

RENEE AND JAY<sup>2</sup>

J. J. MURRAY

 JAMES CROWE PRESS   
~Fuel for the multicultural soul~



~Fuel for the multicultural soul~

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*For my wife and children,  
who have taught me what  
rainbows really are*

## PREFACE

In 1997, I wrote a novel to make my wife Amy Renee laugh. She laughed (thankfully) and encouraged me to get it published. Three years of Amy's edits later, *Renee and Jay* was born. To some extent, the plot of *Renee and Jay* mirrors our own four-year courtship. I wrote *Renee and Jay* as a tribute to Amy, who is still infinitely sassier, sexier, and smarter than any character I could ever create.

The book you are about to read picks up where *Renee and Jay* left off with the colorful, event-filled marriage of Renee and Giovanni. This book is a tribute to my wife, my family, and my marriage, ten years' strong in January 2004. If *your* jaw drops as you read, know that *my* jaw had already dropped *as it happened*.

As you read, please keep in mind that the world you are about to enter is anything but ideal, so don't expect perfection on any character's part. Reality isn't always as pretty or as cut-and-dried as many readers want it to be in books, and I strive to write as realistically as possible. You may find yourself saying, "*I would (or wouldn't) have done or said it that way.*" You may find yourself fussing out loud at what a character says or does—or *doesn't* say or do. You may even hate a character, situation, or chapter.

Good.

That's why I write. I want to get some kind of reaction from you. I want to tick you off, to make you laugh, to make you cry, to make you wonder—to keep you thinking and interacting with the people in my world. It's my job to take your emotions on a roller-coaster ride into perhaps a world unknown to you, and I'd be doing you a disservice if the people you are about to meet (or reacquaint yourselves with) aren't interestingly flawed, damaged, or dysfunctional in some way.

If you want perfect romance, read a Harlequin or write your own.

If you want the real deal, keep reading.



# ONE

Janae Vanni Luchesi came into the world *allegro*.

She wanted to be born worse than any child on earth. Conceived while I was taking the pill like daily communion, Janae decided to surprise us two weeks early.

And we weren't ready.

I was alone in our first home, a three-bedroom brick ranch in Wilmont in Northwest Roanoke, Virginia, and I had to call Giovanni at Luchesi's Deli and Pizzeria, which is really a glorified bakery that Giovanni and his father run on Fourth Street five miles away.

"My water broke," I told Giovanni.

Three simple words and twenty minutes later, Giovanni carried me to that lime-green Cadillac boat of his, and off we went, fishtailing and swimming to the hospital.

With just my toothbrush.

He parked at the emergency entrance of Lewis-Gale Hospital in Salem and carried me inside.

"I can walk, Giovanni," I said.

"But you are leaking!" he shouted.

Inside, he lost it at the first desk we came to. "My wife, she is having *il bambino!*" He always breaks into Italian when he gets emotional.

"What's ill?" the countrified nurse said.

"I am having a *baby*," I said with an attitude. Guess she couldn't see the brown watermelon poking out of my yellow tent-dress. "My water broke half an hour ago."

"Is your doctor at this hospital?"

No, bitch. We were on our way to New Jersey and just decided to drop this chap off. "Yes. Dr. Sprague." I felt Giovanni's arms weaken. "Could you maybe get me a wheelchair?"

"What is your name, ma'am?" the nurse asked.

She didn't believe we were in the right place. "Renee Luchesi."

She looked from me to Giovanni. "Is this your husband?"

Are you a heifer? “Yes. Now get Doctor Sprague.” Stat! Once our doctor found us in the waiting room, I calmed down. Giovanni didn’t, asking way too many questions (“This water breaking—it is normal?” and “Do your contractions hurt?”) and race-walking his skinny Italian ass up and down and up that hall for no apparent reason at all.

When Mama finally arrived, Giovanni snapped at her, talking with his hands. “I called you three hours ago! What took you so long?”

“Don’t be yellin’ at me, Giovanni!” Mama snapped back. “Her damn water broke, that’s all. It’s gonna be a while, shit.”

Thirty hours later, Giovanni looked stank, smelled stank, was stank. While Mama sat quietly and read a few true crime books, Giovanni was worrisome, running around looking for nurses, wiping the tiniest dot of sweat from my forehead, and practically shoving crushed ice down my throat. I was doing fine, and once they hit me with that epidural, I was flying.

Then they said “C-section.”

My blood pressure rose like a rocket and shot even higher when Mama and Giovanni argued over who should go into the operating room with me.

“I brought her into this world,” Mama shouted, “and I can take *you* out!”

“Well,” Giovanni shouted back, “she’s *my* wife and she’s going to have *my* child!”

“As far as you know,” Mama snapped.

“What is this ‘as far as you know’ business?”

“Mama’s baby, daddy’s *maybe*,” Mama said with a smirk.

“And what does that mean?”

“I’m going in alone,” I interrupted. “Shit, both y’all are going to scare my daughter back in!”

An hour later, with Giovanni holding my hand, Janae came screaming into the world looking like anybody’s white girl.

“She’ll darken up,” Mama said later when they brought Janae to me. “She ain’t gonna be ashy like her daddy.”

It took me six weeks to get up and around afterwards.

Giovanni *still* hasn’t recovered.

## TWO

Janae didn't know her daddy was white until she was four. Niesha Simpkins told her while we were at Strauss Park on a steamy Saturday playing on the swings.

Niesha said, "Your daddy white, and you yella, Janae."

Instead of correcting Niesha, I listened to my daughter for a while. Besides, I was worn out. Janae had stopped taking naps when she was two and never stopped moving from sunup to sundown.

"Nuh-uh," Janae said, poking out her lip like I do when I know Giovanni is wrong. "My daddy pink, an' I'm beige."

"What's beige?" Niesha said. Niesha probably flunked colors at daycare. Janae hasn't gone to daycare at all. She's been raised in a bakery.

Janae dragged Niesha over to me and repeated what I had already heard. "You're *both* right," I told them.

"How we both right?" Janae asked.

"Niesha's right because your daddy's skin *is* white."

"Not all the time, Mama."

I smiled. "And that's where *you're* right, Janae. Sometimes it turns pink, like when we play tricks on him."

"Mama plays tricks on my daddy all the time," Janae told Niesha.

They aren't tricks, really. Giovanni still takes everything I say as the truth, when most of the time I'm just kidding around. It's in my nature courtesy of my mama. Say I tell him something like, "I quit my job today, Giovanni," when I have no intention of *ever* doing that. Giovanni will believe me and say something like, "Well, Renee, if that's really what you want, it will take some belt-tightening but I think we could swing it." Then I'll giggle, he'll turn red, and Janae will say, "Mama tricked you again, Daddy!" I just like me some drama for drama's sake sometimes. I like to argue with him just to get him fired up, and damn if he doesn't listen to me all the way out without interrupting. That is respect. My man doesn't say much, but what he does say matters.

"But am I yella, Mama?"

I picked up Janae and hugged her. “You’re my little rainbow, Janae. You’re every single color of a rainbow.”

And she is. Light brown eyes, toasted brown skin, flecks of red in her “better-than-good” black hair, orange freckles during the summer, red-orange lips. Janae is her daddy’s daughter, ten years old and going on twenty-five. Giovanni calls her his girlfriend, she calls him her boyfriend, and the two of them make the cutest couple.

When they aren’t pissing me off.

They piss me off a lot, especially in the morning when I’m trying to sleep in since I don’t have to go in to work at Star City Cable until nine.

Giovanni wakes Janae every morning with his whiskers. I can hear him rubbing those hog bristles on her cheeks from my bedroom, and Janae always wakes up giggling. They don’t make me giggle. Those bristles hurt, especially if he’s rubbing them down there on my thighs. I don’t mind what he does next, but getting hog bristle splinters near my coochie isn’t nice.

“You gotta shave,” Janae says. “And your breath is kickin’, Daddy. You gotta brush your teeth!”

Giovanni has the garlic dragon 24-7 and doesn’t even know it. I’ve tried every kind of toothpaste with no relief. No vampire will ever come near our home. His breath is so bad it’s actually visible. It is definitely an Italian thing.

Giovanni used to carry Janae to the bathroom, but now she puts on crocodile slippers and walks to the bathroom by herself. They think I’m still asleep and “Shh” each other a lot. *Loudly*. I hear water running, some furious brushing, a little gargling, and the nastiest “hock-TUI!”

That’s Janae trying to be like her daddy, who sucks up every bit of snot in his skinny-ass body and HOCK-TUIS it all into my sink every morning. That has to be a man thing. I hate seeing that glob of green spaghetti peeking at me from just under the stopper. That shit just never goes down the drain the first time, and I refuse to touch it. And the weak-ass water pressure in this house doesn’t always rinse it away.

“Shh, *bella*,” Giovanni says. “Wash your face now.”

Giovanni shaves his ashy face while Janae probably uses too much soap on her washcloth. She'll learn. Her nose will be ashy as Giovanni's entire body, and he still doesn't use a washcloth after all my nagging. I allow him to shave in my sink, but I will not allow him back in my shower. I got sick of seeing his pubes on my soap and banished him to the basement shower.

When Giovanni finishes scraping his face, Janae says, "Don't forget to clean the sink, Daddy!" That's *my* little girl.

"Oh no!" he says. "Hair monsters! Help me, Janae!"

Giovanni's crazy like that. Mama tells Janae that she's only half-crazy, but what does Mama know? She doesn't live with them. They're *both* crazy.

I hear water running. "You saved us from the hair monsters, Janae. How can I ever repay you?" Italians are so theatrical. It's why I *don't* go to operas.

"Make me a bull's-eye," she says. Bull's-eyes are nasty.

"Go put on the clothes Mama laid out for you, and I'll make you a bull's-eye."

I hear Janae dragging her feet back to her room. She knows that I hate it when she slip-slides like that. "Pick your feet up," I tell her every damn day. The child would rather slip-slide and get a swat on the butt.

