cask of Amontillado*. It was one of my favorite stories while I was up north. The pacing of the story is so deliberate, and the wording is so vivid, it’s as if you were right there living the action with the characters. I would read that story at least once a day for the entire time I was up north. I’ve practically memorized it.”

I still didn’t like his tone of voice. I couldn’t put my finger on what I didn’t like. Maybe it was how passionately he talked. I mean, he talked with passion about Shakespeare, but this is a different kind of passion: an obsessive kind of passion. Being near him was really uncomfortable right then. I wanted to change the subject really bad.

“So, Mr. Barter,” I asked as nicely as my nerves would allow, “you said you were at school up north for a while. Where exactly did you attend?” I smiled up at him. Maybe he went to Northern Michigan or Central Michigan. I had a friend who went to Central. He didn’t stay up there for longer than a year. There is a casino in the same city as the school, and he blew all his tuition money on blackjack and roulette.

“WHY THE HELL DO YOU WANT TO KNOW?” his roar startled me, making me shrink back a little. Mr. Barter sharply turned his head, leaned down at me and gave me a menacing glare. His eyebrows had bunched up into a furious scowl. His eyes had narrowed into slits. His nostrils had flared up. His mouth was a tight frown and I could tell he was clenching his teeth under his lips. His cheeks were bright red, and a vein I had never seen before popped out of his forehead, pulsating like it was about to explode and shower blood all over me. His breathing was heavier. I couldn’t help cringing a little bit. That was the most terrified I had ever been to that point, even more than when I accidentally broke one of Daddy’s high school football trophies while fighting with Terrance.

“I,” it was hard for me to get the words out, I was so frightened, “I just thought I might want to enroll there after I graduate from high school, that’s all.”

His face relaxed a little, thank God. “Oh,” he said while straightening up and trying to regain his composure. “Well, Ashlynn,

I don't think you'd really want to enroll in the institution I went to. It's an obscure little place that you've probably never heard of, and they are very selective in their admissions process."

He turned back and looked at Forest Park. "It's also an all-boys school. I learned a few things while I was up there, but trust me, I would certainly not like to go back." He looked back at me with a grin. "The cost was just a little too high for my liking." He seemed more amused at himself for what he said, like he had just told some inside joke that only he understood the punchline to. I'd be lying if I said it didn't creep me out.

"But I digress," he added. "It's getting late. I really should be getting you home I just wanted to," he looked up at the sky, as if searching for the right word, "survey your lovely park. I like it. I like it a lot. Especially that marsh. Let's get you home."

It took about twenty minutes for him to take me home. I didn't say anything to him for the whole trip. I finally spoke once he got to my house. As I left the car, I thanked him for the ride, and walked to the front door. I was a little surprised to see both the Lexus and Daddy's Durango in the driveway. Usually the Durango is gone because that's the vehicle Dad takes to work. Maybe something happened, and that was why Mom didn't show up to get me. I started to get a little concerned.

I entered the house and closed the door behind me. I was thinking about taking my books to my room, but I decided against it, instead opting to try to find Mom and Dad and see what was going on. The first place to look was the dining/kitchen/den area. I turned right, and took a few steps into the room. There in front of me, sitting on the couch and staring at me, were Mom and Dad. Neither one of them looked too pleased to see me. The television was turned off.

Mom sat sprawled out over the couch, one leg on the cushion, the other one hanging off of the edge. She was turned sideways, actually facing Dad more than me. Her left arm was stretched across the couch behind Dad, and her right hand was rubbing her temples. She glowered at me with eyes full of rage. I braced for a fight.

“Ashlynn,” she roared, “where were you? I was calling the school for the last forty minutes trying to find you.”

I couldn’t believe the nerve of her. She was the one who was late! How was she going to get on my case, when she was the one who was late?

“You didn’t show,” I said nonchalantly, “and Mr. Barter offered me a ride home from school, so I rode with him.”

“And you didn’t think to call home to see what was going on?” I was going to tell her that I assumed she was going to be there, but then I remembered them telling me to call home if there were any problems with them picking me up. Mom continued, “I called the school to have them tell you I was running a little late and was on my way, but they told me you had already left with somebody. How do you think that makes me feel to hear that you’ve walked off with some stranger.”

Mom was overreacting, and I needed to tell her. “It wasn’t some stranger, Mom, it was Mr. Barter.”

Mom’s growl intensified. “I don’t care if it was the President of the United States! You don’t run off like that unless you talk to us first!”

I gave her a hard look. Maybe if she had shown up on time, then this would never have been an issue.

“Ashlynn,” I was so caught up in staring down Mom that I could barely hear Dad calling my name softly. The hard look softened as I turned my attention towards him. He sat on the edge of the couch, his face resting on his fist, his elbows resting on his knees. He was in his cobalt blue policeman’s uniform, which looked freshly steamed and pressed by Mom. He had a distressed look on his face.

“Ashlynn,” he said again, “do you know what stereotypical kidnappings are?”

Oh no, I thought, *he was worried that I might have been kidnapped*. I just lowered my head and said, “No, Daddy, I don’t.”

“They’re abductions done by a stranger. In these kidnappings the abductee is transported fifty or more miles, held prisoner overnight, and then either ransomed off or killed. Sometimes both. Do you know who the most frequent victims of these kidnappings are?”

I couldn’t say a word. Daddy’s look burned a hole through me.

“Teenage girls, Ashlynn. Teenage girls like you.” His voice had intensified. He just sat there, wringing his hands, looking at me. I wanted to die.

“Did you know that last year 840,279 missing persons were reported?” He looked away and gave that frustrated grunt he normally saved for when Terrance made a bad play in one of his football games. He looked back at me and said, “Would you believe that between eighty-five and ninety percent of these missing persons were your age?” He paused and started looking at the floor. “Did you know that about half of all juvenile victims of stereotypical kidnappings are sexually assaulted? And did you know that just here in Michigan, there are 1,589 missing juveniles currently reported?” I heard Daddy’s voice shaking. If it were at all possible to hang my head any lower, I would have.

He looked back up at me frowning. Daddy had never frowned at me before. “Well? Did you?”

I couldn’t say anything. I just choked back a sob and slowly shook my head. He looked to the left and exchanged a grave glance with Mom, then continued through gritted teeth.

“See, Ashlynn, when your mother and I give you rules to follow, those rules are there for a reason. We spend all of our time trying to think of ways to protect you from all of these robbers and drug dealers and perverts and Lord knows what else, so that you can spend more time enjoying your youth, and less time watching your back.

“We told you and Terrance when the school year started that if you’re not on the bus, then you ride home with nobody but us. Period. If any situation comes up where you might have a doubt, you have your mother’s cell phone number and mine. If we’re late coming for you, or if somebody comes up to you and offers you a ride home, you call us and let us know what’s going on, and we’ll tell you what the deal is.”

Daddy looked away and made a face. It was like he was struggling with something he wanted to say, as if he really didn’t want to say it, but he had to. Whatever it was, I know I didn’t want him to say it.

He looked back at me and growled, “You disobeyed us, Ashlynn.

You showed no respect for our authority over you as parents, you put us through a lot of grief and you put your own life in serious danger. We were about five minutes away from filing a missing persons report on you.”

He gave another grunt and stood up. He walked towards me, and it was like an angry giant coming at me to take me away. This is how Terrance must feel when he costs the team a game. I gulped.

Daddy walked past me and grabbed the door. He didn't turn the knob. I heard him behind me, saying, “Now I have to go to the precinct and explain to the officers why their sergeant is late for work.” I didn't want to turn around to face him, but I did. Daddy looked as if I just broke his heart, as if he could burst into tears at any moment. I've never seen Daddy cry before. Not ever.

“I'm really disappointed in you, Ashlynn,” he whispered, before opening the door and walking out. I watched him leave, wanting desperately to run after him and beg for his forgiveness. I wanted to throw my arms around him and say, “Daddy, I'm so sorry,” as many times as I needed to for him to forgive me. I had never felt so low in my entire life.

I started closing the door, and then I heard breathing. Heavy breathing. I turned around, and Mom was standing right in front of me. Her legs were spread wide apart and one of her hips was thrust way out. Her arms were folded on a heaving chest and there was nothing but rage in her eyes. As low as I had felt when Dad left, I felt that much lower.

“You don't have to say anything,” I grumbled as I tried to walk past her, “I feel bad enough already.” She took a step sideways, and she was right in front of me again. I didn't look up.

“I'm going to my room, Mom,” I said. “I don't want to be any more trouble, so I'm just going to go do my homework.”

“Since when did you have the right to dictate anything to me?” Mom was hissing. I hate it when she hisses. “The last time I checked, I gave birth to you, not the other way around.”

I didn't say anything.

“Now, what you’re going to do,” she was still hissing, “is walk over to that loveseat over there, and sit down.” She stepped aside and pointed at the loveseat in the corner of the living room, in front of the plasma TV. “You and I have some talking to do.”

I still didn’t look up at her. “Yes, Mother,” I growled, and I walked over to the loveseat.

As I was walking, I heard Mom say behind me, “The robot walk, again? You’ve been doing that since you were five years old, every time I sent you away to do something for me and you didn’t want to do it. It wasn’t cute then, and it’s not cute now. Sit.”

I sat. I stared directly ahead instead of looking up at her.

I did notice that she took her hand and ran it through her long, black hair. She always does that when she’s upset.

“Oh, I get it. When Daddy’s around you want to be all nice and submissive and ‘yes daddy this’ and ‘yes daddy that,’ but all of the sudden it’s okay for you to give a bunch of attitude towards your mother? Is that how you’re playing it, Ashlynn?” I didn’t want to dignify that question with an answer. I just stared ahead, while she folded her arms and added, “Let’s get something straight, young lady: I don’t care how cute or how smart or how nice this Mr. Barter is to you, he is not the one putting a roof over your head or food on your plate. He is not the one who’s been watching over you, raising you and protecting you for your entire life. And I will be damned if my daughter is going to disobey me for some man, when she ain’t even old enough or mature enough to take care of herself!”

I was shocked that Mom cursed. I don’t remember ever hearing her curse before. Actually, I was even more shocked that she used the word “ain’t.” I looked up at her, and could tell she wasn’t done. “You’ve been really pushing it over the last couple of weeks, ever since that man started teaching at your school.”

“Pushing it?” Now I was getting heated. I rose out of my seat and looked Mom in the eye. “Pushing what? Aside from today’s incident, when have I ever not done something you asked me to do? I’ve always been your perfect little daughter, going everywhere you told me to go, doing everything you told me to do, obeying your every little

command,” I knew she didn’t want to hear what I was going to say next, “just like a little robot.” As I saw her reaction, I nodded to show her I meant what I said. “Yeah, Mom, a robot. You’re acting like I can’t make any decisions on my own.”

Mom shook her head. “That’s not true.”

“YES IT IS!” I felt my eyes watering. I took a couple of steps back to try to compose myself, then said, “Mom, I know I’m not grown yet, but at the same time I’m not the little girl who needed to hold your hand. I can make some decisions on my own, and I want to think that over the years I’ve earned the right to do that.”

I wrapped my arms around myself. It was hard saying what I was saying, but I had to let her know. “I’m not trying to defy you or rebel against you or anything. I just want you to cut me some slack, and let me figure some things out on my own.”

Mom’s look got steely, and she replied, “The problem with that, Ashlynn, is that I’ve already made some of the decisions you’re trying to make, and I’ve already figured out what you’re trying to figure out. I know the path you’re trying to take, and I know where that path leads. You don’t see it, you can’t see it, but I can, and I do.” She gritted her teeth. “And I will not let you destroy yourself. Not while you’re under my roof. When you’re old enough to take care of yourself, then you can move out and do whatever you want to do. But right now, I am directly responsible for you, and I have to keep you safe until you *are* old enough to move out and do whatever you want. And you’re just going to have to trust me.”

She waited for my response. Seconds passed. “Do you trust me, Mom?” I whispered to her.

Her steely look didn’t change. She slowly shook her head again, and said, “No. I don’t.”

I had to close my eyes to fight off the tears. That hurt. All these years of obedience and following her every command without question, and she still didn’t trust me? That hurt. That really, really hurt. My eyes still felt watery, but I opened them anyway. I made sure I was looking her in the eye when I told her, “Then I guess there’s nothing else to say.” I was trying to burn a hole in her with my look.

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I was shocked, angry, frustrated and heartbroken, and I wanted her to see all of that in my eyes. I don't know if I pulled it off. She didn't have to tell me what was coming next, I already knew.

I wrapped my arms around myself even tighter and walked by Mom as calmly as I could. I walked down the hallway to my room. On television, I would see teenage girls get into arguments with their parents, yell irrationally at them and slam the door to their room in their faces. I never thought I would be one of those girls. I walked into my room, but I didn't slam the door. I didn't even close it. I went to my television and disconnected my DVD player. I set it aside, and stacked all of my DVDs on top of it. I went over to my bed and unplugged my phone, then placed my phone on top of my DVD player, also. I picked everything up and carried it to the kitchen/dining room/den, where Mom was still standing. We didn't say anything to each other. I set my DVD player, phone and DVDs down on the dining room table, and looked Mom in the eye once more. We looked at each other for about five seconds. We didn't speak.

I turned around and walked back towards my room, picking up my duffel bag on the way there. I entered my room, softly closing the door behind me. I felt like a part of me had just died. I sat on my bed, reached into my duffel bag and pulled out my schoolbooks and homework. I started reading my world history book, but it was hard to concentrate on what I was reading. I had to close my eyes and try to shake off what I was feeling.

It wasn't long before I heard a muffled sound coming from outside my room. It seemed as if the sound was right outside my door. I paused and listened. I thought I heard sniffles, or sobbing. I felt the warmth of my own tears as they streaked down my face.

I half expected to hear a knock on the door.

I didn't.

I wondered if I should open the door.

I decided not to.

chapter 7

I had this dream. I was in Africa, the motherland. I don't know what country, but I was in a village, tending to some children. I had on this beautiful red and gold robe that wraps around my body. I remember liking how it blows in the wind. I used to wear one of those gold choker things around my neck, but this time around I had taken it off. My hair had grown out, and was in braids. I walked barefoot, but yet I felt no discomfort.

I looked up from one child and I saw a man enter my town. I remember seeing him before. He is an unbelievable sight, tall and thin, muscular and majestic, onyx skin shining with sun and sweat, covered in a leopard skin tunic. He walked through my village in silence, hands behind his back, looking at everything with what seemed like intrigue or wonder. Every woman who saw him swooned. I could hear them all whisper to each other of how they would like to have such a man choose them as his bride, and what they would do for him if he made that choice. I watched his stride, slow, deliberate and confident, and I felt the same way the other girls felt. He looked my way, and I yearned for him to speak to me, imagining his voice as deep and powerful. He said nothing and continued walking, eventually leaving the village. I knew that he did this on a regular basis, about once a month, and I decided not to let him pass by anymore. I decided to go after him and tell him how I feel.

I told a child a few years younger than me that I will be back shortly, and I ran after him. I asked him to stop, or at least slow down, then I

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begged him to. About a mile away from the village, he did stop. He turned around and looked at me. I think it's a look of sorrow or pity, but I paid it no mind.

"Beautiful maiden," he said, his voice deep, resonating through me, making me quiver, "you have no place out here. Please go home."

I shook my head. "No," I tell him, "You are a magnificent man, and I am in love with you. I will never leave your side, and I will follow you wherever you go."

I saw sorrow in his hazel eyes. "Follow me," he said with a sigh, "and you will regret it."

He continued traveling, and I followed him for miles, through plains and deserts, to the entrance to a forest. He stopped and turned back at me, his voice still somber, pleading with me, "Beautiful maiden, you have no place out here. Please go home." I once again told him that I loved him, and I would follow him wherever he went. His eyes had the same sorrow as he repeated, "Follow me, and you will regret it."

He made his way deep into the forest, so deep that I couldn't tell where the forest began or ended. I was right behind him. At last, he stopped at a large tree which I thought was at the very center of the forest. On the ground in front of the tree was another leopard skin, much like the one he had been wearing. I looked up from the leopard skin and I saw him standing before me, naked. He was not ashamed of his nakedness, nor was I ashamed to see it. He bowed his head, and slowly crouched, all the while singing in a melancholy baritone.

*I walk between lives,
of man and of beast.
my sin is my sentence,
my life is my loss,
a life has been taken
by my savage hand.
Now nature has cursed me
one day every thirty,
to walk as the man
and suffer his pain.*

*but I am a leopard
who knows of no mercy,
and woe to the foolish
who tempts me again.*

By the time his song was done, there was no man before me, but a savage leopard, who snarled at me and looked with murder in his eyes. I was terrified. I turned and ran as fast as I could, trying to retrace my steps and make it back to the edge of the forest. But I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings when I followed him into the forest, so quickly I became lost. I did not stop running, though, as I hear the leopard's footsteps and snarling breath right behind me. It seemed that at any moment he would overtake me, but terror kept me from stopping. I reached the top of a hill, and just as the leopard jumped at me, I stumbled down the hill, rolling and tumbling, barely missing the leopard's gnash. Terror kept me from feeling pain. I quickly rose and continued running, feeling the leopard close at my back again.

I had to stop at a river. I had no idea where in the dense forest I was. The river before me was narrow, but not narrow enough for me to jump across, and much too deep to try to wade through. Its current flowed too swiftly for me to try to swim across. I was trapped. I turned around, and the leopard had slowed down. It stalked me, approaching slowly, deliberately, just as it strode when it was yet a man. It crouched to pounce on me, wagging its rear end, its tail swaying hypnotically back and forth. That's when I woke up.

I actually had a meet that next day, at Northwestern Edison. I think I did okay, but I could have done better. I think part of it was mental. I still had the argument with Mom on my mind, and that may have distracted me a little. Also, I have a tendency to perform better when Mom or Dad comes to my meets, and they couldn't make it because they both had to work. I didn't mind, but it would have been nice if one of them could have made it. Even Mom. Since Dad worked nights and Mom wouldn't get off of work until late, we arranged for me to ride home with Tesenga, who had told me she was coming to watch me

run. Her father said he would pick us up from the meet, and drop me off on the way to dropping her off.

I had just gotten out of the showers and was packing up my things, when Tesenga came up to me. She had on a baby blue and white Rocca Wear jumpsuit with blue Prada shoes and a brand new baby blue North Face jacket that I assumed her father bought for her. She looked nice in it, almost like the sun looks in a blue sky full of fluffy, white clouds. I could never wear an outfit like that, though. I don't think I look good in baby blue.

"Hey," she said, "how's it going?"

"I'm tired," I answered. "I just want to go home, soak and watch a Gabrielle Union movie." I didn't think to tell her that I no longer had any Gabrielle Union movies to watch, "Is your dad there yet? I'm sorry if I'm holding him up—"

Tesenga cut me off, "No, it's not like that. Pa's not here yet. You have some time."

"Well," I said as I zipped my bag up, "I'm ready to go. Where do you normally wait for him?"

Tesenga smiled and pointed towards the front of her school. "Just out front," she said. "Come on, let's go, maybe he'll be there waiting by now."

We left the locker room and made our way to the front of the building. I stopped every few minutes to talk to people who congratulated me on the races, and a few boys even asked me for my phone number! I guess Tesenga was right, after all.

"You were great, you know," she said while we were walking. "You looked like a goddess running out there. You were so powerful and graceful. It was awesome to watch you run."

I shrugged. I didn't think what I did was that big of a deal. "I was okay. I could have done better."

Tesenga looked at me with surprise. "But you were third in the 400, and you helped the relay team win first place. How could you be disappointed in that?"

I shrugged again and switched my duffel bag strap from my left shoulder to my right. Nobody at my school ever carried their

backpacks on both shoulders. It made you look like a dork. I think you were supposed to have it across your right shoulder if you had a boyfriend or girlfriend, and your left shoulder if you were still by yourself. Or was it left shoulder for boys, and right shoulder for girls? I couldn't remember; it changed every year. I just switched shoulders because one of them was getting tired.

"It's not that I'm disappointed," I said as we started walking, "it's just that I know I could have done better. I was probably bouncing as I ran, which Coach said puts stress on my knees, hip and back. I couldn't relax my face. My fists were definitely clenched. I know I was too tense and I didn't relax my face enough, like Coach told me to do. He says that if your face is relaxed when you run, then the rest of you can relax, too. That's why I came in third. And with the relay, we already knew we had the fastest team in the league. We were trying to set a new school record, and we came up about two seconds short. Like I said, I wasn't running right that whole day, so I think that's why we couldn't set the record."

Tesenga's jaw dropped. "So what you're saying is," she said, "is that even you on a bad day is better than most of the runners in the city. Wow."

I shook my head. "Don't make a big deal of it. It's just running."

"Well, watching you inspired me. I went ahead and signed up for cross-country next year. I want to be a runner like you." I really didn't know how to react to that. I mean, it was kind of cool that she wanted to be like me, but I didn't think that anything I did was really that big of a deal to want to emulate.

"Well, I'm flattered," I told her, "but you don't want to run around trying to be like somebody, especially me. Just be yourself. Do what you're good at and what's comfortable with you, and you'll turn out just fine." I couldn't believe I had just said that: I sounded like an after-school TV special.

"Well," she answered, "this is something I need to do anyway. I think I can be a good runner, and I need to get in shape anyway." That sounded funny coming from her. I know a lot of real obese girls who would kill to be as "out of shape" as Tesenga said she was. She then

grabbed me from behind and chirped, "I'm going to follow you! You're my role model."

I made a distressed face at her and retorted, "Girl, I'm no better than you are. You sure you want to follow me?"

We eventually arrived at the front of the school, and we waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Eventually, five minutes of waiting turned into ten minutes. I asked Tesenga if she wanted to call her father. She insisted that he was on his way.

Then, ten minutes turned into fifteen minutes. I asked Tesenga if she wanted to call him. She insisted that he was on his way.

Then, fifteen minutes turned into half an hour.

I looked over to Tesenga, and I saw narrowed eyes, flushed cheeks, flared nostrils and an angry pout. I couldn't remember ever seeing her mad until then.

"I can't believe this," she seethed. Her voice had lowered into a raspy growl.

I thought that maybe I could offer something that could help. "Do you want to try to call him now?" I said.

"Fine." She didn't sound pleased when she said that. I followed her to the nearest pay phone and stood by her as she made the call.

"Pa?" I heard her say. "Why are you still home? We've been waiting here for a half hour for you! Are you on your way?" I noticed her voice rising an octave. "Well, why not?" A long pause and then her voice turned despondent. "Forget it, Pa. I could have walked home by then." Then her voice turned back into the growl. "In fact, that's what I'm doing now. Thanks for nothing." She slammed the phone on its receiver, jarring it into one last "jing" as she stormed off.

"What happened?" I don't know why I asked her that. I guess I was curious.

She didn't look at me. She instead looked directly in front of her with a venomous scowl on her face. "His wife took the car about forty-five minutes before he was supposed to come get me. She apparently told

him she would only be gone for a few minutes.”

“So what now?” I asked.

“We walk.” Her look didn’t change. I could only imagine how she was feeling at that moment. I couldn’t imagine my Dad leaving me hanging like that. I still can’t.

I tried to be helpful. “Maybe we could catch a bus?” I asked.

Tesenga nodded, still scowling, still not looking at me. “The nearest bus stop is across the street,” she pointed to a church across the street from us. “Over there on Fleming Road.”

“How much time do we have before the next bus comes?”

Tesenga looked at her watch. I noticed it was a Hilfiger watch by the little flag symbol on the wristband. “We’ve got about fifteen minutes,” she said.

“Good. I need to make a phone call.”

I didn’t forget what happened the last time I left without calling, so I went to the payphone near the school and left a message on Mom’s voicemail. I told her that Tesenga’s father was a no-show again, and Tesenga was tired of waiting. I was going to walk her home, then catch the bus to Grandma’s house. After I hung up, it occurred to me that I had never caught a bus before.

I caught up with Tesenga as she had started walking to the bus stop.

“Hey,” I said, “about how much is bus fare?”

She shrugged. “About a dollar. Dollar twenty-five if you’re trying to transfer.”

Transfer? That was unfamiliar lingo. “What do you mean by transfer?”

She looked at me with surprise. “You’ve never caught a bus before, Ashlynn?”

I shook my head. “My Mom and Dad always gave me rides wherever I needed to go.”

Tesenga’s voice seemed to perk up a little. She said, “I used to catch the bus a lot with Mom when I was little. We would take the bus to daycare, where she would drop me off, and then a van would pick her up from daycare to take her to Job Corps.”

We waited until a few cars passed before crossing the street, and

THE LEOPARD MAN

Tesenga continued. “When you get on the bus, if you pay an extra quarter, they give you a sheet of paper you can use at the bus terminal downtown. You can use that to get on a different bus that is taking another route without paying the fare all over again. I had an uncle who used the bus to go everywhere. He said that cars polluted the air, and he wanted to do his part to make the Earth a safer place.” She shrugged. “Personally, I just think his credit was too bad to get a car financed.”

We weren’t at the bus stop long before I saw the blocky, white bus approaching in the horizon. Tesenga grabbed my shoulder and said, “Now, this is your first time on the bus, so don’t freak out if you see a few weirdos. Basically, just keep to yourself, try not to talk to anybody, and be on your guard. Oh, and pay attention to your stops. The last thing you want to do is pass by your bus stop, because then you have to get out at the next stop and walk all the way back to where you were supposed to get off.”

The bus arrived, and I paid my dollar to get on, after Tesenga did. I did exactly as she said, making my way to the middle of the bus and sitting next to Tesenga. We didn’t say anything as we sat down. As I heard the pish and whirr sounds of the bus taking off, I couldn’t help looking around at everyone else who was on the bus with us. There was an elderly white lady in front of us who carried a lot of bags and looked really lonely. There was a really heavyset black woman with short hair and a lazy eye behind us, trying in vain to control three little children that I assumed were hers, while at the same time balancing three large grocery bags. I couldn’t help wondering what man would be desperate or drunk enough to get a woman like that pregnant even once, let alone three times. There was a skinny black man who looked to be in his mid-forties or early fifties sitting a few seats down from us. He wore an old, outdated nylon Charlotte Hornets jacket which looked like it needed a wash or five, along with an old, faded Buick trucker cap. He talked nonstop to a teenage boy in front of him, and every time he opened his mouth, I noticed he was missing a few teeth. The teenage boy was wearing braids and a Burger King uniform, rubbing his temples and trying his hardest to ignore the old man

chattering behind him. There were two young white men a few seats in front of us in wife-beater tanktops, which I thought was peculiar since it was not the type of weather for that sort of thing. I overheard them talking of how much baking soda they were supposed to be using. At first, I thought they were talking about cooking, but when they mentioned something about selling two for five, moving their last few ounces and graduating up to keys, then I figured they weren't talking about cooking. I always wondered what drug dealers meant when they talked about selling keys. I would always make a mental note to ask Daddy about it, but I would always forget to ask him later on. When I heard one of the young men talk excitedly about getting his first key, I made that mental note again.

Tesenga and I didn't talk as the bus moved and stopped over and over to let people on and off. The two drug dealers got off at the corner of Dupont and Pierson, and then they just stood there. I thought that was a little strange. A few corners later, a Hispanic guy in a purple Baltimore Ravens jersey got on. He made eye contact with the Burger King worker and jerked his head skyward. The Burger King boy did the same. The skinny man was still talking. About two miles down, Tesenga pointed at a small store and whispered to me, "This is where we get off." She then reached over to a yellow strip near the window and touched it. Next I heard a chime and a mysterious voice that said, "Stop requested." Once the bus came to a stop, the doors near us opened, and we got off.

As we walked off the bus, Tesenga smiled at me and asked, "So, how did you like your first bus ride?"

I shrugged. "It was okay. No big deal, really." I looked back at her and said, "I didn't think any of those people were weird, either. Some of them just looked like they've been dealt a bad hand, that's all. It can happen to anybody."

Tesenga nodded. "That's a good way to look at it, Ashlynn. A lot of people look at people and try to judge them because of what they see on the outside, but they don't know what a person is going through on the inside. I know a girl who made fun of a homeless guy, and called him lazy and worthless and stuff like that."

I agreed. I knew a girl who would do that, too: Heather.

Tesenga continued talking as we walked into the store. “But I’m like, you don’t know what that man has been through. Maybe he lost his job and couldn’t find another one. Maybe somebody slipped something in his drink, and it drove him crazy. Maybe he went through some trauma and nobody helped him cope with it correctly. I told that person not to laugh at him, because you can’t predict what will happen tomorrow. For all you know, that homeless man might be you in a few years.”

I nodded, and grabbed a 99¢ bag of honey barbecue chips from a nearby rack.

We bought some other junk food, and paid for it at the counter. As we left, I asked Tesenga how close we were to her house.

“Oh, we still have a ways to go,” she said. “I just don’t like transferring at that bus station. I’ve heard too many bad things about children getting kidnapped from the terminal and stuff. I’m a little paranoid about it.”

“So how much farther are we going to walk?” I asked.

Tesenga waved her hand, “Don’t worry about it. I know a shortcut.”

I’ve never been a fan of shortcuts, but I trusted her. “Okay,” I said, trying not to sound as uneasy as I felt.

We hit the sidewalk and started heading down towards Stewart Street. Just then, something occurred to me that I always wanted to ask Tesenga, but never got around to asking.