Janae's room is blue, green, yellow, and red, and it's always clean because I say it has to be. Giovanni doesn't even know it's messy when it's messy. He needs to get his eyes checked.

Her clothes are always clean, ironed, and don't have lint on them because I do the laundry. Giovanni used to, but I got tired of fuzz balls all over Janae's clothes and her clothes not fitting after just one wash. Now, I wash her clothes and my clothes but not Giovanni's. He can ruin his own clothes if he wants to, but as stank as they get from that bakery, anything is an improvement.

Janae comes into my room—and it is *my* room though Giovanni sleeps here—dressed in jeans and a red T-shirt, both lovingly starched and ironed by me the night before. I am super mama. I have stock in Niagara Spray Starch. She grabs my hand gently, and I "wake up."

"Turn around," I say, and she does. She is so beautiful that she makes me feel like a redheaded stepchild sometimes. This child is

going to be trouble—for black *and* white boys—when she gets older. “Get the brush and the lotion.”

She goes to my vanity and gets my brush and a bottle of cocoa butter lotion. Giovanni used to brush her hair, but he didn’t have a single clue. He’d brush it straight down, separate it, slap on two rubber bands, and turn Janae into Pocahontas. I rake that brush through her hair. That hair fears me. It does whatever I tell it to do. When Janae was little, she would cry her little eyes out whenever I fixed her hair, but she doesn’t cry now because she’s not allowed to.

I bathe that child in lotion, putting extra on her hands, arms, and face. “You brush your teeth?” She nods. “Let me smell.” She blows a minty breath at me. “Is it cold out?” She shakes her head. “Take a jacket just in case.”

“Okay.”

“Give me a kiss”—she does, but on the cheek because *I* have the dragon—“and tell your daddy he had better clean up the kitchen before he leaves.”

She closes the door behind her and bounces down the stairs to the kitchen. Since I’m usually awake from all their damn noise, I listen to this little daily drama while I sit at the top of the stairs. Giovanni’s rattling pans at the stove, and Janae is dragging a chair across the kitchen floor. “Shh,” my ass. He turns on the radio to a classical station, and I roll my eyes. I’ve told him about trying to corrupt Janae with that opera shit. My little girl is going to be R&B and hip-hop.

I sneak down the stairs and sit on the bottom step. I lean around the corner and see the making of a bull’s-eye. Giovanni folds a piece of bakery bread in half and holds it out to Janae. She takes a bite out of the middle. Giovanni opens the bread and puts one of his big brown eyes up to the hole. “We have target,” he says.

“Drop target!” Janae says, and he drops the bread, that *has* to have Janae’s saliva all over it, into a pan popping with butter.

“That’s so nasty, Giovanni!” I say, and I storm into the kitchen. “That bread got germs all over it!”

"They're *her* germs," Giovanni says. "And she'll be eating *her* bull's-eye later." I hate it when he's right. I say nothing. He picks up an egg. "We have bullet."

"Fire one!" Janae yells, and Giovanni cracks the egg on the side of the pan, dropping the yolk onto the hole. "Bull's-eye!"

I sit at the table. "Why are you feeding her so many eggs? You know they're high in cholesterol. And why does she have to be so close to the stove? She's going to get a grease burn for sure."

Giovanni puts a hand on Janae's shoulder. "I will protect you, my queen."

The shit smells good, and I'm hungry as a mug. "When you're through with hers, make me one, Giovanni, but make sure my yolk's runny."

"Runny yolk for Mama," he says.

While Janae's bull's-eye is cooking, Giovanni puts her books in her book bag. "What-a do-a you-a want-a for-a lunch-a?" he asks her. He talks too much like his Pops sometimes. I love that old man, even if Janae says he has "the biggest nose in the universe." And he does. I've seen smaller *elbows*.

"Um, I want an apple, a banana, and four cookies."

"Hold on now, girl," I say. "Those aren't the four food groups."

"Sure they are," Giovanni says. "The apple and banana are her fruit, the milk she'll get at school is her dairy product, and the cookies are made with flour and *vegetable* oil."

I roll my eyes. He *still* has an answer for everything, but he can't add for shit. Luckily, Pops does the accounting at the bakery. "That's only three, Mr. Man. Make her a bologna sandwich or something."

"A sand-wish?" he says to Janae.

"It's a sand-*witch*, Daddy," Janae tells him.

"A witch? Where?" Giovanni pulls out the cross and the silver star he wears around his neck.

"Oh, puh-lease," I say. "And where the hell's my espresso?"

A little later, I have my espresso and a bull's-eye in front of me, but I'm still pissed. We sit holding hands, and Janae prays "God is Great."

“*Buon appetito!*” Giovanni shouts. The man is much too loud at the breakfast table or any table for that matter. All those years of yelling, “Order up!” Hmm. But I kind of like him loud in my bed. I believe the louder sex is, the better sex is.

“*Altrettano!*” Janae shouts back. He’s corrupting her with Italian, too. The girl’s going to be the first Ebonic Italian.

“Shut up and eat,” I say. I look at Giovanni, a glob of yolk goo on his lip. “Messy Marvin.” Janae starts chewing and showing her food to Giovanni. “And no chew and show, y’all! I want this food to digest!”

When we’re through, Janae throws the paper plates and napkins away while Giovanni washes the forks and pan. I don’t have to do shit when it comes to breakfast except eat and hover around Giovanni to make sure he leaves my kitchen spotless. When I check out the refrigerator, I’m blinded it’s so shiny. He knows I have a keen eye and a sensitive nose. He knows that I can spot a microscopic drink dribble in the fridge from twenty feet and smell milk going bad as I’m turning my car into the driveway. And he is *good* in the kitchen, unlike most men. He cleans up after himself every time, and he doesn’t even have to be asked. He’s considerate like that, and trust me—there’s nothing better than to come home tired from a hard day’s work to a clean kitchen. Love is an shiny, *empty* kitchen sink.

Then they kiss me, one smooch on each cheek, and get in Giovanni’s ugly-ass, lime-green, hoopdy Caddy and drive to the bakery to see Pops before school. One day, Giovanni will drive a car that *I* can look good in.

## THREE

And I definitely look good in this house in Roanoke county, my two-story dream house: four large carpeted bedrooms with huge closets, two spacious baths, dining room and living room with all new furniture that doesn't tilt to the side or have a scuff mark, a roof that doesn't leak, windows that don't need to be opened with a hammer, a level yard, a basement that doesn't flood every time it rains, and a kitchen with lots of counter space and appliances that actually work.

Our first house—puh-lease. Phone booth kitchen and single bath, living room where only furniture lived on the scarred and scuffed wood floor, tiny bedrooms with tinier closets, three eyes working on the stove, an oven that would cook only half a cake to perfection (leaving the other half the consistency of pudding), a sloping, rock-filled yard—an unfixable fixer-upper that I survived for five years. We spent a lot of time at Mama's house, let me tell you, and I will never live in a brick *raunch* again. The only thing that still exists from our first house is a hanging plant that just won't die ... or grow. A Bonsai hanging plant? I leave it under a fluorescent light on the kitchen counter to keep it green. Yeah, I've got a "hanging-around" plant in the room where I basically hang around. I'm glad I married a baker.

And we cook a *lot*.

They say that the longer a couple stays together, the more alike they get, even physically. I doubt the physical part in our situation, but we are growing alike in many ways. I'm getting softer—I *am*, damn it!—and he's getting more aggressive. We have agreed to disagree *many* times, and we *both* wear the pants in this relationship. My pants just happen to be da bomb. And ironed. And lint-free. And the right size.

Take getting this house, for instance. We were pre-qualified for a certain price range, and he fought like hell for a split level in the city of Roanoke at the lower end of that price range.

"I don't want to be house-poor," he told me. "Sometimes business is slow at the bakery."

"We can manage," I said, "because interest rates are down."

“But this house is closer to the bakery and to your work,” he countered. “We’ll save lots of money on gas and have more time together as a family.”

“If we get rid of your hoopdy, that’ll solve the gas problem. As for more time, you and Pops will just have to hire some folks to help y’all out.”

“But we can build sweat equity so much faster at the split level,” he said. For only a high school graduate, this man reads up on every little thing. He could probably run a damn bank for all he’s learned about finance.

“But when would you find time to do the repairs and upgrades?”

He didn’t answer. He knew I was right. “Well, the county house *does* have a bigger yard ...”

So we compromised. I have my dream home, and I’m proud to have folks over to visit, and I know Giovanni sees the pride shining in my eyes. He has his garden—and that hoopdy, grrr—and we live in a safe neighborhood. Some months have been lean at the bakery, and we’ve had to fuss and scrape, but we’ve always paid the house note on time.

The biggest part of the compromise was sending Janae to a city school, to Highland Park Elementary, which is only a short walk to the bakery. Janae has been a fixture at Luchesi’s since Giovanni put her playpen next to the Berkel machine and handed her some dough to play with. While Giovanni and Pops worked, Janae watched, learned ... and ate the dough. Sometimes Giovanni would put her in a pouch around his stomach and carry her around like a kangaroo while he worked. I didn’t like him doing that one damn bit, especially after a man from the *Roanoke Times* came to the bakery and took their picture. Naturally the picture came out on the front damn page on a Saturday, and I had to spend most of the service at High Holiness the next day saving my ass.

“Think of all the germs,” they were saying. “What if he drops her? What kind of mother lets her daughter be raised like that?”

Well, *this* mother, but I couldn’t tell them that. Shit, it was free daycare, we were still paying for the C-section, and we had just started paying a mortgage on my dream house.

As soon as Janae could walk, she started exploring everything in that bakery. I was scared that she'd get hurt with all those blades, knives, machines, and ovens.

"I grew up in a bakery," Giovanni said.

"And look what happened to you. You never left!" And I don't want Janae to spend the rest of her life in that bakery. She's going to graduate high school, college, med school, *and* law school. If we can just find the money, that is. "I want more than a bakery for Janae."

"Just for now," he whispered.