“Hey, I was wondering something,” I said. “I noticed that you’ve gotten really deep into religion over the last year. I still remember when you first went up to the altar and accepted Christ.”

Tesenga looked at me quizzically. “You do? I was actually wondering why you haven’t done the same.”

That threw me off-guard for a second. I was about to ask her a question, and she asked me one instead. “Well,” I said, “I figured I didn’t have to. I mean, Mom had me christened when I was a baby, I go to church every week, and I’ve been in Sunday school for as long as I can remember. I do the communion thing every once in a while, too. I figure that since I do all of this church stuff, then that must mean I’m saved, right?”

Tesenga smiled again, and shook her head. “Sorry, Ash, but there’s no such thing as salvation by default. Just going to church every Sunday doesn’t make you saved. It’s an active choice on your part on who to serve and who to live for. The Bible says you must believe in your heart and confess with your tongue that Jesus is lord of your life for you to be saved.”

This is the deepest I had ever heard Tesenga getting on any subject. She talked to me as if it were a matter of life and death that she made her point. It seemed that if I remembered only one thing from all my years of talking to her, she wanted it to be what she was telling me at that moment. She shook her head and continued, “Being a Christian isn’t just something to do every Sunday because your parents say you have to. It’s a way of life; it’s a set of beliefs that you adhere to, that you base every decision you make in your life from.” She sighed. “Actually, if everyone who claimed to be Christian actually behaved like they were Christian, then this world would be a lot less dangerous.”

Well, that certainly put things in perspective. She wasn’t finished. “It’s a question you really need to ask yourself sooner or later, Ashlynn. Why are you here? What is your purpose? What are you living for? Those things are at the core of everyone’s values and morals. You have to stand for something, and sooner or later you have to choose where you’re going to put your faith. Honestly, if you don’t believe in God, then what do you believe in?” I knew it was a rhetorical question, but I decided to play devil’s advocate and answer.

“Well, I believe in myself,” I said. I was pretty proud of that answer, too.

She looked back at me soberly and said, “And you should. But the time is going to come when what you can do in and of yourself won’t be enough. Who do you place your faith in when that happens?”

I fell silent, struggling for an answer. After a few seconds, Tesenga answered for me.

“That’s the choice I’m talking about,” she said.

Okay, now she was starting to sound too much like my mom. I decided to shift the focus back on her. “So, what caused you to make that choice?” I asked.

Tesenga looked up into the sky as if pondering, and then said, “I think it was about a year ago, right after Pa remarried. His wife and I were first starting to have our problems, and it seemed that he was always taking her side over mine. I was pretty upset, and I talked to Ma about it. It seemed as if he was turning his back on me, and I was really upset about that.”

She took a bite out of her Dove bar, which she had been ignoring while talking to me and was starting to melt, and added, “Ma told me that I should start getting closer to God. If I developed a relationship with my heavenly father, then He would always be there for me, and He would always be on my side, even when my natural father wasn’t. So I started taking church and Bible class more seriously, and I’ve been really making an effort to get closer to God.”

Tesenga took another bite out of her Dove bar and continued. “Just like Ma said, God has really been there for me through everything I’ve been through. Eventually I understood the sacrifice Jesus made for me, and I decided to devote my life to serving him. God has been good to me despite my troubles, and I thank Him every day for His grace and His mercy.”

She grimaced. “But it’s still hard, Ashlynn. Ma works so hard to provide for me, and it seems like the bills just keep getting higher and higher. I see the stress on her face, and it hurts me to see that. But even more than that, all I really want is for my Pa to love me and approve of me. And it really hurts to see that all he cares about is winning the approval of his wife. It’s a tough burden to bear, Ash.”

She looked back up into the sky and added, “Sometimes, when I pray at night, I find myself telling God that if I can’t gain Pa’s approval, then God might as well just take me home to be with him.”

Wow. Those were deep words coming from her, and I didn’t even know she took it that seriously. I even asked her as much. “It’s that serious?”

Tesenga looked at me and nodded gravely. “I know it sounds farfetched, but my whole life is built around Ma and Pa’s support of me. Everything I do is to make them proud of me. Nothing else matters. And for me to try so hard to honor them and for either of them

to reject me...” She shook her head slowly. She seemed almost as shocked to be saying what she was saying as I was to hear it, “It’s just too much to bear, Ashlynn. Much too much to bear.”

Before I could say anything to that, her face lit up, and she pointed the rest of her Dove bar ahead of her.

“Hey!” she said, “we’re near Forest Park!” she ran off ahead of me to cross the street, then looked back at me and yelled, “Come on!” I shrugged and followed her.

Within a minute we were across Stewart Street and standing at the edge of Forest Park. I was a little puzzled, because I thought she told me that she stayed closer to Saginaw Street, which was a bit further to the east than where we were at. I asked her why we were at Forest Park.

“Oh,” she chirped, “this is the shortcut I take to get home when I walk. It’s a lot faster than walking down all those sidewalks.”

I was a bit nervous about that. “You actually walk through Forest Park?” I asked.

Tesenga was nonchalant about it. “Oh yeah. It’s really no big deal. So, you ready to go?”

I hedged a little. I remembered that Mom told me to never go through Forest Park alone. I realized that I did have Tesenga with me, but we were both about the same age, and it was different than going through with an adult. And Mom was really adamant about us not going into Forest Park. It was as if she knew there was serious misfortune attached to this location or something. I didn’t think it was a good idea to go into that park at that time, with it being so close to dusk.

“I don’t know, Tesenga,” I said with uncertainty, “it’s going to start getting dark soon, and I don’t know if it’s very safe to be going through that forest at this time of day.”

Tesenga waved off my concern, and said, “Don’t worry about it. I go through here all the time. We’ll be in and out of this park long before the sun starts setting.” She had a confident look on her face, so I took her at her word.

“Okay,” I said uneasily, “but I still don’t have a very good feeling about this.”

We entered through the dirt parking lot next to a large metal telephone tower on Dupont Street. Eventually we came across a paved trail. I assumed it was for people who wanted to walk around the park or jog or something. Tesenga urged me to turn right, and we headed down the trail, passing a sign that read “Protected Wetland, Do Not Disturb.” It was pretty intriguing. I mean, I knew about the marsh, but I had never seen it up close and personal. It amazed me that this city, my city, was considered important enough to have its own protected wetland. Through the dense branches and leaves above me I noticed light clouds and a setting sun, engulfing what we could see of the sky between leaves and clouds in bright orange-red.

I gazed at the cracks in the pavement of the walking path, and took note of some landmarks we passed by in the park. Among them were a couple of signs, one of which has the word “start” in bold white, and a wooden park bench that didn’t look like it had been sat on too often. I marveled at the colors of fall: the yellows, golds, browns and oranges of the leaves as they floated to the ground. One of the trees we passed by stood out. Its branches hung down, almost as if weighted by the yellow leaves. Its largest limb hung ominously over our path, threatening to fall to the earth, pointing in the opposite direction of the way we were walking. Almost as if to say, “Go back... while you still can.” Maybe I was just paranoid. I had never been that deep into Forest Park without Mom or Dad. We followed the path to a sort of cul-de-sac in the center of the park. The path turned circular with a really green area in the middle that had some unkept bushes and an American flagpole. Nearby was a playground. I actually remember playing there when I was little, during the family reunion. Terrance had just been born, but my Granny on my Dad’s side was babysitting him. We had a pretty good time there. However, if I remember correctly, Mom seemed uneasy the whole time at the park. Dad was at her side the whole time, whispering into her ear. I could have sworn I saw him tell her once, “Relax, honey. I’m here. I won’t leave. This is part of your healing.” But I never understood what he was talking about. In any case, the playground looked run-down this time around. The

yellow swing I remember seeing one of my cousins on was totally missing all of the seats, its yellow paint peeling away to reveal spots of rust. There were yellow benches all around, one next to an old water fountain and a sandbox full of acorns and leaves. There were also a bunch of wooden jungle gyms and a yellow-brown spiral slide. I remember playing on one of those gyms when I was little. It had this wave shape, and had tires on the each side of it. One gym was shaped like a bridge. In the distance, there were some hanging rings, a lookout tower, some steel mushrooms and a cookout center. I never understood the point of steel mushrooms. They don't have any moving parts, there are no ladders attached to them, no slides, no hiding holes or anything. It's just a big mushroom. I guess it's great for little kids who have Smurf fantasies, but I can't imagine the average, normal child finding anything amusing about a giant, steel mushroom just sitting in the middle of their playground. It just doesn't make any sense.

At that point Tesenga turned left, and I followed her past a strange concrete platform. It looked bizarre and pointless among all of the leaves, dirt and grass all over the place. Maybe it was a stage or a foundation for something in the past, but by the time we went by, it was just covered with a big pile of leaves and wood chips. Soon we reached two clearings in the area, and I followed Tesenga down the one on the right. I don't know if it was the sun having started to set, or that we were getting deeper into the forest, but things started getting darker, and the forest was getting a little denser. It was creepy.

I asked Tesenga if she had a flashlight or anything, she said "Like I said, I usually get through the park long before it gets too dark. Besides, once you get a little deeper you will see streetlights inside the park. Don't worry, we're perfectly safe." It sounded like Tesenga was taking delight in having me be the one leaning on her, instead of her leaning on me. I didn't mind, I just hoped that the next time I would have to defer to her, it would be under less creepy circumstances. Much less. As the forest got darker, I started hearing bugs chirping. I also heard scurrying animals in the darkness, in addition to blowing wind and the rustle of leaves all around me. Now it was really creepy. I kicked something that I hadn't noticed, and it took all of my wits to

keep my balance as I stumbled forward. I looked back to see that I had almost tripped on an old tire.

“Pa always told me that he put that tire there when he was a little boy,” Tesenga said. “Him and one of his buddies went hunting in the forest with B.B. guns. They saw this rabbit running around, and they shot at it, just for fun. Well, the B.B.’s hit the rabbit, and it was hurt a lot more badly than they had anticipated. According to Pa, they ran up on the injured rabbit in order to finish it off, and found it huddled near a hole. . .right next to ten bunnies it was guarding. Pa said he and his friend had compassion for the rabbit and took a nearby tire that somebody had dropped. They buried the tire halfway in the dirt, and made that a marker to remind them not to hunt in the park again.”

That was a pretty touching story to hear. I just didn’t want to be one who tripped over their marker.

We walked a bit further, and Tesenga looked back at me and smiled.

“Hey,” she said, “did you ever hear the legend of Captain Bubblegum?”

I thought it was a little weird that she was bringing that up. “I heard of it. Why?”

She smiled, and looked around the park as she walked. “Well, they say that Captain Bubblegum lives in this park, looking for his next victim.”

Oh, that’s why she brought that up. “Really?”

She nodded and said, “Yeah. The story behind him is really creepy, too. From what I heard, this guy named Bobby left his high school prom with his girl, and took her on a romantic walk through Forest Park. But really, Bobby wanted to get her alone so he could have sex with her. She tried to resist him, right? But he got mad and tried to rape her. So the girl threw dirt in his eyes and ran away.”

“Good for her,” I said. Then I started thinking that maybe that was the real reason why Mom didn’t want me in Forest Park, so that guys wouldn’t try to rape me.

Tesenga shook her head. “But it doesn’t end there. See, after she

ran, Bobby stumbled deep into the park, and eventually he tripped on this stone tablet half-buried in the ground. Once he cleared his eyes and read the tablet, it turned out to be, like, an ancient formula for eternal life.”

That was a little bizarre. “So, how did an ancient formula for eternal life wind up in Forest Park?”

Tesenga shrugged and shook her head. “Beats me. All I know is what I’ve been told. So anyway, Bobby took the tablet home and spent about ten years studying it. Apparently, if he collected the index fingers of thirty children while he was in Forest Park, then he would have eternal life. So he sold his house and all of his belongings and moved to Forest Park. Would you believe the first person he found was the woman that he had tried to rape originally? She was strolling through the park with her five-year-old son.”

Wow. This was getting good. “So, what happened next?” I asked, “Did she recognize him?”

Tesenga shook her head again. “The legend never said, but it was ten years later, and from what I was told he had his face done up in some crazy war paint, or something, so I doubt it. Well, Bobby caught her off-guard and stunned her, right? So she’s trying to tell her son to run away, but Bobby told the boy that if he left, he was going to kill his mommy.”

My jaw dropped. “That’s despicable,” I said.

She replied, “You don’t know the half of it. So, according to the legend, he tied the mother up to one of these trees, spread-eagle,” she walked up to a nearby tree and placed her back up against it, then spread her legs as wide as she possible could, “like this. Then, while she was watching helplessly, he started molesting and raping the little boy.”

I’m sure my eyes got wide open when I heard that. “Are you serious?”

Tesenga came off the tree and nodded gravely. “Yup, and all throughout that time, he told the boy that if he screamed or tried to run, he would kill the boy’s mother.”

That was disgusting, and I said as much.

Tesenga nodded in agreement. “And it gets worse. All this time, the mother was begging him to stop, but he wouldn’t, and after a while he told her that if she kept screaming, he was going to kill the boy. So after he was through, he made the boy hold his hand out,” she stuck her arm out and spread her fingers, “like this, and right in front of the boy’s mother,” she made a swiping move with her other hand across her fingers, “he chopped the little boy’s index finger off.”

My jaw dropped again. “So, he let them go after that, right? All he wanted was the boy’s index finger, right?”

She gave me a pretentious look. “Of course not. In fact, after he cut off the boy’s finger, he held the boy in front of his mother, and slit the boy’s throat.”

“Oh my God!”

Tesenga nodded again. “That’s what I heard. Then, after he killed the boy, he ran up and raped the mother while she was still tied to the tree. According to the legend, he told her that he found children more sexually pleasing, and then he stabbed the mother in the gut,” she rubbed part of her abdomen, “right here, I think, and then he let her bleed to death.”

I shook my head when I heard that. “That’s messed up.”

“Do you think I made this up? Anyway, Once he added the boy’s index finger to his old cummerbund from the prom, he felt, like, five years younger. Seeing that the formula worked, he began a thirty-year reign of terror in Forest Park, raping and murdering children, and seducing them to their doom with the promise of candy—hence the nickname Captain Bubblegum.”

She sounded like she had read that last part from a book. That’s when I started to think she was just telling me all of this to scare me.

“You’re just telling me all of this to scare me, aren’t you?” I asked. “There’s not really any Captain Bubblegum in Forest Park. Is there?”

Tesenga shrugged. “I can’t tell you either way. It’s just an old urban legend that I heard. But sometimes, whenever me and Pa were in Forest Park, I could swear I heard the sound of a little boy crying somewhere deep in the forest.” She then paused mid-stride, and looked around the park suspiciously, as if listening for that cry. I

paused right along with her, ready to jump out of my skin if I heard that cry.

Next thing I felt was a nudge on my arm. I really did jump when I felt that. I didn't hear any cry, but I did hear Tesenga's laughter.

"Boy, are you jumpy!" she said, still laughing. "I was just playing with you. You're pretty panicky, you know that?"

So she was just trying to scare me! "That was mean, Tesenga! So there is no Captain Bubblegum at all, isn't there?"

Tesenga held up a corrective finger. "*Au contraire, mon frainre.* The legend is real. Didn't you say that you had heard of it before?" I had to nod. "The legend is very real. But that last part, about hearing the boy's screams, that was just me having fun with you." She smiled. It was always hard to stay mad at someone who had a smile like hers.

I stopped walking, put my hands on my hips and shook my head. "You're unbelievable." Then I started walking again. "But you don't think any of it's true, right?" I'm pretty sure my voice was more than a little queasy as I asked her that. "It's just an urban myth, isn't it?"

Tesenga shrugged, as if none of this was a big deal. "Stranger things have happened. But I don't think it's true. I do see a weird guy around here from time to time, but he never does anything. He just stares at me. I think he's some homeless guy, or something."

That was interesting to hear from her. "How often do you walk through this park, Tesenga?"

She smirked, and kept her eyes on the path before her. "I used to cut through here all of the time when I was younger. It was me and Pa. We used to walk through this park to the Pro Clean across the street to get our Sunday clothes dry-cleaned. He used to tell me all kinds of great stories, and we had a lot of fun together. We walked through the park because Ma and Pa were unemployed and we didn't have a car." She hung her head down and I heard a despondent tone in her voice. "That was before Pa got that big foreman job at Buick City and before the divorce. Now, if I ever have to go through here, I try to go through as fast as I can, so that I won't have to think about how things used to be." That was sad. It amazed me, because in all the time I've known Tesenga, she's never told me much about what

goes on in her family. I didn't know she was dealing with so much. Maybe if I had known, I could have offered her some advice or something. It made me feel bad.

Within a few minutes we passed by a row of trees that had been cut down, with only stumps remaining. They were in all kinds of odd shapes, and they were running across the way we were walking next to a shallow ravine. It must have been some sort of stream, but all the water was dried out. Things were getting harder to see. The sun had started setting, and its light was blotted out by all of the trees. The only real light came from the magenta streetlamps, and I didn't think there were enough of those around.

"There's a science project for you, Tesenga," I mused. "We should do a report on why the water in streams like this one dry up. We could use the ravine here as our test subject."

I looked at Tesenga, who smiled and said, "Wow, Ashlynn, that would be so cool! We could be a team, like Dr. Livingston and, uh..." she contorted her face as if trying to remember something, "...uh, that other guy."

"Yeah, Tesenga," I said while smiling at her, "that other guy."

Tesenga giggled. She had one of the sunniest, most pleasant giggles I had ever heard. It's really high-pitched and really soft, like if someone were playing one high note on a flute really fast. I liked hearing her giggle. "That's why I admire you so much," she chirped. "You always have these great ideas of stuff to do. I want to be more like you."

I bowed my head, closed my eyes and blushed. "Now, Tesenga," I said, "I've told you to stop it with all of that—"

"ASHLYNN! LOOK OUT!" Within seconds of her yelling, I opened my eyes, looked up and stopped in my tracks. A good thing that I did, too: My face was mere inches away from a large elm tree.

I made an embarrassed face at Tesenga. "See?" I said in my best I-meant-to-do-that voice, "For all these smarts you're putting me on a pedestal for, I almost ran into a tree! I'm just human, like you are." We both laughed about it for a few seconds, and then Tesenga led me away.

“Come on, Ashlynn,” she said as she walked away, “We’re almost halfway through.”

A little further into the forest, I asked Tesenga how often she walked through Forest Park to get home.

“Not very often,” she said with a funny look on her face. “I only come through here if, like, I miss the bus or don’t have enough fare. After, like, the third time I walked through the forest, Ma and Pa agreed that it was too dangerous for me, so they agreed to alternate picking me up from school. After a while, it just became Ma picking me up, with Pa picking me up only if Ma can’t do it.”

I regarded her, “Do you think this park is too dangerous to walk through?”

Tesenga shrugged. “I never really put much thought into it. I mean, I see people walking through the forest by themselves, taking walks or jogging. They don’t seem too bothered about being in the forest alone. I figure if I watch my back while I’m in here, I shouldn’t have too many problems.” For some odd reason, I didn’t feel very reassured from hearing her say that.

I decided to change the subject a little. “So,” I said, “the last few times you came through here, what route did you take to get home?”

Tesenga hopped over a thick branch in her way and kicked a clump of auburn leaves in front of her. “Well,” she said, “I normally enter from Dupont, the way we came in. Then I would cut right through the forest. I find staying on the path boring, so I usually just ignore it until I get to this old, abandoned bus. It’s next to a large red and white house,” she crinkled her nose as if deep in thought, and continued. “If I remember correctly, the bus has the words ‘Shalom Mission’ written on it. I’m sure you’ll see it once we get closer to it. Once I see that bus, I return to that path I was ignoring and head left until I reach Bunche Elementary.” She looked back at me. “You know that steel walkbridge right next to Bunche, that crosses King Street?” I nodded. “I just take that bridge across to the other side of King, and after that I’m only a couple of blocks away from my neighborhood. It’s not a

complicated way to get through the forest.” I was amazed that she had that route memorized.

A few minutes later, Tesenga spoke again. “Hey!” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper, “do you hear something?”

I frowned and concentrated, trying to hear any peculiar sounds. I nodded, and told her, “Yeah,” in the same hushed tone. “Does it sound like people talking?”

Tesenga nodded, and looked around. After a few seconds she pointed in the direction of the marsh. “Over there!” she whispered. I looked in the direction she was pointing at and saw it: two vague figures in the midst of the marsh talking to each other.

I was actually about to write it off as just another one of those odd things you see from time to time, and have us continue walking Tesenga’s route. But as I took a step, something occurred to me. The park was supposed to be closed, so there shouldn’t have been too many people in the forest with us. In addition to that, that marsh was restricted. No one was supposed to be there, especially at that time of day.

“Tesenga,” I said while eyeing a strange, hollowed-out tree we were near, “something’s telling me that we should hide.”

We ducked behind the big tree, hiding our bodies in the hollow part. I could smell the rotted wood, and when I ducked my head I could see the streaks of wood running up and down, different shades of brown, my finger running across a swirling knot in the outside bark. I looked up for a second and saw what must have been a woodpecker hole directly above Tesenga’s head. The bark felt almost scaly. It seemed as if the tree, no, the whole forest, was alive, and threatening to swallow us whole.

“Ashlynn! Look!” she whispered to me. I was already looking, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. Bathed in the magenta light of nearby streetlamps, the two figures had now turned into three, and there was one on his knees. One of the men standing was large, massive and muscular. Another one was skinny, and stood with a lean, as if one of his legs was a few inches shorter than the other one was.

“Ashlynn! Do you see them? Ashlynn?” It was the one in the center of the group that had me speechless. He stood with a relaxed posture, wearing a suit that from where I stood looked yellow. Shadows of the leaves fell on him, making his yellow suit look like the skin of a leopard. That bothered me. He stood over the kneeling man, barking orders in a voice that was too familiar. It couldn’t be him. There’s no way it could be him.

But then I remembered what happened the last time I was here at Forest Park. It was definitely him.

I concentrated on listening to them, and got a confirmation from the large one.

“We got what we need out of him, Raziel,” he said, “Let’s get the money and go.”

I saw Mr. Barter shake his head. “Nah,” I heard him say, “we stick to the plan. This fool’s got this coming to him.” Got what coming? I didn’t like how that sounded.

“Ashlynn!” I heard Tesenga whisper at me. “What’s going on? I can’t make out what they’re saying.” I shook my head and held up a finger. I wanted to know what was going on, too, and I didn’t want her interrupting me.

I squinted, wondering who was that guy on his knees in front of Mr. Barter, and who were those two guys holding him. More important than that: what was Mr. Barter pointing at him? Was that a gun?

Traffic picked up, and I could barely hear their voices over the sounds of passing cars, but I could make out some of what Mr. Barter was saying.

“No use begging now, punk,” he said. “You set me up, and now it’s time to pay. I trusted you, man. We were supposed to run off together with that money and weed, split it fifty-fifty. You remember that? That was the plan. But you had to get greedy, didn’t you? You just had to have it all to yourself, didn’t you?” He nodded maniacally, then continued. “Yeah, that’s right. So what did you do? You set me up, that’s what you did. Had the police raid my spot and haul me off to jail.” I couldn’t believe what I was seeing and hearing. Mr. Barter had done jail time? How did he get a teacher’s job with a criminal record? I saw

him slide a finger on his free hand across his face, where his scar was.

“Believe me, that was not a pleasant experience.” Then he chuckled, while the guy on his knees remained silent. “But I need to thank you for that, man. ’Cause see, while I was locked up, I got me a new team of guys that are really down for me, unlike you, you sorry excuse. You see my man Corey here?” He pointed at the big guy who stood behind him with folded arms. “He’s the one who found you, laying low here in Flint. I guess you thought nobody would come looking for you here.” His voice rose a decibel, and I heard him yell, “Well, you were wrong! And you’re about to be dead wrong. My man Black, who’s holding you on the left, was the one who got me a stolen social security number, and a nice set-up subbing in the Flint schools.” So that was how he did it. And that probably meant his real name wasn’t even Barter. He continued. “It was a nice way to bide my time while we were pinpointing you, and it works as a perfect alibi. I couldn’t have killed your sorry ass, I was at school grading papers, and Corey here will vouch for me.” I saw Corey nod.

The man on his knees stirred. “Stop with the damned theatrics, you pompous bastard!” he said in a garbled baritone. “If you’re going to do it, then do it and get it over with!” I squinted and shook my head. Do what? What was going on?

Raziel cocked his head back. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this. Too long, if you ask me.” Raziel pointed the gun away from the man, and paced around in a small circle. “You know, I was never a very religious man myself, but my grandmother was a real Jesus freak. And one of her favorite scriptures comes to mind right about now.” He looked in the air, as if trying to remember the exact words. Raziel looked as if he was savoring this moment. It was revolting and frightening to watch. At the same time, though, I couldn’t help being a little fascinated: I never knew he was capable of this. I couldn’t have even imagined it. I couldn’t believe this was the same guy I had been reading Shakespearean plays with just a day ago.

“How did it go?” he asked. “Oh yeah. ‘Be ye not deceived, for God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.’” I saw him cock back the gun, “In other words, if you screw your boys,

it's only right that you get screwed." Corey walked over and gave Raziel something that looked like a potato. What was he going to do with a potato? Oh, that's what: Raziel put it on the muzzle of the gun. I heard from somewhere that putting a potato on the gun muzzle makes it work as a makeshift silencer. I think I heard it from one of Terrance's rap songs.

Raziel pointed the potato gun at the man and growled, "Time to harvest, buddy," and the next thing I heard was a muffled pop, followed by a sickening "shuck" sound and a shower of red all over the surrounding trees and grass. The sight and sound made me cringe. It was so surreal, like I was watching a bad gangster movie, but it was real. Too real. Raziel chuckled a little, obviously happy about his accomplishment, and then started to walk away. He then paused, and turned back to the crumpled body of the dead man and said, "Oh, and thanks for telling me where you had the money stashed. Too bad it wasn't enough to save your sorry life."

Corey walked over and stood next to Raziel, staring at the body. By then, traffic had let up, and I could hear him say, "We need to clean this up and get the body out of here as soon as possible. And we need to go pick up that money. Let's hurry; the flight leaves in a few hours." Raziel nodded. The guy Raziel called Black pulled some gloves out of his coat pocket and put them on.

"Oh...my...God," Tesenga just kept repeating, her voice higher pitched than I had ever heard it before. It was almost a squeak, "OhmyGod ohmyGod ohmyGod ohmyGod..." I turned and looked past the paleness of her face and into her eyes. The pure shock and terror in them reflected my own. I was speechless. How could Raziel do such a thing? He was such a nice guy at school. I thought I really was connecting with him, but I didn't realize he was capable of this! How could I have known? Were there any clues? How did I miss them?

All those questions faded as I took a step and heard the loud crack of a branch breaking under it. Then the only question on my mind was: "Did they hear that?" I froze, closed my eyes and gritted my teeth. Please God, let the answer be no.

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“Hey, did you hear that?” I heard Corey say. “It sounded like something.” Oh no.

I saw Raziel’s figure move into the light shed by a nearby streetlamp as he grabbed Corey by his lapel. “WHAT!?” he yelled, sounding really paranoid as he yelled. “I heard nothing. You’d better not be playing with me, Corey, not now.”

“Naw, man.” That amazed me, even a guy as big and intimidating as Corey seemed to be could be scared of Raziel. Was this really the guy I admired so much at school? It was unreal. “It...it was probably just a squirrel, or something. It was probably nothing, boss.”

I could barely make out a sneer on Raziel’s face as he let Corey go. “I should hope so,” he said. “This park is long closed. Nobody would be out here at this time of night.”

I closed my eyes to breathe a sigh of relief, but as my eyes shut I heard Raziel say, “Just to be safe, though, let’s look around and see if anything’s moving.” I stopped mid-sigh, and my eyes reopened wider than they had ever been.

Quickly I ducked as far behind the tree as I could, and looked up to make sure Tesenga had done the same. I saw the terror in her eyes, and nodded at her, trying to reassure her that everything was going to be okay. I don’t know how convincing I was. My hand reached out and clasped hers, and we held our hands together as tightly as our muscles and bones would allow.

I looked out from the tree and saw flashlight beams darting throughout the forest. There were three off them. A few times they passed by our tree. Each time a beam flashed by, I held my breath, and felt my grip on Tesenga’s hand quivering. Only when the light beam passed did I breathe again. This happened about four times before I heard the other one hiss, “Man, I don’t see nothing. You must be hearing stuff, Corey.” I allowed myself to relax a little, slumping down a little and exhaling deeply. Maybe they really did think the noise was some forest animal, and they could turn their attention away so Tesenga and I could sneak out without them noticing. I let go of Tesenga’s hand and started feeling a little relieved. Tesenga poked her head back out to check if the coast was clear; then she glanced

back at me and nodded. I nodded back: The worst was over.

But then one of them shined his flashlight back in our direction.

Just then the loudest gasp I had ever heard in my entire life came out of the mouth next to mine. My eyes grew to the size of grapefruits and my blood ran cold. I looked up, and Tesenga's horrified face was bathed in a deathly white beam of light.

"There!" I looked back at the men to see Corey yell while pointing directly at Tesenga. "There's someone over there spying on us! I knew it!"