He's good at calming me down with just a whisper. He isn't at all like those so-called "heroes" in most romance books, you know, those dark, brooding, sexists who ooze testosterone 24-7 and put women down. Why would any woman want a man like that? Giovanni has a quiet strength, and I can always count on him. Always.

"Just until we get a more solid financial footing," he continued. "And anyway, all the dangerous things are out of her reach."

"She could wander out the back when you're not looking."

"We're always looking, Renee, and the back door is always locked."

"She could wander out the front door."

"It opens in, not out, and she can't reach the handle."

"Yet. If anything happens to her, Mr. Man ..."

"I won't let anything happen, Renee."

And nothing bad ever did. That child was never out of Giovanni and Pops's sight and probably received more attention at that bakery than at any daycare center where I hear the kids come out all ornery and bad mannered.

When Janae turned four, I let her help out more at the bakery ... so she could help *me* out more at home. She put the knives, forks, and spoons in blue cloth napkins, rolling them up tight, swept up all the flour around the Berkel, and even washed some dishes. I didn't say shit about any of that. Because of her "training," I don't have to do shit around the kitchen to this very day except cook.

And I refuse to pick up the shit outside.

Giovanni thought Janae should have a pet. “To give her more responsibility,” he explained. He started her with fish. I hate fish because they shit where they eat and drink. Janae got tired of making fish faces at those anorexic goldfish and dumped all the fish food into the tank one night. In the morning, they were all dead. She and I had fun watching them take one final swim around and around in the toilet.

I wouldn’t let Janae get a hamster since hamsters are really rats. I don’t do rats. Our first place, a rental in Salem, had sewer rats as big as footballs because of a nearby all-you-can-eat-and-excrete restaurant. Late at night, they’d play croquet with me on my way to the bathroom—they were the balls, and I was the wicket. We only stayed there a week. Our Wilmont house had little field mice, and no matter how much Giovanni said, “But they’re so cute,” I enjoyed feeding them still stuck in their traps to the neighbor’s cats every morning. Shit, it beat the hell out of watching *Good Morning, America*. Our current house doesn’t have rats. Yet. But I have traps set out just in case, and they are loaded with peanut butter and bacon.

I was so pissed that night we got the dog, mainly because *I* didn’t pick out the dog. I wouldn’t have picked out what we got. I’d have gotten a mean dog like a bullmastiff that would attack first, dine for a while, and bark when he was done.

“Giovanni Luchesi!” I yelled. “There’s a deformed puppy dog in the basement!”

“And that’s where he’ll stay,” Giovanni said. “And he isn’t deformed.”

“He looks like a runt.”

“He’ll get bigger, and when he’s bigger, he’ll be an outdoor dog.”

“But he shit everywhere down there!”

“I’ll clean it up,” Giovanni said. “Come on, Janae. Let’s meet your new puppy.”

The runt wasn’t much to look at. He was chocolate with fat paws and a round belly that dragged on the floor. He licked Janae’s face until she giggled and rolled over, the puppy yipping and yapping.

“Is he gonna get real big, Daddy?”

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"Yes," Giovanni said. "He's a Labrador retriever. He'll grow really big."

"As big as Pops?"

I laughed. "There's nothing on earth as big as your Pops."

"I wanna name him ... Hershey."

Hershey now weighs *one hundred and fifty pounds* and drops at least *ten* pounds of shit a day near the fence. He can't do it in a nice little pile out of sight, oh no! He distributes his treasures where anyone walking by can see them and appreciate their size, texture, and odor. And that dog barks at everything that moves. A leaf blows into the yard, he barks. A bee buzzes by, he barks. It snows, he barks. When I come home ... he keeps his *damn* mouth shut. If that dog *ever* barks at me, he's going to the pound.

In a way, though, I have Hershey to thank for Janae's introduction to sex. We had Hershey fixed, and Janae didn't understand me when I said "Snip snip."

"Snip snip what?" she asked.

"Hershey's balls."

"His balls?"

"Dogs have balls that help them make babies. So does your daddy. That's how we made you. The doctor took off Hershey's balls, and one day the doctor is going to snip snip Daddy, too."

"Oh," she said. "I understand."

"Renee!" Giovanni shouted, his face turning red.

"I'm just kidding!" I shouted back. And I was. I need that man intact at night.

"You tricked him again, Mama," Janae said.

She was so smart—and she was only four!

## FOUR

Then Janae started school, and since the first day Janae went to Highland Park until now, the principal and teachers at that school have been nothing but trouble.

And naturally, I've made trouble back.

We could have sent her to county schools which have higher graduation rates, higher SAT scores, better facilities, more computers ... It's a long list. But Highland Park's location, its racial mix, and its magnet program sold Giovanni and me.

Then.

Her first day in first grade, Janae and a white girl, Jennifer, were pasting shapes on a poster board using that minty paste I know Giovanni ate for snacks as a child. Jennifer smeared some paste on Janae's arm, so Janae smeared some paste on Jennifer's hair. That's what I would have done. I never liked blonds. Jennifer hit Janae on the arm, so Janae hit Jennifer dead in the nose. I would have done that, too, following it with a left uppercut. Janae don't take shit from anyone, just like her mama. But when Jennifer fell out on the floor like some of the ladies at High Holiness do every Sunday and bled all over the place ...

... Mrs. Bell, the heifer principal who has been stuck on stupid since the day someone promoted her sorry ass, called Giovanni and me to come in for an emergency conference. We walked into that office, and Janae asked me, "Mama, what's a nigger?"

I stared hard at little, blubbering Jennifer. "Did *she* call you that?"

Janae grabbed my hand and pointed at a stringy-haired wench on the bench. "No, Mama. Jennifer's *mama* did."

I taught Janae a whole bunch of new words that day. While Giovanni barely held me back, I called Jennifer's mama a bitch-heifer, a cracker-wench, a bitch-cracker, a heifer-wench, and a number of combinations ending in "ho." I'm sure I rhymed, too.

And what did Mrs. Bell do? She suspended *Janae* for a *week*.

"My child is not going back to that school," I told Giovanni that night before we went to bed. "We're transferring her to a county school."

"But it's so close to the bakery, honey," he said. "Pops and me will be devastated."

"Better y'all than Janae."

He bumped his stuff against my ass. "Janae *did* knock her out."

"As she *should* have. My girl was just defending herself. But why did Janae get a whole week and the other girl got nothing?"

He sighed and rolled away from me. "Well, today's little episode—"

"And don't you *even* blame *me* for her getting five days."

He turned out the light. "Good night, Renee."

I was calmer by the end of Janae's week of suspension, and Giovanni and I had a talk with Janae. A talk, under my definition, is where I talk, Giovanni sometimes says something weak, and Janae keeps her mouth shut.

"Janae, if anyone calls you a name or bothers you," Giovanni said, "you tell your teacher."

"What good is that going to do?" I asked.

"It's the right thing to do."

"My child isn't going to be a tattletale or a snitch!"

"It'll keep her out of trouble."

"And make every kid in that class more hateful to her than they already are."

Giovanni paced back and forth in front of Janae's stuffed animals. "Okay, what would you have her do?"

I took Janae's chin in my hands and stared hard. "Janae, if anyone cusses you, cuss them back. If anyone hits you, hit them back. Even if the teacher sasses you, you sass the teacher back."

Giovanni threw up his hands and started talking with them. "You want her to fight fire with fire? Two wrongs do not—"

Then I held up my hand. Giovanni stopped talking. A few years of marriage to me had taught him to freeze whenever I held up "the hand." I stared harder at Janae. "If you do it enough, eventually no one will mess with you, and you can go on about your business."

It took the rest of that year and twelve more days of suspensions, but no one *ever* messed with my little girl again after that.

Two wrongs *can* make a right.

## FIVE

Until this year.

Yesterday, as a matter of fact. That's why I'm in such a bitchy mood this morning, taking out some of my bitchiness on my loving husband and child. I know I shouldn't do that, but I do. I guess it's one way that I try to control what is out of my control.

I have another conference with Mrs. Bell, and even my mama, who Janae calls Nay-Nay, is going to be there. It seems Giovanni taught Janae two new words yesterday while he was driving her to school: "sumbitch" and "scumbag." Naturally, Janae has to use these choice, redneck words on the first kid who messes with her—only the kid turns out to be a fat black boy named Freddie King Smith.

"I called Freddie a sumbitch cuz he was tryin' to grab my titties, Mama!" Janae had explained to me before going to bed early as part of her punishment.

"Did Freddie get in trouble?"

"No. I had to go back and apologize to Freddie in front of the *whole* class."

Would I ever do that? No way. She's too much like her daddy sometimes. "What did you say?"

She rolled her eyes. "I said, 'Freddie, I'm sorry I called you a sumbitch for trying to grab my titties. I should have called you a scumbag.'"

I laughed because that was the best apology I'd ever heard. "Don't worry, little girl, Mama's going to get you out of this one."

I tucked her in. "Mama, Mrs. Bell says titties are called breasts."

"Mrs. Bell don't know—" And then I stopped. "She doesn't know anything, Janae."

Janae giggled. "She don't know shit either."

"Did Daddy teach that word to you?"

"Uh-huh."

I want to hate Janae today, but I can't. She may be her daddy's child, but that girl is a miniature me. I'll just do a little hatin' on

Giovanni instead. After all, I've had more practice, and he's a much easier target.

I get to Star City Cable late, but it doesn't matter now that I've been promoted to management. I can come in any damn time I want, say just about any damn thing I want to whoever I want to (except for the old white farts on the executive level), and leave ... whenever my work gets done, which is often after the *Friends* reruns are over at eight.

Management suits me except for the staying-late part.

I had tried working as an outside tech, and Giovanni was right there encouraging me to break some more barriers, but that shit wasn't for me. I would have been the first African-American female in this area to climb poles and do the actual connecting of service, all because I opened my big mouth at a union meeting. "I'll be your pioneer," I told them. At first, it was easy. I passed every written test, passed my first pole climbs at twelve and fifteen feet—but I failed the twenty-foot test. I was a foot from the top getting ready for my maneuvers when my foot slipped. Those damn spiked boots never fit right anyway. I grabbed for the pole instead of leaning back in my harness like we were taught to do, learned that gravity works harder when you're twenty feet off the ground, got me some nasty-ass splinters in my arms, side, and legs, and landed on my ass. I consoled myself with a simple phrase: "Pole-climbing is not in my culture—there are no telephone poles in Africa."