Raziel left the area lighted by the streetlamp, turning into a demonic shadow silhouetted against the marsh. His voice turned from the pleasant tenor I had been used to hearing into a sinister, guttural howl that chilled me to the bone.

"I want no witnesses!" He yelled, "I don't care who it is out there hiding. Find them and kill them!" Those were the most terrifying words I had ever heard in my entire life. To this day, they still are.

"Oh My God!" I heard the fear in Tesenga's voice. "They saw us! They're coming this way!" She didn't have to tell me that, I saw them approaching. I felt a chilling panic overtake me, starting in my gut and rising up past my heart and actually making my head tingle. I could only think of one thing to say to Tesenga, and also to myself: "RUN!"

I got up as fast as I could and shoved Tesenga on, yelling "Run! Run! Run! Go! Go!" over and over again. The panic had now overtaken my entire body, and I couldn't get to full stride fast enough. I had to get away from them, as far and as deep into the forest as I could go. In my mind, all I could think of was, *Please, God, don't let them shoot me. Please don't let them shoot me.* I don't even know what made me think of God. I didn't pray a lot before that day. In fact, I hardly ever said God's name because I heard it was a sin to say God's name in vain, and I didn't want to commit that sin. But in my mind, I was just repeating, *Please, God, don't let them shoot me.* At any time I expected to hear the thunderclap sound of a firing gun behind me, with the feeling of a hot bullet piercing my flesh following shortly after. I had never been shot before, but that was how I imagined it feeling like.

The good news was that I didn't hear any gunshots.

The bad news was what I did hear: a desperate scream, then a dreadful thud. I slowed down and turned my head, apprehensive of what I was about to see. Sure enough, laying on the ground in front of a small steel bike rack, was Tesenga. She must have tripped over it while trying to stay caught up with me. She was holding her ankle: she must have twisted it in the fall.

"ASHLYNN!" I heard her yell, "don't leave me!" With one arm she let go of her ankle and reached out to me. There were lots of wet streaks on her cheeks reflecting the magenta street lamps in the park, and there was absolute terror in her eyes. It was probably in mine, too. I took a step towards her, but had to cower back: Raziel and his goons were closer to her than I was.

In a split second I weighed my options. If I tried to rush over there, pick Tesenga up and run off, could I make it to her in time? Could we be able to get some distance between us and them with her ankle being twisted like that? Where could we go at this time of night that would be safe? But soon all of those questions were made moot. Raziel and his goons were right behind her before I could do anything.

All I could do was watch hopelessly while the one called Black snatched Tesenga up by her hair with one massive hand. A noise came from Tesenga as she was yanked up: half screaming, half crying. Tesenga struggled against the man's grip. I couldn't tell if he was hurting her the way he was holding her by her hair, or whether it was pure fear that drove her to struggle and squirm the way she did. I know if that were me in her situation, it would have been fear.

Then, with his free hand, he pulled something out of a holster strapped onto his camouflage pants. It looked like a set of nunchuks, only much smaller, which fit into the palm of his hand. He trained his eyes on me and smiled, with a mouth missing a few teeth. Then he turned his free hand sideways and flicked his wrist. The miniature nunchuks flipped out again, one nunchuck sliding across his knuckles before being caught back in the palm of his hands. There was a flash of silver, and then the other nunchuck slid into his palm.

He flicked his wrist, and the miniature nunchuks flipped out,

splitting open, and another silver flash came out of it for a split second. He caught one of the miniature nunchuks on one of his fingers and flicked his wrist again. One of the miniature nunchuks spun out, the silver flashed again, then disappeared when the nunchuks closed back up in his hands.

After that, he turned his wrist upside down and twirled his wrist around. The silver flash came out again, spinning one of the nunchuks around and landing it between two of his other fingers. The other nunchuk slipped out of his palm, and with an upward flick of his wrist and a twist, there was another silver flash as the miniature nunchuk clicked onto the second one.

He then held his hand up. In his hand were no longer miniature nunchuks, and that silver flash wasn't a silver flash. It was a butterfly knife. Daddy had shown me one back when I was in grade school. The blade looked about five inches long and was wavy, like the fancy swords I see some of the nerds in my class gawking over in weapons catalogs. One side had a much sharper edge than the other, and the handle in his hand was made of this clear jade marble which gleamed a little as a nearby streetlamp reflected light off of it and through it. His sinister, toothless smile grew even wider. He was obviously proud of the performance he had put on with his knife. I was horrified: this guy was acting like this was some show, and I was his audience! He looked at me and squinted his already beady eyes. The whole night had gone silent: Tesenga's screaming, begging and pleading sounded muffled to me. One last lightning-quick silver flash, and the knife slid across Tesenga's exposed neck, sinking deep into her soft, golden brown flesh and swiftly slicing it in two.

It was dark, but not too dark for me to see the burgundy blood flowing out of her throat, running down her neck and chest, staining her blue shirt and baby-blue coat dark red and staining the grass in front of her. My bones chilled as I heard what sounded like a combination gurgle, chortle and gasp for air come from her mouth as he let go of Tesenga's hair. She landed on her feet, but then quickly crumpled to her knees, then dropped chestfirst onto the blood-soaked grass. There was shock in her wide open eyes, a look of sheer dread

on her whitening face as she clutched her open throat and gasped for breath. In no time her hands were soaked in red. I was frozen. Within seconds the blood that was in her face was all over the ground. Her face, still looking at me with those eyes wide open, was now ghostly white, her skin pale and almost transparent. She shuddered; one final, sickening gurgle bubbling from her mouth as a drop of blood trickled from it. After that, her hands slackened, and she moved no more. Her terror-stricken eyes were still open: even in death she looked up to me. In that short period of time, those eyes burned themselves into my memory to forever haunt me.

I had never seen anybody die before. I never paid any attention when I saw somebody killed on television or in a movie, but this was totally different. Nothing could prepare me for this. Just a moment ago I was laughing and joking with her, and just like that, she was gone. The look of horror on her face as her last breath left her body had chiseled itself into my memories, my daydreams and my nightmares for eternity.

Black let the blood from his knife drip onto her body. He looked down at her for a second, it seemed in mock pity. Then, with his head still bowed, his eyes slowly rolled up to meet mine. His lips then slowly curled into this evil grin. A few seconds later, the knife was pointed in my direction, still dripping my best friend's blood onto the grass. I gasped, and before I knew it I was breathing through my mouth, faster and harder than I had ever breathed before. I could actually feel my heart beating, trying to burst out of my chest and run away.

Whatever had me frozen quickly thawed me out, and I spun around and ran like I had never run before in my entire life! There was only one thought in my head: get away. No matter what, I could not stop running. I didn't look behind me, I just kept running. I'm very sure my technique was wrong. I was probably sitting in the bucket, or overstriding. I was probably bouncing as I ran, which Coach said puts stress on my knees, hip and back. I couldn't relax my face. My fists were definitely clenched. I know I was too tense. Maybe if I had followed proper technique, I would have gotten a little bit more distance between me and them, but that was the absolute last thing on

my mind at that time. I wasn't thinking about technique, I was thinking about survival.

I stopped for a second to catch my breath, wrapping my hands around a fungus-covered stump. I didn't bother looking behind me to see who was following. I didn't rest long. I didn't know how close they were to me, and I was way too terrified to look back and see. I couldn't believe this was real, that this was actually happening to me. Things like this weren't supposed to happen to people like me. I was just a girl trying to get good grades in school. I didn't deserve to be running for my life in Forest Park! How in God's name did I end up in this dilemma? How could I get out of it? Who could I turn to for help?

I didn't have time to dwell on it for long, because I heard dry leaves crunching behind me, and they were getting louder. I looked up, and I saw a bunch of old, rotted wood fences bordering off the park. There was an opening in one of the fences, in the backyard of a green house. I took a deep breath and pushed off from the stump towards the opening, streaking through it and stopping at the backdoor of the house. I didn't pay much attention to what the house looked like. Normally, I would be more aware of such things, but I had more pressing matters to worry about. There was a faded "beware of dog" sign hammered onto the door. The sign was so old that the normally bright red letters were a pale orange. I ignored the sign and banged on the door as hard as I could. I know I have small, soft hands, not nearly as massive as my Dad's, but I tried to make the loudest noise I could make, banging and pounding on the door. I also screamed, at the top of my lungs. *Please let someone hear me*, I thought.

"Hey!" I screamed, "somebody help! Please! Let me in! PLEASE!" I kept screaming. I kept pounding. I kept hoping. No response.

"PLEASE!" I yelled even louder. "LET ME IN! SOMEBODY HELP!" I was surprised I didn't lose my voice. But still, no one came, and slowly I turned and looked back to see if they had gained on me. I was surprised: it was only one person behind me, and it wasn't Razel. He was lanky, almost sickly looking, wearing dingy camo pants and a white wife-beater tank top. He had a wool skullcap covering his head

and a bloodstained gold chain around his neck that reflected moonlight and streetlamp light off of it as he approached me. That toothless smile was still plastered on him as he twirled his butterfly knife from finger to finger in his right hand. It was the one called Black, and in the time I was looking back at him, he had gotten close enough to lunge at me. He did.

My eyes must have gotten as big as baseballs when I saw him leap at me, his arms and hands outstretched like one of the superheroes in those comic books that Aunt Terri's husband always gives to Terrance. Out of instinct, I slid a leg to the side, and let the leg drag my body to it. No sooner had I heard the clunk of Black's head hitting the door, I turned around and bolted for the front yard. I heard loud swearing behind me. I didn't look back.

Once I had gotten past the driveway to the front of the house, I heard the rattle of a chain nearby. My eyes couldn't help shifting to that direction, as the chain noise was soon joined by an unearthly growl. Just as I saw where the sounds were coming from, the growl turned into a deafening bark. The bark filled my left ear, and I recoiled from it so quickly that I lost my balance and fell onto the driveway. I looked up: just where I was standing there was a long, muscular black creature straining against the clanking chain which held it back, laboring in vain to sink its gnashing fangs into me. Its bark was irate, full of bloodlust and rage. It sounded like any moment it could snap that chain and rip me limb from limb. My eyes met another set of eyes: closer set than even mine, beady, full of blood lust. The face was pitch black except for the mouth, which was light brown and I could have sworn was foaming. As it barked, it bore fangs I figured could tear flesh to shreds in mere seconds. I think it was a Rotweiler, but it had gotten so dark that I couldn't tell. My breathing quickened. My eyes got larger and larger. That thing was close enough to bite my head off, and if I had been just a fraction of a second slower...

But then the Rotweiler turned its head, and its eyes were no longer meeting mine. Suddenly, its body was no longer in front of me, and the bloodcurdling bark I had just heard was now off into the distance. I also heard surprised, terrified swearing from the direction

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the Rotweiler had jetted to. It must have seen Black. Whatever had frozen me in place again thawed out quickly again, and that one thought again took over my mind. Get Away. Now.

 chapter 8

I ran down the block and past a barricade blocking the street off. Then I turned left on Stewart Street and ran up to Martin Luther King Avenue. I was tired and my legs were rubbery. That didn't stop me from running.

I thought of Raziel and his goons on my tail, and I couldn't stop thinking of Raziel's yellow suit, dark, patchy shadows crawling over it like the skin of a ferocious cat. For some reason it was familiar, but I didn't know why. It was like *déjà vu*: I've been in this situation before, but I don't know how. Maybe I dreamed it up, maybe I read about it, maybe it was on TV, but I've seen this situation before. I wished I could remember how it turned out that time. I didn't waste much time thinking about that, though. My first and only priority was getting away from the butterfly man. I looked back and saw him behind me. I was right: one of his legs was shorter than the other, but yet he still limped after me. And he was gaining.

I felt panic rising in me. Why was he gaining on me? That can't be possible! I kept looking back at him. He seemed to come closer, closer, closer. Now I was really starting to get panicked. I looked back one more time. Still he was gaining.

An ear-piercing screech accompanied by a loud honk jarred me. I swung my head around, and my mouth dropped open. I halted running and stumbled forward, landing on my side. I looked around, I was in the middle of the street, at an intersection, and two cars had just swerved to avoid hitting me. I think I scraped my arm in the fall. I didn't

have time to check. As soon as I figured out where I was, I looked ahead of me and saw two headlights approaching me at blinding speed. I shrank back as quickly as I could. Within seconds what looked like an old Mustang came careening by, sideswiping me and scaring me silly. Then I heard footsteps, piercing through the screeching tires, loud stereos and honking horns. I looked back where I came. Black was only a few feet away. And gaining.

“STAY AWAY FROM ME!” I yelled, not as loudly as I wanted to because I was so tired and out of breath, but I was able to get to my feet and away from him to the other side of the street. I still heard his footsteps behind me through all of the noise. My panic was giving way to anxiety: he just wasn’t going to give up, was he?

I didn’t get a few steps before I heard more screeching tires and the loudest horn I had ever heard. I didn’t stop running, but a sickening thump made me pause and turn around. A few feet before me there was a puddle of red on the pavement, starting a red trail that led a few feet down the street, stopping at the tail end of a bus which had screeched to a halt. Around me, traffic had completely stopped. Behind me, onlookers had come out of a nearby gas station and a barbecue restaurant to look at something. I followed their gaze to find the back end of the bus. I walked over to the bus, wading my way through stopped cars and horrified bystanders to the front of the bus. What I saw took my breath away.

On the grill of the bus was a large red splatter. Lying in a crumbled heap in front of the bus was the body of Black. He was smashed, broken and horribly disfigured. His face looked like something out of a horror movie. People had started filing out of the bus to look at what happened. Black must have been running after me, and he couldn’t get out of the way of the bus in time. The bus must have hit him and dragged him down the block. What a way to go.

Just then I remembered that he wasn’t the only one after me. And he had a knife. I didn’t want to touch that bloody mess in front of me, but I did remember him running after me with the knife in his hand. I ran back and followed the trail of blood to see if the knife had fallen to the street. Within a few minutes I had found it, dull and bent up from

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having been knocked to the street. I bit my lip and fought off the urge to curse. That knife was useless.

Everybody's attention was on the bus accident. I figured no one would notice me slipping away. I slowly, deliberately backed away from the scene and tried to go back down the street I came from. I walked casually, hoping nobody would notice me and think I had anything to do with the accident. I wasn't walking for long. Two headlights ahead of me started speeding towards me. Before I could make out the car in the darkness, high beams came on, nearly blinding me. I put up an arm over my eyes, but I knew whose car that was. I started to back up, but then remembered all of the people back there who might connect me to the accident. I was trapped. Or was I?