I *know* that there are ... but the thought makes me feel better.

So now I have Connie's old job after that heifer retired two months ago. It wasn't a hard job to get since I was one of the few people in customer service with a college degree. Collette was furious, mainly because she had more seniority, but also because I was now her boss. I get to order Mrs. Clyde Dunbar around, and Mrs. Clyde Dunbar can't stand it one damn bit. As a result, that tall, overdressed wench and I haven't spoken outside of work in two months.

And today, I get to mess with her.

One of my tasks as manager is to listen in on customer calls. I sit in a little room, a window letting me see everyone on the floor, and watch fifty faces. If a representative looks too pissed,

too confused, or too happy, I connect to his or her phone line. It's called "call monitoring," and believe me, it's the shit.

Today Collette looks especially stressed, so I listen in.

"That's not what I'm saying, Mrs. Greene—"

"—Y'all just charge whatever the *fuck* you want whenever you motherfuckin' want to—"

"—But I'm saying that someone at that address ordered a pay-per-view—"

"—whenever the *fuck* you want to and I ain't takin' it—"

"—My records show someone ordered a boxing—"

"—no more, no way, and *fuck* your records! Let me speak to someone who knows what the *fuck* is going on!"

That's my cue. I've already taken a few notes on my "Remote Observation Form" (ROF), and I plug my headset into Collette's line right there in my little booth. Technology is so wonderful. I don't have to walk the floor like heifer Connie had to do. Mrs. Greene's account comes up on my monitor, and sure enough, someone did order a boxing match for \$49.95 at Mrs. Greene's address. I scroll down her account and find that no one has *ever* ordered pay-per-view from that address in the past.

"Mrs. Greene, this is Mrs. Dunbar's supervisor, Renee Luchesi. How can I be of assistance?" I love saying that "supervisor" part. I always say it a little louder each time. I can hear Collette grinding her teeth.

"Tell this ho I ain't payin' no seventy-five dollars for no cable bill."

"Can you hold one moment, Mrs. Greene?" I ask sweetly. "I want to speak to Mrs. Dunbar for a moment." I connect Mrs. Greene to some soothing R&B Musak, and lay into Collette. "Mrs. Dunbar, no one has ever—"

"—I know," Collette interrupts. "Shit, I ain't stupid, Renee."

I check off the "used inappropriate language to supervisor" box on the ROF. "Then credit her account, Mrs. Dunbar."

"I know this ho, Renee, and she knows me. She lives just down the block. She ordered it all right. There were cars was all over my street. The bitch probably charged everybody admission, but when Tyson knocked that white boy's ass out in thirty seconds

flat, they wanted their damn money back. She ain't getting out of this one."

Oh, really? "Who died and made you supervisor, Mrs. Dunbar?"

"C'mon, Renee. You wouldn't let her get away with this shit when you were in customer service."

She's right, of course, but now I'm the boss. "I'm not in customer service anymore, Mrs. Dunbar. Credit her account."

"It's Collette, heifer, and nah, I ain't gonna credit the ho's account."

I check the "refused direct order from supervisor" box. "Credit her account, Mrs. Dunbar."

"*You* do it. You don't live in her neighborhood. The bitch will be braggin' all up in my face for weeks."

I check the "refused direct order from supervisor" box again. One more check, and she could lose her job. "For the *third* time, Mrs. Dunbar, credit her account."

After a short silence—I hear those grinding teeth again—she says, "Patch the bitch in."

I reconnect Mrs. Greene. "Mrs. Green, this is Renee Luchesi, Mrs. Dunbar's supervisor again. Thank you for your patience. Mrs. Dunbar will be happy to remedy your situation immediately."

"Thank you," Mrs. Greene says with a nasty laugh. "The ho had it in for me."

I hear Collette growl before she says, "I've credited your account, Mrs. Greene, and I *still* have it in for you, you *three*-toed, *four*-eyed, *snaggle*-toothed—"

I cut Collette off.

"Mrs. Greene," I say quickly, "Mrs. Dunbar will be disciplined, I assure you."

"Y'all, *ooh!*" Mrs. Greene yells. "I'm takin' my business somewhere else!"

We're the only cable company in town, wench. "If I credit your account for a free month of HBO, will you keep your business with us?"

"Add Showtime and we got a deal."

Mrs. Greene gets her deal. The trials and tribulations we managers have to go through.

Collette, though, will have to be disciplined. I check the “used inappropriate language to customer” box three times and stand just in time to see Collette storming toward me. In the narrative section of the ROF, I write: “representative left station”—she’s banging on the window now, all her gold-plated jewelry crashing against the glass—“and attempted to shatter supervisor’s window.”

I open my door. “Yes, Mrs. Dunbar?”

She points at the floor outside. “Out here,” she hisses.

“You gonna *try* to whip my ass now, bitch?” I whisper.

Her eyes open as wide as her mouth. “Fuck you, Renee.”

I add her latest profanity to her ROF. “Keep on,” I whisper, “and you’re gonna be a stay-at-home housewife.”

She opens and closes her mouth for a few seconds, her lips making a nasty smacking sound. “I’m filin’ a grievance on your ass.”

I wave the ROF in front of her face. “You’ll lose.”

“Maybe,” she says, “but you’ll be in the shit, too.”

I smile at the other representatives, all union members like Collette, who watch our little drama while still fielding calls. “You through?”

Collette storms off, her cheap-ass jewelry jingling away.

I close my door quietly and look out at fifty foreheads. No one looks me in the eye for long around here. Who’s next?

Ten minutes later, Collette shows up outside my door with a piece of paper, shoves it under the door, and returns to her station. I pick up the paper ... and nearly shit. It’s an official grievance form, the kind that *I* used to file against Connie once we had finally organized a union a few years ago. I was a union steward, and I had me some clout with the folks on the executive level. I could even cuss them and not be fired. But now that I’m a manager, I have no clout with them. And this form in front of me is my “baby.” I wanted immediate action on grievances in those days, not weeks away as management proposed, and now it’s biting me in the ass. The form tells me that I have to appear at a “hearing in front of the executive board” at 1:45 sharp “as per

*J. J. Murray*

union rules,” the same damn rules I helped write. I look at my watch. “One o’clock!”

Janae’s conference! I’ve been having so much fun that I forgot all about it!

I race out of the office, get in my VW Passat, and break all traffic laws getting to Highland Park.

“This is going to be a quick meeting,” I say, and I strut into that school like I own the place.

## SIX

I'm the last one to the conference, and I'm in no mood to waste time. "Let's get this shit over with," I say. I breeze right past Janae, Mama, Giovanni, and the skinny-necked secretary, Miss McNally, and bust up into Mrs. Bell's office.

Mrs. Bell looks up from behind her desk. "I'm so glad you could meet with me like this on such—"

"We shouldn't have to be here," I interrupt as Mama, Giovanni, and Janae come in and sit. I'm not sitting. I have set the tone of this meeting, and it's going to have attitude, and you can't really have attitude if you're on your ass. Unless you're Judge Judy or Joe Black, that is. They don't play.

"Well," Mrs. Bell says slowly, opening a folder in front of her. "Perhaps your daughter should wait outside."

"No," I say.

"Okay," Mrs. Bell says, "let's look at your daughter's file."

"Her name is Janae," I say.

Mrs. Bell's face is getting red. Good. It looks bad on her. "Let's look at Janae's file. Her test scores indicate that she's in the top tenth percentile in every major category."

"The top what?" Mama asks.

"That means," Mrs. Bell says, "only ten percent of the nation scored higher than her on these tests."

Mama smiles at Janae and squeezes her leg. Giovanni has his cheeser smile going.

I'm not smiling. "What's your point, Mrs. Bell?"

"Janae is truly a very bright child, but her behavior—"

"Is a direct reaction to the problem-children and problem-adults around her." Ba-BOOM. Take that, bitch.

Mrs. Bell puts on her glasses. "Oh, I don't think it's entirely the other children's fault, and certainly not the adults' fault." She flips through Janae's file. "Let's see, the first day of school in the first grade, Janae hit another student in the nose."

"Who punched her in the arm first," I say quickly, "and whose mother called her a 'nigger.' Is that in your report?" Mrs. Bell

pulls her folder closer to her. "I didn't think so. Is there any *beginning* to your knowledge of my daughter, Mrs. Bell?"

"Mrs. Luchesi, I don't know where this hostility is coming from."

It's standing right in front of you, bitch. And you are blind *and* stuck on stupid. I'll bet those qualities come in handy when you're a principal.

I'm scowling, Mama's scowling, and I'm staring at Mrs. Bell's blotter calculating how far I can throw it through her damn window.

Giovanni stands and puts his hands on my shoulders. I don't need to be calmed down, fool! Though I could use a back rub. A little lower, Mr. Man.

"Mrs. Bell," Giovanni says, rubbing some of the hate out of my back, "the hostility is racial, and you know that. Janae was unfairly treated in yesterday's incident and has been in other incidents as well."

"But Freddie Smith is ... black," Mrs. Bell says.

"And your point is?" I ask. Giovanni backs away and sits because that's one of my favorite questions to *him*, too.

"How can it be a racial incident if both children are black?" Mrs. Bell asks as her salt 'n' pepper hair starts to unravel. At least I think it's her hair. I think Mama got some that looks just like it in her dresser drawer.

"Freddie's brown," Janae says suddenly. "And I ain't black." That's right, girl. You tell the racist white bitch a thing or two.

"Remember when Janae took that test almost four years ago?" I ask.

"Yes," Mrs. Bell says, taking off her glasses, "and we almost had to throw out her scores."

"You don't get it," I say, and I check my watch. Damn union and the rules I made for it. If I leave within the next five minutes, I'll be there in time but just barely. "Mrs. Bell, you allowed a first grade teacher—a white woman—to decide what race my child is, and you've treated her as a below-average human being ever since that fight in first grade, which you *know* was racially motivated. I'm sorry she almost screwed up your test results, but if you'll remember, her second grade teacher allowed Janae to choose."

"I chose 'other,'" Janae says proudly.

"And her test scores have always been very high. Obviously her race or *races* has nothing to do with her intelligence."

Mrs. Bell's face is so red I want to pinch her to see if she's a tomato. But just the thought of touching her ... "Well, Janae *is* in the highest reading group—"

"—Not today!" Janae says.

"*What?*" I shout.

"Mrs. Mead put me with the Kilobytes, Mama."

Mama shakes her head. "The what?"

"The low group," I say. Kilobytes, Megabytes, Gigabytes. Where do teachers get these messed-up names? It isn't like the kids don't know they're in the low, middle, or high groups.

"Why were you put in the low group?" Mama says to Janae.

"I dunno," Janae says. "Ask Mrs. Mead. She put me in with Freddie, Juan, Corey, and Trung Le."

I slam my hand so hard on Mrs. Bell's desk that her unraveling hair straightens up. "She put Janae in the *minority* group?" Though I'm not so sure about Corey. Maybe he lives in a trailer park. I turn to Janae, my eyes smoking. "Janae, did Mrs. Mead jerk your arm again yesterday?" She nods slowly, and I turn back to Mrs. Bell. "And that's not the first time Mrs. Mead has assaulted Janae."

"Oh, I don't think—"

"It's *assault*, Mrs. Bell, and you know it, and I don't doubt that you *don't* think. What are you going to do about that?"

Mrs. Bell is looking torn up. "I will speak to Mrs. Mead about that matter after this meeting is over."

"You ain't gonna do shit," Mama says as she stands. My thoughts exactly. That's why I'm my mama's daughter. "You gonna do what you always do, and that's to do less than nothin'. Ain't a damn thing changed in thirty years. This meeting is over for me." She bends down and kisses Janae's cheek. "Be good." She nods to me and leaves.

Mama's got the right idea. "Giovanni, are you going to say anything in your daughter's defense?"

"Yes." He takes a deep breath and says, "I think Mrs. Bell will do the right thing."

No the heifer won't, Giovanni! All Mrs. Bell is going to do is practice Cover Your Ass, and in her case, it's going to be an all-day job. And quit quoting Spike Lee movie titles all the damn time! Shit, Giovanni, you're Italian. You're supposed to be more talkative than that!

I shake my head at him and turn back to Mrs. Bell. "Well, I have a few things to say. One, Janae will be returned to the highest reading group immediately as in the *second* I leave this room. Her test scores put her there in the first place, and you're going to put her back. Two, Freddie will be punished in some way for trying to grab Janae's titties, and yes, Mrs. Bell, they're titties because *I* said so. And three, you better do something about Mrs. Mead. If I have to make a phone call to a board member who attends my church and sits next to me in my pew, you *will* be sorry. Good day, Mrs. Bell."

I give Janae a kiss, growl at Giovanni who winks back at me, and rush to my Passat as Mama's Buick spews blue smoke into the parking lot. One bitch session down, one to go.

I've never been on the receiving end of one of these grievance meetings, but I know that if I'm late, I will be in the shit, not Collette. I break a few more driving laws, arrive at 1:47, and check in with the executive-level secretary, a wrinkly, chicken-legged wench with a chicken's beak for a nose. "Mrs. Dooley, where's the grievance meeting being held?"

Mrs. Dooley squints at me. "You just missed it, Mrs. Luchesi. See Mr. Conway."

Oh shit. "I had to have a conference with my daughter's teacher about test scores," I say, hoping this—ooh, nasty—chicken-necked lady will help me out. Dag, woman, get that baggy shit taped up or something. "And I'm only two minutes late."

"Union rules, Mrs. Luchesi. See Mr. Conway."

Ted Conway and I used to get along when he was a lowly rep like me. He took some college courses, got his master's, and ended up as an executive. If I had had the time, I would have done the same thing ... and stayed in middle management. There isn't anything colored or female at the executive level. Even their Berber carpet is white. And except for Ted, they are all old, gray, and dull as the October sky outside.

I knock on Ted's door. "Enter."

I step inside the door. "Hey, Ted, sorry I was late. I had a conference—"

"You're on three months' probation, Mrs. Luchesi," he interrupts, "and you made us look bad with the union rep."

So it's *Mrs. Luchesi* now? "Ted, I was two whole minutes late."

"You know the rules. You wrote them."

I had been on probation as a rep, and it sucked, but I never heard of a manager going on probation. "Uh, what exactly does probation mean for a manager?"

"You'll have to clock in and out for the next ninety days, and you'll have to shred Mrs. Dunbar's ROF."

"Don't I get to tell my side of it?"

He shakes his head. "No"

"But—"

"You had your chance, but you were too late. That will be all, Mrs. Luchesi."

I take the stairs down, slip into my little room, sit, and pout. I look up and see Collette telling every rep what happened. Ninety days of life just like them. This doesn't just suck.

It swallows.

## SEVEN

On days like this, I push paper from one side of my desk to the other and shoot rubber bands at the window.

And I miss my daddy.

He'd know the right words to say to cheer me up. He'd know how to figure this shit out. We used to talk every night on the phone, mainly about Janae. She called him Chubby instead of Grandpa, but Daddy wasn't chubby. He was a fine, dark black African stud with so much love for us. Just watching that man changing one of Janae's diapers when she was so small brought tears to my eyes. He spent the last few years of his life trying to do for her what he didn't do for me: be a father.

Mama and Daddy didn't live together after being apart for most of my life, but they might as well have. They spent weekends together at Mama's house (which Daddy had fully paid for years ago) on Allison Avenue where he painted, trimmed, fixed, planted, weeded, re-built, tinkered—and that was just with Mama! She's since moved to a two-bedroom "apartment home" at Sunscape on Colonial Avenue. It's a modern and nice apartment, but it's not a home. I know she misses her garden, and the little box garden in one of her windows looks like a weed farm.

Since Giovanni works at the bakery on weekends, he has never been the one to take Janae places, and Daddy was all too glad to help out. Daddy taught Janae how to fish. She only caught a few sunfish that first time on Tinker Creek, and she hated putting the hooks in the worms, but she had fun. Daddy also took her to the railroad museum when she was three. He took her picture inside just about every old train outside. They were, according to Daddy, having the time of their lives when a man who worked there asked him, "Is that your grandchild?" and Daddy replied, "No, I'm just renting this child for the day." The nerve of some people who can't mind their own damn business.

Daddy even helped coach Janae's T-ball team, the Wilmont Braves. Yeah, it wasn't real baseball, and the uniforms were old and gray, the hats bo-bo, the fields hard and dusty, no fences in the outfield, rent-a-umps who didn't know all the rules, but Janae

had a ball as the pitcher—only she didn't get to pitch. I have never understood T-ball. Why have a pitcher when you don't need one? Daddy had her chasing every ball hit and out-running the batter to first base since the chubby chap over there couldn't catch a ball even if you put it into his glove.

Janae even did an unassisted triple play in the last game of the summer. That's what Daddy yelled to me with this huge smile on his face. I shrugged from my lawn chair. Hell, everything she did out there was unassisted. Besides, baseball isn't in my culture, and I don't know anyone who can name them a real *African* baseball player.

So Janae did this triple-play thing, and the coach for the other team, a white wench with bad acne scars, went off as only white wenches can. It has to be in *their* culture. "That ain't fair!" she shouted as she waddled onto the field. "That ain't fair at all!"

"What isn't fair?" the umpire, a teenaged white boy, asked.

"You helped her!"

Janae had caught a pop-up (a rare event in T-ball) then touched every base when the other team's runners didn't go back to tag up. I think the bases were loaded, I don't know. It should have been a quadruple-play if you asked me, and what is this tagging up business? Hell, they're children. Let them run!

"How did I help her?" the umpire asked.

"You pointed to the base after she caught it!"

Daddy walked over to try to calm the white wench down. "He called the batter out with his fist. He didn't point." Daddy even demonstrated for her with his massive fist.

The white wench ignored Daddy and dug her finger into the umpire's chest. "You been helpin' these people win this whole game!"

Bitch actually said "these people." Loudly. Not exactly a Ross Perot "you people," but her tone was clear. The Wilmont fans around me started to get up while the sunburned white folks on the other side fidgeted and looked for places to hide.

"What exactly do you mean by *these people*, Coach Hambrick?" Daddy said.

Coach Ham-Thick looked at her Pro Keds. "Nothin'."

Daddy bit his lip, I bit mine, the Wilmont folks settled back down, the white folks came out of hiding, and the game went on.

Later we all went out to Chuck E. Cheese for a season-ending celebration. Not a bad place to go—if you have forty bucks and a couple hours to kill. I chatted with the other mamas while Daddy followed Janae around with an endless supply of tokens. He stopped by the table and slid in next to me.

“That child wears me out, girl,” he said.

Like I would have done if you had been around for me, I think but don’t say. “Where is she?”

“Ski-Bol.”

I looked toward the Ski-Bol lanes and saw Janae rolling away. I also saw a white witch ripping off the tickets Janae had won and putting them into her plastic bag. What the hell?

I stormed over, Daddy close behind. “What you think you’re doing?” I hissed.

White witch blinked. “She’s with me. I’m collecting her tickets for her.”

It was my turn to blink. “She isn’t your daughter.”

White witch smiled. “Well, like she’s yours either.”

Oh no she didn’t! “Janae?”

“Yes, Mama?”

White witch looked from Janae to me and back to Janae. “You have to remember to collect your tickets, girl,” I said, and I snatched that plastic bag from White Witch.

“Oops,” Janae said. “I keep forgetting.”

I thought that would end it, but White Witch had to go and get the manager, who couldn’t have been more than eighteen, and he asked *us* to leave. I was all set to break some shit when Daddy stayed me with his hand. “I’ll handle it.”