I shook off the blindness and looked around, trying to find another way out, another route I could get to, somewhere where that car couldn't reach me. I couldn't tell how close it was. For all I knew, it was near me. I saw the park a few feet away. That was no good; there was a driveway that led into the heart of the park. I'd have been chased down before I could get far. I could have crossed the street. That was no good, because I didn't know how close they were. For all I knew they could have run me over as I crossed the same way Black got ran over. There had to be somewhere I could go...

I heard tires screeching just as I saw it. The street I came from originally was barricaded. There was no way their car could get through...and there was no way either of those men could catch me on foot. I wasn't going to let them. I didn't give it a second thought; I was gone.

This time I didn't waste energy looking behind me. I ran, my mind racing as fast as my feet. Where could I go? Who could I turn to? How could I get away from these guys? I could have stopped and knocked on every door to find somebody who could give me sanctuary, but what if nobody would take me in? The nearest police station was about a mile down, near my Grandma's house. Could I make it there before they found me? How much time did I have before they decided to just drive the car around the block to the entrance to this street?

I turned the corner and got a few houses down before I realized the answer to the latter question: not much.

A feeling of sheer dread crept over me as I saw the front of their car pull out from behind a house at the corner of the street. I stopped cold and ducked behind a nearby tree. I held my breath: *Please, God, don't let them have seen me.* The reflection of magenta street lamps shined off the body of the all-black coupe, making it look like a reverse leopard on the prowl. It slowed down and crawled down the street. I stayed behind the tree, out of its sight, slightly moving as they moved. It seemed like forever, that the car would never pass me by. It seemed like the car itself, the reverse leopard, was waiting for any sound, any noise, any peculiar sight before pouncing and tearing its prey apart. I didn't breathe the whole time.

It took forever, but the coupe eventually passed me. I thought I was in the clear, but I couldn't leave yet. If I had started running, sooner or later they would have had to turn around at the dead end, and I would have been caught before I could get far. I needed sanctuary. I looked across the street and found it.

Without a moment's hesitation I bolted out from behind the tree and ran as fast as my tired legs could take me. I hoped they didn't see me in their rearview mirrors, but I really didn't care if they did. There was no way they could get to me there. If I could be safe anywhere, it would be there. I wove my way through freshly washed, parked cars, inching closer and closer to my refuge. All the time I planned what I would do once I got inside. I would find somebody and try to get to a phone. I would call Daddy and tell him about what happened to that man on his knees, Tesenga and Black. I would call Mom and beg her to come pick me up, as soon as possible. I would call 911 to tell them that two dangerous men were chasing after me. I would find the deepest corner of this place and hide out until she came to get me. I reached the steps of the place: I was almost there. I stopped for a second to catch my breath and looked up, thankful for the giant cross I saw before me. St. George Beth El Church; this was the same church that my Uncle Bryce's girlfriend used to attend a long time ago. I hadn't been there in years. It was a perfect time to go back.

Within minutes I was in the church and into the main sanctuary. It was just as I had remembered it: all brown on the inside, with a large cross in the back near the area where the preachers and the choir sat. There was a curtained-off area where I remember people went to get dunked into water. Thinking back, I had never understood the big deal behind getting dunked in water. When I was little, Aunt Terri's husband told me it was "God's bath," where you wash off all the bad things you did in life up to that point and start over as a clean, new person. I never saw the need for it. I didn't need to be a new person. I liked myself just the way I was. I walked in and greeted some of the churchgoers, trying not to get drowned out by the organ and choir music blaring out over the hall. It was a song I remembered, but hadn't heard in a long time.

They were having a Saturday night service, and the people weren't as overdressed as most people I see on Sundays. They were right in the middle of their praise songs, so I had a hard time getting any of their attention. It was frustrating trying to get their attention.

"What?" they would ask me.

"I said," I would try to answer, "do you have a phone I can use?"

"What?" they would say again. "I can't hear you."

"This is really important! I need to use your phone!"

"What?" This happened over and over again. I was getting desperate, and I was getting frustrated. I decided to head out and find an office somewhere else in the church, and call Daddy from there. I made my way to the back of the church, trying to remember Daddy's work number. I stopped at the entrance of the sanctuary and turned back around, swiveling my head from side to side, trying to find someone, anyone who would take the time to help me escape Raziel and his goon.

"Don't turn around."

As soon as I heard that, I felt something small and hard shoved into my back, like someone had taken a long, square block and put the end of it on the small of my back. Oh no.

I felt the man behind me leaning in to whisper in my ear, his hot

breath on the side of my head; and I heard him over all of the singing, shouting and organ music.

“Little girl,” he said, “this is not my finger in your back.” I recognized the voice as the one called Corey. I was trapped. I put up my hands and bowed my head. “Okay,” was all I could say to him. I could actually feel the corners of my mouth drooping downward. A paralyzing fear crept up through my belly, and had risen to the lump in my throat by the time Corey grabbed me. I never realized just how big Corey’s hands were until then.

Corey dragged me to the parking lot of St. George Beth El. He held a vise-like grip on my arm, so tight that it hurt badly. He stopped me in front of the black Mazda coupe. The window facing me slowly rolled down, the same way a gangster’s window rolls down in the Mafia movies Daddy likes to watch with some of my uncles on his side of the family. Then, while still holding on to me, Corey leaned backwards onto another car in the parking lot, a brand new Toyota Corolla.

“I got her,” Corey said.

“Why didn’t you kill her where you found her?” a familiar tenor voice in the car asked.

Corey shrugged, “Too many people.”

The window slowly rolled back up, and a second later the car door opened. First, one leg came out, then the other, before long, Raziel’s head popped out of the darkness in the car, then his arms, then the rest of his body. He emerged like a demon crawling out of the bowels of Hell, intent on dragging me back into the depths of the pit along with him. He straightened himself up and looked down at me with contempt. He still looked like a leopard. The dark shadows I saw on his yellow suit earlier were replaced with dark splotches of dried blood. Daddy told me once that when somebody is shot at close range and the blood splatters all over the killer, it is called a wetwork. I figured that was what Raziel had done. I returned the contemptuous look. It was like we had never met.

Raziel then looked up towards heaven and threw his arms up in exasperation. His voice was the harsh, frenzied tenor I remember him

using on the phone. “You moron! Do I have to do all of the thinking around here?” He then looked Corey in the eyes. “If you had killed her in there, none of those people would have lifted a finger to stop you! Nobody wants to be a hero, Corey.”

Corey objected, “But it was a church...”

Raziel snarled, “I don’t care if it’s a church! If you had done her in there, I guarantee everyone in there would have looked the other way. On top of that, all you would have had to do is pull out this,” with a flash he reached into Corey’s pocket and pulled out the gun, “and nobody would have done a thing to stop you.”

He held the gun in the air, like it was a trophy. He raised his voice and said, “And do you know the beauty of that, Corey? None of those people would ever say anything to anybody about what happened, least of all the police. None of them. Do you know why? Because every single person in that church, from the ushers to the choir to the preacher, to even the Pope if he were in there, is scared that the so-called ‘bad guy’—that would be you—will come back and kill them if they say anything to the authorities about what happened.

“You see,” Raziel added, “In times of crisis, people will always follow the golden rule: ALWAYS LOOK OUT FOR SELF. It doesn’t matter if you’re the pastor of a church, or if it’s your own family in danger, you are not going to put your life in jeopardy if you can help it. If I’ve learned anything up north, I’ve learned that.”

He looked around, a cold look in his eyes. “Well, we can’t kill her out here. We’re too close to the bus accident. Cops are swarming over there. There’s a cornfield at the corner of Jennings and Carpenter, which is right on the way to the airport. We’ll take care of her there.”

He looked down at me, the look of cold-hearted contempt still in his eyes. “Whatever you were trying to do in that church, Ashlynn,” he hissed, “you should have been praying.”

I felt Corey’s massive hands press on my shoulder, and before I knew it I felt myself being shoved into the car. I fell in and slid across the black leather seats, hearing the car door shut behind me. I wanted to cry, but I fought the tears off. They weren’t going to see me cry. They weren’t going to see me scared. I wouldn’t give those bastards the satisfaction.

“You shouldn’t have followed me, Ashlynn,” Raziel said, his gaze trained on the road in front of him. “Little girls like you shouldn’t be sticking their noses into grown people’s business.” I didn’t say anything back to him; I just sat back and glared at his eyes in the reflection of his rearview mirror. I wasn’t going to show him any fear.

“It’s too bad, too,” he added. “You seemed to be a pretty nice girl. I actually liked you, Miss Missy.” Hearing him call me that gave me chills. I think I actually shivered when he said it.

He made a noise of mock regret and added, “I bet everyone at school is going to miss you once they find out what’s happened to you.” I didn’t say anything; I just kept staring. And I was thinking about everything, mostly about Tesenga, the image of that knife ripping across her throat, the terrified look on her face as she saw her own blood gushing out, the way her limp body crumpled to the ground, soaking the dirt and grass in red. And then I started thinking of what was in store for me: not how I would die, but how everyone would react if they found out I had been killed. I could see Mom at my funeral, crying out over me, with Daddy trying to console her. Daddy never cried. I could see my brother, crying over me, finally regretting all of those times he pulled my hair when I wasn’t looking. I imagined the faces of Grandma and Aunt Terri. I imagined the faces of all my uncles. They would all be mourning me; even the ones Mom wouldn’t let me talk to. I bowed my head and couldn’t stop a tear from streaming out of the corner of my eye, down my cheek and onto my upper lip. I licked the salty tear off of my lip and winced to keep any more tears from coming out. It didn’t work. I was so scared that night, and I had actually started trembling in that backseat. I didn’t want to die.

“We’re not gonna make it, man,” Corey said, nervously clutching the steering wheel. “I don’t think we have time to ace this girl, get the money and still get to the airport on time. We’re toast.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Raziel answered. “We’re going to make it. Just drive faster, will you?”

“The petal’s to the metal, man! I’m going as fast as the law will allow!”

Raziel sounded like he was gritting his teeth. “Then go faster than the law will allow!” he growled. “We have to make that plane!” I heard the car rev up, and felt its momentum build. I guessed Corey was following orders.

I rocked back and forth in my seat, and started whispering, actually I was mumbling, but no sound came out of my mouth. My voice had left me.

“Jesus,” I said, “I know I haven’t said any real prayers in a long, long time. But I really need you right now. I’m trapped, and I don’t know what to do. Jesus, I don’t want to die. Please don’t let me die. Jesus, if you let me live through this, I promise I’ll be a better person. I’ll never miss church again, and I’ll study my Bible more. Please, Jesus, just let me live through this.” I didn’t want to die.

As I was mumbling, I heard something that shut me up quickly. Raziel was berating Corey about how slow he was driving, but Corey cut him off.

“Damn it!” he yelled. “The police is behind us!” My eyes opened quickly. I turned and looked in the rear windshield, and just as Corey said, there was an all blue sedan with yellow trim driving right behind us at about our speed. And its red and blue lights were flashing.

“Calm down,” Raziel snapped. “That cop doesn’t want us. Just pull to the side and slow down, and he’ll drive right past us.” That took a little wind out of my sails, because I’ve seen that happen a lot whenever I rode around with Grandma. Corey slowed the car down and pulled it over to the side of the road. The police car slowed right down with us and pulled to the side behind us. Yes!

“Crap, man!” an obviously nervous Corey muttered. “He’s pulling us over, man! He’s pulling us over! What are we going to do!”

Raziel sounded really annoyed now. “You imbecile! Calm down, he has no reason to suspect anything. He’s probably here to tell us we have a busted taillight, or something.” I then saw Raziel slide his hand between the seats. “Just act natural, and nothing will happen.”

He then swiveled his head sharply in my direction and snarled, “And you had better not get any ideas. If you so much as make one

sound, I am going to kill you.” His voice intimidated me so much, it didn’t occur to me that he was going to kill me anyway.

Within minutes, the policeman arrived, and Corey gave him a license, some registration and what looked like an insurance card. The officer asked if Corey knew that he was speeding. Corey apologized to the officer politely, and the policeman said he needed to run a check on the identification.

The policeman then turned and headed back to his squad car. I was shocked. No! Where are you going? Don’t leave me with these men! They’re going to kill me! Then I thought about what Raziell said earlier, about people not wanting to put their lives in danger. What if he was right? What if nobody would help me? Would Mom turn her back on me in this situation? Would Terrance? Would Aunt Terri? Would Dad?

Dad...

No. Dad would never turn his back on me. He is a policeman. He put his life on the line every day for complete strangers. He would fight for me. He wouldn’t give up on me. He would save me; it was his job to. In fact, My brother said that he would go to war for me. And Mom said she wanted to protect me. So Raziell’s theory was wrong. And I needed that cop’s attention to prove it.

I overheard Raziell telling Corey they should take off while the cop was preoccupied with checking the license, registration and insurance...all of which I assumed were forgeries. My eyes grew wide, and I fidgeted. There had to be something I could do to get the cop’s attention. I looked around the car for something, anything I could use to save my life. Then I saw it: in the front seat, wedged between the driver and passenger’s seats out of view of the policeman. I had to get hold of it, and I couldn’t afford to wait. It was now or never.

I screamed at the top of my lungs and lunged at the front seat. I screamed higher and louder than I had ever screamed before or since. I screamed like the power of life and death was in my voice, like God himself wouldn’t hear me unless I screamed that loud.

The scream caught both Raziell and Corey off-guard. Corey jumped in his seat, yelling, “What the freak!?! Girl, is you crazy?!” I didn’t care,

I kept screaming. I screamed until my throat felt raw, and my lungs felt like they were about to burst. I screamed until my ears rang and my eyes watered, filled with fear, anger, frustration and dread. But I kept screaming. Corey's pause gave me enough time to grab what I was reaching for. Now it was Raziel who screamed.

"Corey!" he yelled, "she's got the gun! She's got your gun!"

The gun felt heavy and cold in my hands, a lot like my Dad's revolver when he let me hold it when I was little. The difference was that back then Daddy made sure the gun had no bullets in it and the safety was on. This time around, the safety was clearly off, and I knew the gun was loaded.

"Get the gun!" Raziel yelled again over my wailing, and before I could move, I felt Corey's mammoth hands, one on the gun barrel, and one engulfing my hands. I felt the tug of him trying to pry the gun away from me. That was not going to happen: if that hunk of plastic left my hands, I was as good as dead. With every ounce of strength I had left in my body I wrestled him for that gun, climbing on top of the backseat for leverage, twisting and tossing my body around as much as I could in order to swing him loose of his grip. I kept screaming at the top of my lungs to drown out Raziel's barking orders at Corey. Soon, it was a three-way dance, for Raziel's hands joined Corey's soon after. I felt the entire car rock back and forth as we struggled for the gun.

I didn't hear the footsteps in all the commotion, but through my squinted eyes I could see a miracle. The policeman had seen and heard what was going on, and rushed back. Through Raziel's yelling and my own scream I heard the click of a handgun being cocked, followed by another scream: "You! All of you! Drop the gun now!" I was in full survival mode by then. There was no way I was going to let go of that gun until I felt Corey and Raziel's grips loosen first.