And he did. Daddy pulled the manager away from us and said his piece. A few precious moments later, the manager escorted White Witch and her brood of seven dwarves to the door, and we got a complimentary pizza and pitcher of soda for our trouble. And when it came time for Janae to cash in her tickets, the girl behind the counter put her finger on the scale so my baby could win the biggest prize—a huge stuffed rat. Okay, it was Chuck E. Cheese himself, but it’s still a rat in my book.

"Grandpa Chubby always smells so good, like perfume," Janae told me on the way home. "My daddy always smells like food."

"That food," I said, "is what puts a roof over our heads."

"Oh." She thought for a bit. "I guess it's okay."

When Janae was six, Daddy took her to the Hunting Hills Country Club where he was one of the few African-American members. I dressed Janae right fancy that day in church pants and a church top. I fussed over her hair more than usual and put lotion all over her. "Janae, you say 'yes ma'am' and 'yes sir,' okay?"

"Yeah."

"Janae!"

"Yes ma'am. Dag, I was just playing."

"And don't shout or do anything silly, okay?"

Daddy picked her up in front of our house early one Saturday morning and drove her to the golf course, and I worried all day that Janae would show her ass.

When she got back, I sat her down on the couch and grilled that ass. "Did you behave?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Tell me what you did."

"Well, we went into what Chubby called the club house. It wasn't like the clubhouse over at Joey's. It had carpet and lots of wood." I had been in Joey's tree house. Just once. It had carpet and wood, too, but the wood was all splintered, and the carpet smelled like pee. "Chubby left me in a big chair outside the locker room and told me to wait. I smiled at everyone who walked by me because I thought that's what you would want me to do, and I didn't tell them they were rude for staring though I really wanted to."

"They stared?"

"Uh-huh. Then Chubby came out with three other men, all tanned white men wearing different hats and outfits. Mr. Lantz wore funny bright blue pants that didn't reach all the way to the ground." High waters. Have white people no shame? "I shook his hand. It was smooshy. Mr. Dupree just tipped his hat and said nothing. He had really beady eyes, Mama, like Simon Barsinister on *Underdog*. Mr. Grubb wore black and white checked pants. He

took off his hat and kneeled down in front of me and said, 'You're far prettier in person, Janae.'"

"That was nice."

"He smelled like beer though." Figures.

And then Janae explained golf to me. "You go to this flat space that has a number on a sign. You put a little wooden thingy down between two blue pegs and put your ball on top of the wooden thingy. Then, you take a long club and hit the ball into the woods."

I laughed. "They tried to hit it straight, didn't they?"

"Mr. Dupree could hit it straight. He hardly spoke to anyone at all. The only time I heard him speak was to himself, and he was saying the F-word. A lot. And he walked like he had to poop. Aunt Collette would say he had a broom stick up his ass."

"Janae, say 'butt' instead of 'ass.'"

"You say it."

"My house, my rules."

"Okay." She laughed. "Mr. Grubb was the worst player, but he smiled and laughed an awful lot. Chubby let me help Mr. Grubb find the balls that he hit into the woods. And I found lots of different balls every time I went into the woods."

"What a waste of hard-earned money."

"But the most fun was when we got to the hole with the flag stick in it. I got to hold the flag. Mr. Lantz would wiggle his butt before hitting the ball, and I couldn't help but giggle. Mr. Dupree would take forever to hit his, walking behind it, and looking at it, and squatting down like he really *did* have to take a poop. Chubby was so still when he hit his ball, and he got *so* close a bunch of times. Mr. Grubb was the silliest. He flopped down on his tummy and tried to blow his ball in. One time he even shot it like he was playing pool."

"Because he was drunk, honey."

"Oh. Yeah." She twirled a curly hair. "Mama, who's Tiger Woods?"

"He's the best golfer in the world. Why?"

"Well, Mr. Lantz asked me if I liked Tiger Woods. I thought Tiger Woods was in *Winnie the Pooh*, so I said I did. Anyway, Mr.

Lantz put his fat face next to mine and whispered, ‘And he looks just like *you*.’”

Oh no, he didn’t go there. “What did you say back?”

“Nothin’.”

“Well,” I said as I grabbed the phone, “I’m going to say something.”

But I didn’t say it to Daddy. I was too mad. Comparing my child to a golfer? I knew Tiger Woods was the shit, but my little girl looks only like herself and will one day play in the WNBA! After med school and law school, that is. I called Mama, she agreed with me for a change, and she told Daddy. Janae never went golfing again.

And Daddy didn’t either.

A couple days later, Daddy died of a heart attack. He was only fifty-two and looked healthy as a horse. I stayed at Mama’s house where I saw her weeping openly for the first time in my life. All those times she said “I don’t love that man” were lies. And even though I only knew him for ten years as my daddy, I wept, too.

It was a cloudy August day when we had Daddy’s funeral at High Holiness. I’m glad Mama had it open casket so everyone could see how handsome my daddy was, but I was worried about its effect on Janae.

I shouldn’t have worried. That child stole the show.

Janae was sitting between Mama and me, and we weren’t crying at all. We were all cried out. Reverend Noel said some nice things about Daddy then let other folks say whatever they wanted into the microphone down below the pulpit. I wasn’t about to get out of that pew, and I knew Mama wasn’t going to say anything.

Janae walked out and said it for us.

She wore her best blue dress that day with white tights and looked so small up there. Reverend Noel had to lower the microphone to her.

“Hi. I’m Janae Vanni Luchesi, Grandpa Chubby’s granddaughter.” Lightning flashed outside. “Grandpa Chubby taught me how to fish last summer.” I heard thunder crash. “And I know he’d want to go fishing tomorrow after this storm.”

I had a little lump in my throat. I looked at Mama, she looked at me, and then the tears came again. Never look at your mama at a funeral unless you got a full box of Kleenex. Giovanni and Pops, as usual, were blubbing. Italians are so over-emotional.

Janae turned and looked right at the casket. "Chubby," she said to him, "there's a change in the weather, and when there's a change in the weather ..." She turned back to the crowd. "The fishing's never better." I heard the rain drumming on the roof of the church. "But, we better wait until the rain stops, okay?"

Mama gave Janae a big hug before she sat down, and I could only smile. Pride. That child had pride. That was *my* child.

After the service, we drove in the pouring rain to Evergreen Cemetery. Mama, Janae, and I held hands and were doing so well until they started lowering Daddy into the ground. That's when we all started crying. If it wasn't for Collette, we might have watered his grave for hours. Collette led us back to the car and drove us home. On the way back, the rain stopped, and a rainbow shined out over Mill Mountain.

"Nay-Nay," Janae said pointing, "a rainbow."

Mama smiled. "That's where your grandpa used to take you all the time when you were little. Guess Grandpa's just saying good-bye, huh?"

So whenever Janae sees a rainbow, she thinks of her Chubby. And whenever I look at Janae, my rainbow, it makes me think of my daddy.

## EIGHT

Because of my daydreams and memories, I have to work late again. And because of a lot of things, Giovanni and I hardly see each other anymore.

I used to come to the bakery every evening after work, and we'd all eat as a family. Then I became a manager, and now I eat a lot of microwave meals at my desk. Like this one. The chicken tastes like rubber, and the noodles have the consistency of rubber bands. I'll bet the box tastes better. Twenty-one grams of fat! It'd be better if I ate a chunk of fat back instead of this shit.

I miss those meals at the bakery, and Mama and Collette do, too. They were never ones to turn down a free meal. I remember one snowy night we had the bakery all to ourselves. Janae was at her "why" stage and couldn't stop asking questions.

"Poppa," she said to Pops—I never could get her to say Pops—"why is my daddy crazy?"

The amaretto was flowing nicely that evening, and Pops laughed. "Who told you this?" Janae pointed at Mama. "She *would*." He finished his shot of amaretto. "But she is right. Your daddy is still crazy in the head, ever since he met your mama."

"Hey now," I said.

"He is." Pops pulled Janae to his lap. "Your mama comes into the bakery and eats, and when I turn my back for just a second, they fall in love. A little while later, they get married and we have the reception right here in this bakery. Nine months later, you're born. *Allegro!* Very fast."

"That ain't it at all, old man," Mama said. She had been sucking the Chianti down like it was Kool-Aid. "Janae, your daddy got your mama *drunk* that first night. Ask her about it, and she'll tell you all about that. Then he rushes your mama into marrying him. Oh, I tried to stop it, but you know your mama. Stubborn as a mule."

Janae looked at Collette for the longest time. "That's not what *you* said, Aunt Collette. *You* said that daddy rocked mama's world!"

Collette's big mouth dropped open. "Well, I didn't say it exactly like—"

"You said that daddy lit her up like a Christmas tree, Aunt Collette. You said he just lit Mama up like the Fourth of July!"

"Collette!" I yelled. "What are you doing telling my child our business for?" It *was* true, but shit. She wasn't supposed to tell anyone! Heifer.

"Well, y'all *were* in lust with each other."

Yeah. We were. We just couldn't get enough of each other. But not anymore. We're married now. We make love about once a week, occasionally twice when it's busy at the bakery *and* I get home from work at a reasonable hour. Busy equals big money equals big smile on Giovanni's face equals big surprise for my coochie when he gets home. But I know we're pulling down the national average. Where do these average people find the damn time? And when it's slow at the bakery? Forget it. Slow equals no money equals no smile equals no surprise ... equals a little workout for my damn self, thank you very much. Man's so exhausted he doesn't even know I'm seeing rainbows right next to him in bed. Sometimes I even grab one of his hands and put it on my tittie. He *still* doesn't wake up ... but it almost *feels* like he's involved. Do I feel guilty "cheating" on him like that? Hell no. I'm in my sexual prime, and I'm getting all I can in my bed whether he participates or not.

Lately, his "other wife" is that damn laptop I bought him. Giovanni is on that thing like he used to be on me, his fingers flying. Doing what? Typing. That's what he says he's doing anyway. "I'm typing," he says. "What?" I ask, though I know the answer. "Poetry," he says.

Poetry. Not a novel that might make us some money. Not a screenplay that will make us rich because movies are where the money's at these days. Not an entry in some contest with a cash prize. Not a play that a local theater group could do to get us a take of the door. Poetry. Poems. Thousands of them shot out all over the Internet to God knows where. When business is slow at Luchesi's, he gets on the laptop instead of me. And when he tells me he's been published again somewhere (I've lost count how many of his poems are "out there"), I say nothing because all we're

going to get is some more nothing like another copy of some magazine or journal no one ever heard of or the joy of seeing his poem on the Internet for a month before POOF—no more poem.

“I’ll have enough for a collection one day,” he tells me, “and then we’ll see a return on our investment.”

“Our” investment? All I’ve done is roll my eyes and sigh at his efforts. And whenever I feel he’s been on the Internet too long (or if I’m lying in bed waiting for him to feed my hungry coochie), I lift up the phone to disconnect his ass. He still thinks there’s something wrong with the computer, and I’m not about to tell him otherwise.

The poems aren’t bad, though, since they’re mainly about me and Janae. They seem like such a waste of time and energy for such a crummy return. I bragged all over the office when he got his first poem published, but now ... Okay, say he gets his poems published in a collection. What then? Who goes out to Barnes and Noble and buys a collection of poetry for fifteen to twenty bucks? I mean, even regular paperbacks are costing too much these days. And when he was all into this “self-publishing” stuff for a while, getting quotes for paper, binding, cover art, distributors, I just couldn’t see it happening. “You have to spend money to make money sometimes,” he said.

Well, he isn’t spending any of mine. And he sure as hell isn’t spending any of his smiles on me. Even when he’s in a bad mood, he always manages to smile for Janae. Sometimes I wish he’d smile at me like he smiles at her.

I give up on the bullshit paperwork in front of me and pack it in my briefcase. I’ll just have to spend another night alone in my basement office. I drive to the bakery and see just one car parked on Fourth Street. Slow again.

I’m not getting any tonight. From Giovanni, that is.

I walk in, only one red-nosed white man eating.

“Hi Mama,” Janae says, racing to the back yelling, “Mama’s here!” Giovanni zips around to the front and sits at our table. Our table. A whole lot of shit started right there at that table. And some more is going to start tonight.

“How was work?” Giovanni asks as I sit.

"Shitty, but I don't want to talk about it. We have to talk about that school and what it's doing to our daughter." Giovanni says nothing, which means he disagrees. "We're transferring her to the county next week."

He reaches out to hold my hands, but I pull them back. "Can we wait to see what happens tomorrow? Maybe Mrs. Mead—"

"I've had enough of her shit," I interrupt. "I ought to get the N-double-A C P on her racist ass."

"What will that accomplish?"

I stare him down. "Something. Shit, maybe get her ass fired. At least it will get her hands off Janae." He says nothing. He's being awfully disagreeable today. "Come on, Giovanni, what does it say for a school if parents have to go down and cuss until they do the right thing?" Spike Lee strikes again. "Why can't they do what's right on their own?"

He shrugs. "I don't know, but I'm sure Mrs. Bell has already fixed everything the way you wanted it. Janae's back in her reading group—"

"Mrs. Bell can kiss my black ass. Maybe I'll sic the N-double-A C P on her stuck-on-stupid ass, too."

Giovanni sits for the longest time. "Renee, I think you're overreacting."

Oh no he didn't! Not after the day I've had! I stand and throw my napkin in his face. "Well, I think you're an asshole!" Giovanni's eyes drop. "I'm going home."

I turn to leave and hesitate. Damn. Why do I do this? I am overreacting, he's right, I'm wrong, I love that man to death ... I look in the reflection of the windows and see Giovanni stand, shove his hands in his pockets, and go back to the Berkel, polishing what is already brightly shining. I also see Janae carrying a pizza to our table, probably one she made especially for me. Shit!

I turn and force a smile. "You made that for me?"

Tears stream down Janae's face. "I made it for you and *Daddy*." Then she runs down the hall to Pops's office and slams the door.

I look at Pops. "She read your lips," he says.

I mouth "asshole" to myself. That's an easy one to figure out.

"I will box it, send it home with them, okay?" Pops says.

*Renee and Jay<sup>2</sup>*

I shake my head. "I won't be hungry. But thanks."  
I cry all the way home.

## NINE

The morning after “asshole,” I wake up alone in bed, Giovanni’s side still tucked in. He and Janae go through their little routine without a single “hock-tui.” When Janae comes in, she gets the brush and lotion without a sound and stands quietly as I brush her hair. She’s never been this still.

“Was the pizza good?”

“I threw it out,” she says.

“Why’d you waste good food for? I could have had it for lunch.”

“Sorry,” she says, but I know she isn’t.

I turn her around. “So am I.” We don’t hug or get mushy because I know she’s still mad at me. “What’s daddy fixing for breakfast?”

“Pop-tarts.” Which means that Giovanni’s in a hurry to leave me. She kisses my cheek. “Gotta go. Bye.”

Daa-em. I wound one, the other bleeds. My words do double-duty around here.

I clock in early for a change and vegetate for a few hours until I get a call from the school. “Hello, Mrs. Luchesi. This is Principal Bell from Highland Park.”

I’d recognize your screechy voice anywhere, ho. “Yes?”

“Uh, I have a delicate question to ask you concerning Janae.”

What’s she done now? “Go ahead.”

“Has Janae started her period?”

I fall back in my chair. She’s only ten! She’s been moody as hell, but I thought that was because of the argument I had with her daddy. No way. She’s much too young for this! “May I speak to Janae?”

“Well, has she?”

I’m not answering your question, Mrs. Bell. This shit is between a mother and her daughter only. “Please put Janae on the line. And could you give us some privacy?”

“You didn’t know, did you? There, there, Mrs. Luchesi. Don’t worry about it. These things happen. Here’s Janae.” Nosy wench.

“Hi Mama.”

"Is Mrs. Bell gone?"

I hear a door shut. "Yeah."

"Then please tell me what is going on."

"Well, Daddy sent me to apologize to Mrs. Mead and Mrs. Bell." He would. He's so big on apologies. "And Mrs. Bell asked why I'd been in trouble so much. I, um, I told her that I had PMS."

I smile. "You didn't."

"Yeah, I did."

"Why?"

"Well, Aunt Collette always says, 'Bitch with PMS comin', get out the way,' so I thought it would work for me."

"You thought wrong, Janae," I say with a laugh. "You should have told her you have CPT."

"What's that?"

I laugh. "Colored People's Time, and trust me. You got it. Bad."

"I do?"

I have to get Mrs. Bell back somehow. "Tell Mrs. Bell you have Sippity. Heifer will probably look it up in a book and won't be able to find it. You listening?"

"Yes, Mama. What do I call it again?"

"Sippity. Tell her it's something only your mama's people get, that it won't be in any books white folks wrote, and that you, me, and Nay-Nay have real bad cases of it."

"You have Sippity, Mama?"

"Only on Sunday mornings, now repeat what I've told you." She does. "Okay now. You have a good day, hear?"

"I will."

My little girl is a trip! And because of her, I have a good day and write nice comments on all my ROF's. I even call Giovanni at the bakery during one of my many unscheduled breaks to apologize, but he's not there.

"He's taking Freddie home," Pops tells me.

"The Freddie?"

"Yes. Janae and Freddie are friends now. One day he grabs her ... and the next day they are friends. I will never understand."

"Freddie came to the bakery?"

"Yes. Janae made him cookies, they eat, they talk."

"Sounds like a date."

"It wasn't. He didn't pay." Under Pops's definition of a date—the *man* always pays—Giovanni and I have *never* had a date at the bakery. Pops clears his throat. "Renee, I break bad on Freddie."

Go Pops! Getting down with the lingo. "What did you say?"

"I am embarrassed for myself. I ask him why he grabs my Janae's titties." I jump in my chair. Pops has never said "titties" before. I'm wearing off on him, which may not be a good thing for such a holy man. "He says he's sorry, calls me Mr. Lu-Cheesy, I say 'What's up with this Lu-Cheesy business?' and Janae says it's just a nickname. Freddy has a nickname, too. Janae calls him 'Shitty Smitty.'"

Two profane words in the same conversation? I should call more often. "Why's Giovanni driving him? Isn't Freddie from the neighborhood?"

"He lives on Rutherford Avenue and walks to the school every day."

Off Tenth Street? That's at least three miles away from Highland Park. Freddie must have gotten kicked off the bus. Maybe he grabbed the bus driver's titties, too. "Well, have Giovanni call me when he gets back."

Giovanni calls twenty minutes later. "They are so cute together, Renee."

Like we *used* to be, Mr. Man. I pout, and now I don't feel like apologizing. "Where'd they sit?" And you better not say the back seat, Giovanni.

"In the front seat."

"Good."

"Their knees were touching the whole way."

"And you let them? They're only ten years old!" He doesn't answer. "What's Freddie's house like?"

"Small and needs paint," he says.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Just that it's small and needs paint. You asked me what the house was like, and I told you. Lots of houses over there are small and need paint."

“Well maybe they can’t afford to live anywhere else. You ever think of that?”

“You asked for a description, I gave it.”

I steam for a while. “Well, I didn’t want anything else. Good-bye.”

The rest of my day is lousy, and I have to stay late filing ROF’s, filling out end-of-week service reports, and updating representative files. By eight, I can finally see my desk. And it’s Friday, when Janae and I usually go visiting. Janae is probably waiting tables ... and having more fun than she would if she was with me.

I am so depressed.

My pager goes off, and I call Mama. “What you want, Mama?” I ask her.

“Collette just called me, Renee,” Mama says.

“So?”

“She said to call the bitch off, and that was all. What did she mean by that?”

“Long story, Mama.”

“Well, I ain’t got the time.” Well forget you then! “And I also got a call from Janae. You call Giovanni an asshole?”

Jesus! “Yes. He won’t let me take Janae out of Highland Park. He’s being so hard-headed and stubborn.”