"I SAID NOW!" The policeman's voice got louder, and I felt the other grips loosen. I stopped screaming, only because I was out of breath and had started to go hoarse. Corey and Raziel let go, and I set the gun down. My screams had by then turned into sobs. I looked up and saw the cop's face for the first time: square-jawed, big nosed and chinky-eyed. He reminded me of Daddy.

“Out of the car, all of you,” he said while backing away from the car, still training his gun on us. “Now!”

I saw Corey mouth a swear word to himself as he slowly opened the door and backed out, his hands above his head. I did the same, coming out through the back seat. The policeman motioned for us to kneel. I sank to my knees, my hands behind my head, facing the car door I had just climbed out of. Tears streamed down my cheeks. How did I end up here, in the middle of nowhere, being held like a common crook? This couldn't be happening to me. This must have been a bad dream. The chilly wind blowing across my arms told me, to my dismay, that this was no dream. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the officer... a lieutenant, by the looks of his uniform, pointing his gun back at the car and yelling, “You, out of the car, now!”

I couldn't see, because my head was bowed, but I heard Raziel yell out, “No! I'm not going back to jail!”

I heard the officer yell “Drop the gun!” again, but there was no talking after that. Instead, I heard the sound of a car door opening, and footsteps. It sounded like he was running. The next thing I heard was the sound of gunshots in the distance. Then I heard gunshots closer by. A few cars passed by, then I heard the policeman's footsteps over the constant whoosh of passing cars as he approached Corey and me.

“Hope you two weren't too close to that guy,” he said, “I'm calling an ambulance to pick up his body.” He paused, “and you all have the right to remain silent.”

I was so happy to see Daddy's face at the precinct. I walked by him briefly on the way to the room where they were going to question me. It was weird, like he didn't want to look in my direction, but he did, and I saw so much concern on his face. I hoped he didn't get the wrong idea, like I had tried to run away or something like that. I knew I was going to have some explaining to do after I got home. Believe it or not, I thought I was more nervous about that than I was about everything I had been through that night.

Once we were situated in the drab blue-gray questioning room, They asked me what happened. I told them everything I knew. I told

them about how I met Raziel, how his behavior went through sudden changes, how he seemed paranoid at times. As I talked of him, it became so clear that he was hiding something, that there was indeed something wrong with his behavior and mood swings. I felt really stupid for not noticing the signs earlier. I told them about the walk through Forest Park, about spying on Raziel and his men. I told them about the man they killed and where to find him. I told them about being discovered, about trying to run, about what happened to Tesenga. I told them about the butterfly man, the Rotweiler, the bus. I told them about how Corey and Raziel almost ran me over with their car and how Corey trapped me in the church. I told them everything.

As I was talking, I was a little worried. What if what I said wasn't enough to put Corey away? Raziel and Black were the ones who did the killing, and they were both dead. I didn't want Corey getting acquitted or making bail and trying to kill me, and I told the detectives as much. They assured me that they had Corey on enough charges to keep him locked away for a very long time. He had violated his parole, he was driving a stolen car, the gun we were fighting over was unregistered, and he was threatening a minor by pulling a gun on me. Also, if there were any of his fingerprints on the guy Raziel killed, they could prove that he was an accomplice in that act. That made me feel a little better, but not much.

Daddy walked into the room as soon as I finished talking. I assumed he was listening to me on the other side of the mirror. It was just like in all of the police TV shows I saw, where the detectives would listen in on an interrogation. He looked so intimidating and imposing in his uniform. He stood straighter than I normally saw him at home. There was more intensity in his eyes, even more than when he watches Terrance playing football. He had this grave look on his face, unlike any I had ever seen from him. It was a look that said he was in control, he had a lot of authority, and he was responsible for a lot of people...so don't mess with him. Daddy looked so powerful at that moment; he looked exactly the way I imagined him looking whenever I got home from school in time to see him leave for work. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little awestruck.

Daddy didn't speak as he walked in. he just looked over at the detectives, and sent them away with a wave. After they closed the door, he turned towards me and looked me in the eyes. It was the same intense look, but there was an added hardness to it. It was a lot like the look he usually gave me after I did something wrong. I hated that look.

"So, according to the statement you just gave," he finally said, "you could have died about ten times over during this whole thing, huh?"

I smiled weakly, trying to make like it was no big deal. I wanted to show him that I was cool under the pressure, that I wasn't afraid, that I, like he, was in control of my situation. "I guess I'm just like a cat, then."

Daddy didn't smile. "Cats only have nine lives." His voice had gotten gravelly, and he sounded really tired. My smile went away.

"Then I guess," I said with a shrug, "that I'm just lucky."

Dad walked around the table separating us, and started walking towards me. "Your luck ran out the moment you met that man," he growled.

Ouch.

He got over to my chair and squatted down before me. I braced myself for an "I told you so." I didn't get one. He gave me a weird look, part anger, part sorrow, part anguish. His eyes were watering. Daddy had never cried before.

Seeing him like that made me want to cry, too. "Daddy," I whispered, "what's wrong?"

He didn't speak for what seemed like an hour. He just looked at me, breathing as deeply as he could. "You really don't understand, do you?" he managed to say. Then he bowed his head, and I thought I heard a snuffle. He looked up, wrapped a massive arm around me, caressed the back of my head, and kissed my forehead. He then put his mouth to my ear and whispered, "Did you view your friend's body yet? That could have been you right along with her. It was only by the grace of God that it wasn't you. If even one thing hadn't fallen into place for you last night, I would have had to investigate the murder of my own daughter." He let go of my head, and slowly backed away. By the time I saw his face he was wincing, and I heard him repeat, "I

would have had to investigate the murder of my own daughter,” except softer, more despondent. He shook his head and took a deep breath, as if he were fighting off tears. It took my breath away to see Daddy that shaken up. The feeling was unbearable. He stood up, mumbling something about having to fill out some paperwork and how he’d be right back and slowly walked out of the office.

The door closed, and I was left to myself for a while. I couldn’t get Daddy’s words out of my head. What if I had tripped instead of Tesenga? What if I hadn’t noticed that Rotweiler soon enough? What if that bus had come out a few seconds earlier? What if the policeman hadn’t pulled us over? It was overwhelming to think about all of the near-misses I had. Daddy was right; I could have died anytime that night.

I could have died anytime.

I could have died.

I thought of Daddy standing over my dead body, that same look of anguish I had just seen in his eyes. I thought of my funeral, my mom and brother crying over my casket. I started wondering what would have been waiting for me after death.

I couldn’t help myself. Tears streamed down my face, dripping onto the table my head hung over, held up by my trembling hands. I cried and sobbed and wept for so long. I was so foolish, and I almost paid for it with my life. I could have died anytime that night. I could have died.

A few minutes later, Daddy walked back in and wrapped his arm around my shoulder.

“You ready to go home, sweetie?” he asked, his voice tender and warm.

I spun around in my chair, and wrapped my arms around him as tight as I could. I looked up at him and nodded, before burying my face into his chest and crying some more.

I felt his hand gently wipe through my hair and heard him whisper, “It’s okay, sweetie. Everything’s going to be okay. Daddy’s here. Daddy loves you. You’re safe now.”

“Daddy,” I blubbered into his chest, “I want to be saved.”

Daddy had me answer a few more questions about everything that happened, and then he drove me home. I don't even remember the car trip. I was so exhausted from everything that had happened; I think I slept the whole way home from the police station. I think I also slept with my head on Daddy's shoulder, but I don't know for sure.

All I know is that we got into the car, and I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again, we were home. I remember him nudging me and saying, "Hey, sweetie, we're home." I climbed out of the car and walked into the house. Daddy fumbled with the keys to the front door for a minute, but then unlocked the door and walked in. I walked in behind him. I saw him walk up to the couch once he entered. He was blocking my view as to what he was walking to. I saw him stop right in front of the couch and bend over. I heard him mumbling something, and the sound of a kiss. He turned back to me and gave me this look, like he was really relieved that I made it home safe, but he was still bothered by what could have happened. He gave me a weak smile, and walked off to the master bedroom. I looked back at the couch, and saw what he had been talking to. It was Mom. She was sitting on the couch in jade silk pajamas and a purple robe Aunt Terri bought her for Christmas last year. Her legs were shut together and bent sharp, her arms were draped over the knees and clasped together. She was leaning forward at me, looking at me through bloodshot eyes. Her hair was totally mussed up, and I could see dry streaks that went from the corners of her eyes all the way down to her chin. She had been crying.

"Daddy told you?" I asked. Mom nodded.

"You were on the news too," she added, "and I had talked to Tesenga's mother." Tesenga. I had to hang my head and choke back a tear when I heard her name. Part of me still couldn't accept that she was gone forever. Mom took her hand and ran it through her long, black hair. She always does that when she's upset.

"It must be tough," Mom said, "losing your friend like that." I could tell she was struggling for words. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Then I saw Mom shake her head violently and wince. "That was a stupid question. You had just spent the last couple of hours talking

about it all at the precinct. I shouldn't have asked." She stopped shaking her head and look at me with sincerity, a sadness in her eyes I haven't seen in her before or since. "But honey, if...if you want to talk it over, I...I'm here, okay?" This was the softest I had ever heard Mom's voice. It was warm, inviting and safe. I needed warm, inviting and safe. I didn't say a word, but I walked...no, I think I actually ran, over to the couch and sat next to Mom. I just sat there, thinking about Tesenga. She was gone. No more talking with her on Sundays. No more pretty dresses, no more sunny attitude. It was all gone. I leaned back, letting my back and the back of my head sink deep into the plush, soft couch back. I leaned slightly to the right, resting my head on Mom's shoulder and letting a couple of tears fall from my face. She was really gone.

I heard a sniffle. Mom seemed like she was thinking the same thing as me. "I was sixteen," I heard her say, "and a senior asked me to be his date for his prom. Your grandma objected a little to it, but I rose a big fuss over how she never gave me any freedom, and she let me go, reluctantly. It started off nice. He was polite to me and everything, and he pulled up in a really nice car...a Mercedes, I think." This was the softest I had ever heard her speak. I didn't say anything, I just let her talk. "Our colors were white and baby blue. Me, your Aunt Terri and your grandma made the prettiest dress for me. It had this pleated neckline, and Terri had made some rhinestone straps for it. The dress was made of baby blue peau de soie satin; I remember because your grandma was in the fabric store all day trying to find it. The zipper was in the back, it fit around my body snugly but not too snugly, and we even made a matching scarf for it. It was an awesome dress, and I was happy to be wearing it. Actually, I was just happy to be going to the prom. I was just happy to have been asked to go, actually."

She paused, then continued. "The prom itself was okay, nothing too spectacular. We had it at the banquet room downtown at U of Michigan-Flint. It was actually pretty boring. The song was 'Other Side of the World' by Luther Vandross, but my date and I didn't dance. Actually, he didn't do much at the party. He just sat there, fidgeting,

like he was in a hurry to finish the prom and leave. We talked a little, but as we talked, I could feel his hand on my leg. I tried so hard to smile and not get upset. I didn't want to upset anyone, not that night, not at the prom. He kept looking over at a group of friends he had over in the corner of the room, like they were planning something. I should have known..." She trailed off. I heard another snuffle.

"After the prom, it was a tradition for everyone to go to an after-party at the valedictorian's house. We had agreed to meet some mutual friends up there, so as we left the prom I felt a little more at ease."

Another pause, another snuffle, and she continued. "But we never made it to the party. He started driving in the complete opposite direction, toward the north side of town. I looked over at him and asked where we were going. I remember the look he gave me. It was so scary and evil. 'Just sit there and shut up,' he barked at me. I was shocked. I didn't know what to do, so I did what he said, I sat there and shut up. I heard him mumbling something about how many points he were going to get from his friends. I really started getting scared then. I was too scared to do anything in that car. I had no idea where he was taking me. I remember the Slick Rick tape he had blaring and my head pounding. I remember breathing harder. I didn't know what to do. After a few minutes—it seemed like an hour—he pulled over and parked in one of the lots in front of Forest Park. That's why I always told you to stay away from there.

"He got out the car and started walking around to my side. I started wondering where the nearest phone was. If I could just get out of the car, I could run to the nearest phone. I was sure I could outrun him. I fumbled for the door but my hands shook so hard, I couldn't get it open. Then he was there, at my side of the car. He opened the door, and before I could do anything he grabbed me and yanked me out of the car. I was yelling at him, 'What are you doing? Stop! Stop!' But he wouldn't let go of me. He shoved me into the back seat and bashed my head on the driver's side door. I grabbed the handle and turned as hard as I could, but the door wouldn't budge. Before I knew it he was on top of me, ripping off my blouse.

“I kicked him, I screamed at him, I bit him, I scratched him and I even hit him as hard as I could but he wouldn’t stop. Every time I hurt him he would hurt me worse. He shoved my hands under the seat cushion and pushed until they hit hard against a metal bar. He kept grabbing my hair, and pulling back as hard as he could. He drew blood. Then he ripped my dress in half and ripped off my nylons, and then my underwear.

“I kept trying to push him off, but he was so much stronger than me. I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t think of anything. I kept screaming but there was no one around to hear me. No other cars had stopped at Forest Park. I was alone against him.”

Mom paused. I heard more sniffles, and her voice started to quiver. “Then he shoved himself inside me. Ashlynn, I had never had sex with anybody before that night. That was the most painful, the most agonizing thing I had ever felt. It was torture. I cried so much, the tears were stinging my eyes. It was—it still is—the worst feeling I’ve ever had in my entire life. It was useless to struggle anymore. I gave up fighting, turned my head and blacked out. I didn’t come back to myself until I felt my body hit the ground outside of the car. He had thrown me out of his car, I guess, since he had gotten what he wanted out of me. I could barely move as he called me a bitch, shut his car doors and drove off.

“I was really beat up and couldn’t get up to walk. I began to crawl onto the street and a car almost hit me, they stopped and asked me if I was alright but I couldn’t get the energy to say anything. They drove me to the hospital. My family came to offer support, but a lot of them were acting like it was my fault that he raped me. Your grandfather never came to visit me, even after I called him at his new wife’s house and begged to see him. Your father and I were just friends back then, but when he found out what happened, he tried to start a fight with the guy at school, and got suspended. Your father went with me to file the police report. I originally wanted one of your uncles to go with me to do it, but they refused, and never told me why.

“The cops found the guy and charged him with rape. It was so painful to have to sit in that courtroom and relive everything he put me

through, and on top of that he had the nerve to take the stand and lie about me. Him and his lawyers tried to bring up my past to use against me. He had it so twisted that some members of my own family had a hard time believing I was telling the truth at first. It was so humiliating to go through that. They tried to use everything I had ever done against me. They tried to assassinate my character. They tried to make me look like a lying whore. But they were the ones who were lying. Your father was there. We were a lot closer by then, and he stood by me through the whole ordeal. When nobody else would, he stood by me.

“Well, in mid-stream they changed his plea to statutory rape, which is a lesser charge. He only got ten years for what he did. Your grandma was furious about it. The prosecutor said that it was the only charge that would stick because it was just his word against mine and he was only a couple of years older than I was. The prosecutor didn’t want to risk the jury believing what the guy said about me and letting him go. He thought I would be happy just because the guy was going to jail for something, even though it wasn’t for everything he had done. He couldn’t have been further from the truth. Ashlynn, the pain of it all, the pain of the trial, the pain of what he did to me, the pain of what he put me through is still there. I can’t get rid of it.

“For that whole time, it seemed as if no one believed me, that no one was on my side. Except for your father, that is. He pretty much dedicated his life to being on my side. Ashlynn, you have no idea what that means to me. Your father was so patient with me during that whole time. It took so long for me to trust anybody again, even him. I remember telling him how I couldn’t trust him with my body, and he said, “I don’t care if you never let me get that close to you. I believe that God sent me to help you cope with your pain, and I intend to do my job.” Then he asked me to marry him. I couldn’t speak: all I could do was cry and nod my head.

“It’s gotten a little better over the years, obviously. God gave me two beautiful children, but I still can’t get rid of the pain. I threw myself so deep into my faith in hopes that God would heal me. He is healing me, but it’s such a long process. I’m better now than I’ve ever been, but the pain is still there. Every time I think I’ve finally let it go, I look

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into your eyes and I see it happening all over again, and worse, I see it happening to you. I still am afraid. I probably always will be.” I looked up, and Mom was looking into my eyes, her own eyes filling up with tears. “Ashlynn, as painful as everything I’ve been through was, I would go through it a thousand times before I ever let it happen to you. I’m sorry for being so hard on you. Maybe if I had told you why—”

I finished her sentence. “I still wouldn’t have listened to you. You don’t need to apologize for anything, Mom. I’m apologizing to you.” She sniffled again, and I sniffled with her. “You shouldn’t have had to tell me anything. I should have trusted you. I should have respected you.” Tears welled up in my eyes and streaked down my cheeks. Closing my eyes couldn’t stop them. “I’m so sorry, Mom. I’m sorry for everything. Could you ever forgive me?”

She didn’t say anything, but I felt her arm squeezing my shoulder and back. I felt her other arm wrap around me also, pulling me closer, moving my head from her shoulder to her bosom. We both stopped holding back, and cried together, just the two of us, for the rest of the night. It was all the answer I needed.

Epilogue

Tesenga's wake was this past Wednesday. I was actually the first one up and ready to go, hurrying everybody else up so we could get there on time. I couldn't sleep at all the night before, reading through Mom's Bible and thinking of all the foolish things I had done, some of which may have led to Tesenga losing her life. I couldn't wait to get to church that day. I went in, and it was like I had never been to the place before. It seemed like a totally different building. We arrived a little late, but we still had time to go to the casket and give Tesenga a last look before the rest of the service started. I opted not to view the casket. Shortly afterwards, her mother got up and spoke a few words about her. They were going to ask me to say something, but my mom and dad recommended against it, figuring I would be too distraught over everything that happened. I volunteered to speak anyway. I had spent all night preparing a speech, but I couldn't think of the right thing to say. Pastor Stokes called me and just told me to speak from my heart.

Tesenga's mother said that Tesenga wouldn't want us feeling sorrow and mourning her death, but she would rather we celebrated her life, so that's exactly what we did. The choir started performing all of Tesenga's favorite songs, from "Blessed Assurance" to "Melodies from Heaven." Before long, everyone was singing and dancing in the aisles.

Then it was my turn to speak. I'm usually not nervous at all when I speak in front of people, but I could feel queasiness in my stomach

as I got up in front of the congregation. I guess this is what people talk about when they speak of butterflies in their stomach.

“Tesenga,” I said timidly, “was my best friend. We always sat together in children’s church, and she would always give me words of encouragement whenever I was feeling down. She was always such a sunny, positive person who I loved to be around. Sometimes you looked at her, and she seemed to almost glow, she was so sunny. I was flattered that she thought so highly of me, but she once had told me that everyone has a quality you can look up to. God gave us all talents and gifts to use, and they are unique to each person he creates.

“I miss my best friend. Yesterday I talked to Pastor Parker about Tesenga. I was confused, wondering why God let her die and spared me. Pastor Parker told me that it was part of God’s plan for her and for all of us. Strangely enough, it made sense. I thought that maybe the pain of what Tesenga was dealing with in her life was too much for her to bear, so God called her home to be safe with him.” My eyes searched around the congregation until they found one particular person. My eyes trained on that person as I added, “And maybe to serve as a painful wake-up call for everyone she left behind.”

I cleared my throat and continued. “I’m going to end this by telling you a couple of things she used to always tell me. First of all, never feel ashamed for who you are. You are all very special in the eyes of your heavenly Father. He made you who you are for a reason, and God never makes mistakes. Secondly, be thankful for the good that God has done in your lives. No matter how bad you may think things are, I guarantee there is someone there who would love to trade places with you. And my best friend isn’t here to complain about her problems anymore, so please do not take the things God has blessed you with for granted. That’s all.”

After I left the podium, the choir sang a song of praise called “He’s Always There,” and I had to pause on my way back to the pew. I turned around and regarded what they were singing: it seemed like they were singing that song just for me. Then a lady minister led the whole congregation in a group prayer for deliverance, and it seemed as if everyone was praying specifically for me.

Then the pastor came up and delivered this amazing sermon. I'm sure he came up with it based on what happened to Tesenga and me, but I'm not 100% sure. He based it on Hebrews 13:15, where it says "God will never leave you nor forsake you." Basically, he was explaining that God watches over His children and protects them according to His master plan. He mentioned Psalms 18:30, saying that God is a shield for all who trust in him. He argued that even as God was calling Tesenga home, He protected her, because He kept her friend...me...alive to make sure her killers saw justice. As he talked about Deuteronomy 31:3, I thought about that. How much worse would it have been for Tesenga had I not been there? She would have been in that park alone against Raziel and his goons. If she had died, her murder may have never been solved and I would have gone on idolizing "Mr. Barter" in class without ever knowing the truth about that monster. It's pretty deep, if you think about it.

Pastor Stokes wrapped it up with Joshua 1:9, which says for us not to be afraid because He is with us wherever we go. I immediately thought of everything I had been through, especially at Forest Park. There was no arguing that God was with me the whole time, warning me of the danger I was walking into, protecting me even as I ran and fought for my life. When I thought of that, I looked over to the pew where Tesenga normally sat. In her place was the person I had sought out when I was at the podium. It was Tesenga's father, sober-faced, teary-eyed, and sitting by himself. I figured that he came to his senses and decided that whether his wife "approved" or not, he was going to be there one last time for his daughter—if only to say goodbye.

By the time Pastor Stokes was finished, I felt like the Pastor and I were the only two people in the church, and he was talking directly to me, just educating me on how things work in the spiritual realm. I had never felt so connected to what he was saying in service before. It was an amazing feeling. After he had finished, he asked everyone to bow his or her heads in prayer.

"If there are any of you," he said, "who have heard this sermon and hear God speaking to them, who know in their hearts that they have never made Christ their Lord and Savior, and who feel God

urging them to come into a new relationship with their heavenly Father, please raise your hand.” I raised mine. Pastor Stokes then asked for people who had fallen out of their relationship with God, then for people who wanted to pray for what he called “The baptism of the Holy Ghost.” I wasn’t sure what that was all about, but then he asked for people who wanted to join the church. Then he asked us all to raise our heads, and added, “Now, to those of you who raised your hands for any reason, or who know you should have raised your hands, please come down to the altar now.” Music began playing, and a few of the choir members standing behind the pastor began singing. A few people made their way down to the altar, to the applause of the rest of the congregation. My feet wouldn’t move. I looked around, and saw some of Tesenga’s family and my classmates in the congregation. I started having second thoughts. What would they say if they saw me at the altar? Would they think something was wrong with me? Maybe I shouldn’t do this after all.

Just then, the pastor looked out over the congregation and said, “I sense there are still some people God is talking to. You feel God tugging at your heart, telling you what you need to do. But you have doubts.” He raised his arms and said, “I want all of you to look at each brother and sister to your left and right and ask them if they would like to go to the altar. Tell them that if they want to go, you will go with them.” Right then, I felt a small hand on my shoulder. I turned and saw Mom, looking at me with a warm smile and a reassuring gaze. She didn’t say anything, she just nodded at me. I smiled back, grabbed her hand and made my way into the aisle and towards the altar. I noticed a few other people behind me who had done the same. That made me feel a little bit better about going. The congregation cheered for us, and out of the corner of my eye I saw a few of my classmates smiling and clapping. For a minute, I thought I saw Tesenga in the congregation, flashing her brightest, most radiant smile. I thought I saw her clapping for me in the shimmery silver two-piece I last saw her wearing in church. I think it was just my mind playing tricks on me, though.

Mom and I arrived at the altar, and the pastor walked over to me with a microphone in his hand. He placed a comforting hand on my

shoulder and said, “You’ve made some foolish choices in the past, and you’ve been running for your life. Well, God says you don’t have to run anymore. God says that you have never felt appreciated. Like people only see one part of you, but you feel neglected in other areas that are just as important to you. It has you questioning your identity, questioning who you are.”

He smiled at me and added, “Well, God says He knows exactly who you are. You are His child, You are His beautiful, radiant Princess. Just as your natural father wrapped his arms around you to protect and comfort you from the cold when you were a baby, so will your heavenly Father wrap His arms around you to protect you and comfort you, whenever and wherever the world tries to destroy you. You have access to power that is greater than anything this evil world can throw at you, and no weapon formed against you shall prosper. All you have to do is believe, and confess.”

The congregation behind me erupted in applause, and Mom hugged me. It was the best hug I had ever received from her. She then whispered in my ear, “You’re going to be fine, sweetie. I’m here for you every step of the way.” I love my Mom.

The dream reoccurred that very night. I was in Africa, the motherland. I don’t know what country, but I was in a village, tending to some children. I had on this beautiful red and gold robe that wraps around my body. I remember liking how it blows in the wind. I used to wear one of those gold choker things around my neck, but this time around I had taken it off. My hair had grown out, and was in braids. I walked barefoot, but yet I felt no discomfort.

I looked up from one child and I saw a man enter my town. I remember seeing him before. He is an unbelievable sight, tall and thin, muscular and majestic, onyx skin shining with sun and sweat, covered in a leopard skin tunic. He walked through my village in silence, hands behind his back, looking at everything with what seemed like intrigue or wonder. Every woman who saw him swooned. I could hear them all whisper to each other of how they would like to have such a man choose them as his bride, and what they would do for him if he made

that choice. I watched his stride, slow, deliberate and confident, and I felt the same way the other girls felt. He looked my way, and I yearned for him to speak to me, imagining his voice as deep and powerful. He said nothing and continued walking, eventually leaving the village. I knew that he did this on a regular basis, about once a month, and I decided not to let him pass by anymore. I decided to go after him and tell him how I feel.

I told a child a few years younger than me that I will be back shortly, and I ran after him. I asked him to stop, or at least slow down, then I begged him to. About a mile away from the village, he did stop. He turned around and looked at me. I think it's a look of sorrow or pity, but I paid it no mind.

"Beautiful maiden," he said, his voice deep, resonating through me, making me quiver, "you have no place out here. Please go home."

I shook my head. "No," I tell him, "you are a magnificent man, and I am in love with you. I will never leave your side, and I will follow you wherever you go."

I saw sorrow in his hazel eyes. "Follow me," he said with a sigh, "and you will regret it."

He continued traveling, and I followed him for miles, through plains and deserts, to the entrance to a forest. He stopped and turned back at me, his voice still somber, pleading with me. "Beautiful maiden, you have no place out here. Please go home." I once again told him that I loved him, and I would follow him wherever he went. His eyes had the same sorrow as he repeated, "Follow me, and you will regret it."

He made his way deep into the forest, so deep that I couldn't tell where the forest began or ended. I was right behind him. At last, he stopped at a large tree which I thought was at the very center of the forest. On the ground in front of the tree was another leopard skin, much like the one he had been wearing. I looked up from the leopard skin and I saw him standing before me, naked. He was not ashamed of his nakedness, nor was I ashamed to see it. He bowed his head, and slowly crouched, all the while singing in a melancholy baritone.

QUAN WILLIAMS

*I walk between lives,
of man and of beast.
my sin is my sentence,
my life is my loss,
a life has been taken
by my savage hand.
Now nature has cursed me
one day every thirty,
to walk as the man
and suffer his pain.
but I am a leopard
who knows of no mercy,
and woe to the foolish
who tempts me again.*

By the time his song was done, there was no man before me, but a savage leopard, who snarled at me and looked with murder in his eyes. I was terrified. I turned and ran as fast as I could, trying to retrace my steps and make it back to the edge of the forest. But I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings when I followed him into the forest, so quickly I became lost. I did not stop running, though, as I hear the leopard's footsteps and snarling breath right behind me. It seemed that at any moment he would overtake me, but terror kept me from stopping. I reached the top of a hill, and just as the leopard jumped at me, I stumbled down the hill, rolling and tumbling, barely missing the leopard's gnash. Terror kept me from feeling pain. I quickly rose and continued running, feeling the leopard close at my back again.

I had to stop at a river. I had no idea where in the dense forest I was. The river before me was narrow, but not narrow enough for me to jump across, and much too deep to try to wade through. Its current flowed too swiftly for me to try to swim across. I was trapped. I turned around, and the leopard had slowed down. It stalked me, approaching slowly, deliberately, just as it strode when it was yet a man. It crouched to pounce on me, wagging its rear end, its tail swaying hypnotically back and forth. Then I heard a creaking sound. The leopard heard it,

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too, and paused. I looked behind me: an olive tree on the other side of the river slowly bent its way over the river, its top landing at my feet. Without hesitation I climbed onto its strongest branch and the tree rose, just as the leopard bounded at me. The animal missed, crashing into the river and being swept away by the current. I watched the leopard struggle against the current as it eventually disappeared from sight, and I could not help pitying the beast. I climbed down from the tree, thanking it for saving my life by tearing off a piece of my garment and tying it around one of its lower branches. I looked ahead and was surprised to find myself at the edge of the forest. I made my way out and back to my village, where my mother and father awaited me with open arms. My father was the first to hug me, kissing my forehead and whispering into my ear that I am safe now. I woke up shortly after, and I have never had that dream again.