“Like someone else I know.”

“Mama, give me a break, please. I want what’s best for Janae.”

“Then don’t call your husband an asshole in front of her. And in public? What you doin’ sharin’ your business with the world?”

“There was only one customer—”

“You’re missing the point,” she interrupts. “Showin’ your ass, that’s all it was. I didn’t raise you to do that. I gotta go.” *Click*.

Doesn’t *anybody* love me today?

I drive to the bakery with the intention of making things right. Really. But when I get there and see a full house through the windows, when I see Janae smiling and laughing with the customers, when I see Giovanni and Pops working their magic, I drive home. I’m just not a part of that, and I don’t know if I’ve ever been part of that ... family. When they are in that bakery,

they are the Luchesi family serving food, conversation, romance, gossip—and it doesn't include me.

I lie in bed and flip through channels until Giovanni comes home at two, carrying Janae to her bed first. I quickly turn off the TV and act like I'm asleep. I know he's stank and sloppy, smelling like yeast, bleach, and degreaser, but I need him to come to my bed. I need him to hold me, to make me a part of that family at the bakery, even if I have to hold my breath.

I hear him creak the floorboards near my door. He sighs, opens the door just enough to get in, and doesn't shut it. He creeps across the room, kisses me softly on the cheek, gets some clothes from a drawer, and leaves, shutting the door behind him.

I could have grabbed his hand. I could have called him back. I could have followed him, brought him back to me or joined him on the couch.

I let him go.

## TEN

And early the next morning, I let him have it.

I didn't sleep at all, and I wake up before sunrise, before even Giovanni gets off the couch, and I do the bills at the kitchen table. I hate doing bills. That saying about "too much month at the end of our money" is coming true. We're barely making it, even with my promotion, because the bakery is losing money. Folks in Roanoke don't want to pay twelve bucks for an authentic Italian pizza they have to go out of the house to get when they can use a coupon and get two for that price delivered to their doors.

I hear the squeaky shower knobs being turned in the downstairs shower. Perfect timing. I count to a hundred then scream "Giovanni!" down the stairs.

He comes up a few *minutes* later drying his hair. "Yes?"

He used to come to me much quicker. "What took you so long?"

"I was in the shower."

I know. "What if it was an emergency?"

"Is it?"

To me, it is. "How much of your mama's money is left?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. A couple thousand. Why?"

This stack of bills didn't give you a hint? "We'll need it."

He sits across from me. "I thought you said we'd be using that money for Janae's college fund."

I roll my eyes. "We need the money now. She'll just have to get a scholarship or two. She can always get a Stafford loan."

He flips through a few bills. "Why are we so short?"

"If you did the bills with me every once in a while you'd know." He puts the stack down and looks away. "Giovanni, the bakery isn't bringing in nearly enough. Y'all are going to have to cut some costs or something, turn down the heat this winter, charge more for coffee, stop buying all those fancy imported ingredients—"

"No," he interrupts.

Am I hearing things this morning? "What did you say?"

He stands. "I said no. The ingredients make the pizza, the bread, the sandwiches, the espresso, the pies, the cakes, everything on the menu. Without them, we're no better than Domino's."

"I like Domino's," I say, knowing that I have cut him to the core. God, why do I spite him so much? "But the ingredients y'all use cost almost double—"

"Business is always slow in October," he interrupts.

He says "no" *and* interrupts me within sixty seconds in *my* kitchen? That shit just isn't allowed in my house. Sleeping on the couch has made you brave, Mr. Man.

"It will pick up again next month."

"That's what you said last month, and the month before that, and the month before that!" I take a deep breath and say what I've been thinking for the past three years. "Why don't y'all just sell out, let Pops retire some place warm and Catholic, and go get yourself a real job!"

It's like I've just punched him without using my fists, and I feel it in my own stomach as well. Instead of going off, he closes his eyes. "I, uh, I have to get the dough ready." He opens his eyes and looks at the towel in his hands. "It's supposed to be cold tonight. We should have a nice crowd." He looks up at me for a second. "See you later."

I don't see him for more than a few seconds over the next two days. He comes home, though, getting in after two and leaving before I get up for church. I walk into the kitchen on Sunday morning—and see Giovanni's tip jar on the kitchen table. It's filled to the top with a lot of green. I'm overwhelmed because he's breaking a sixty-year-old Luchesi tradition. With one notable exception involving our engagement party, all tips collected at the bakery have been re-invested into the bakery since the Luchesi family came to this country all those years ago. He's breaking a tradition for me?

"What's wrong, Mama?" Janae asks.

I can't answer, and I feel my face. Tears? I've been crying, and I didn't know it? What's wrong with me?

"Poppa's and my tips are in there, too, Mama. I made forty dollars Friday night. Will it be enough?"

Will it ever be enough? I turn away. "Go get ready for church."

"Daddy says there's over five hundred dollars in there!"

Geez. A couple *weeks*' worth of tips. Oh, I feel just wonderful now. "When did he tell you?"

"This morning when he gave me my kiss."

He kisses his daughter but not his wife? What's up with that? No. I didn't deserve a kiss. "Well, it might not be enough. Now go get ready for church."

"But Daddy was so sure—"

"Janae!" Calm down. The child loves her daddy, and you love her daddy, too. "Please, Janae. Go get ready for church."

Now she's crying. "I don't want to go."

Neither do I. "We're going."

"No!" she yells, and she runs up the stairs.

If another person says no to me today in *my* house, I'm going to go off! Instead of getting into it with Janae, I go to the front door and get the morning paper.

Hershey barks at me.

I shouldn't have gotten out of bed today.

## ELEVEN

I mope through the rest of Sunday, and by the time Monday morning rolls around, I'm feeling mean again. It's an emotion I'm familiar with, doesn't involve tears, and puts me in control. So when my pager goes off and I see the bakery's number followed by 9-1-1, I don't respond. It's never a real emergency with Giovanni. Janae may have the sniffles or a small cut or something. He once put in 9-1-1 because Janae lost a tooth at school. Puh-lease!

Then I see the bakery's number and 9-1-1 repeated *six* times. Maybe it *is* an emergency after all. I start to dial the bakery when my pager buzzes again, and this time it's Mama's cell phone. Daa-em. I call Mama immediately. "Mama, what's going on?"

"Renee, Janae's real sick. You have to pick up Giovanni at the bakery."

Oh shit. "What's wrong with Janae?"

"She threw up, fainted, got a real high fever. I'm with her at the hospital. So go pick up Giovanni and—"

Hospital? Jesus! "Which hospital?" I interrupt.

"Community, but you have to get Giovanni *first*. His car wouldn't start." We need to pay someone to *steal* that shitty car! "Hasn't he been paging you?"

"Yes."

"And didn't he put nine-one-one after the number?"

"Yes, but it's never been a real emergency before."

"Well, this one's for real girl, so give him a call and get over there."

I grab my purse. "I'm on my way."

"To the bakery first!"

I curse Giovanni's car all the way to the bakery, especially when I drive right by Community. "I could have already *been* there!" Maybe we could sell the Cadillac as a boat on wheels.

I screech to a stop outside the bakery, and Giovanni starts to get in. Pops busts through the doors and yells, "It's your mama, Renee! She wants to speak to both of you on the phone!"

"We'll see her in a minute, geez," I say as I get out. I follow Giovanni into the bakery ...

... and freeze. The lights are low, a single candle burning on our table, a basket bursting with bread sticks in the center, two plates loaded with sandwiches at our places, a bottle of amaretto and a bottle of Chianti next to the candle. I listen and hear "*Ave Maria*." I look behind me. Pops smiles, winks, and reaches inside to turn the sign to "CLOSED." I watch him walk away smiling and whistling.

We have been set up.

I turn back and see Giovanni at the pay phone. "Shirl? Are you there?"

He's so clueless. I put down my purse and take off my coat.

He points at the phone. "She must have hung up."

God, he looks mighty sexy in that apron. "Giovanni," I say softly, darting my eyes to our table.

"We've got to get to the hospital!"

He tries to run past me, but I grab his arm. Ooh, nice and muscular. "You see the table?" He looks. "You hear that music?" He nods. "You hungry?"

"Janae's not sick?"

I shake my head and pull him to me. Yeah, he's already yeasty and stank, but he's *my* yeasty and stank man. "Your Pops and my mama have been busy, and now they're using our daughter to play tricks on us."

"But I *saw* Janae. She threw up and fainted and—"

I put a finger on his lips. "She was acting, Giovanni."

"Oh."

"So ... let's eat, Mr. Man." I pull his head down and whisper in his ear, "And then you can eat *Mrs.* Man."

He blinks and gulps. "I'm really hungry, Renee."

A few tears escape. I can't help it. "So am I."

And then we kiss, start to grind, I rip off that apron—and the damn pay phone rings and rings. "Don't you answer it, Mr. Man. This bakery is closed, and the only thing that's going to be open up in here is my legs."

He unzips my dress and sucks hard on my neck. "You're the boss."

"Damn right," I say as I shove my hands down his pants and tear at his ass.

He rips my bra down and starts tonguing my nipples, going down, down ... his nose is in my bellybutton, lower, lower—and he stops.

"I have to answer it, Renee. It's ruining my concentration."

He leaves me with a cold wet coochie and answers the phone. "Hello, Luchesi's?" He laughs, and he hands the phone to me. "It's your mama."

"Give me that phone," I say, and I push him down to continue what he started. Daa-em, that's nice.

"Hello, Renee."

"Nice trick, Mama. Now put Janae on the phone." Oh shit, my man-in-the-boat is riding the waves again! It's going to be quite a storm down there today!

"Hi, Mama."

"Thank you, baby." Ooooh, and thank you Giovanni ... shit, I already see rainbows everywhere.

"You okay, Mama?"

"Uh-huh." Giovanni rises and drops his draws. "Oh yes, baby. I'm just fine."

Giovanni takes the phone. "Thank you, Janae." I guide him deep inside me. "Now don't call here again." He hangs up the phone and carries me to a table, thrusting deep and slow.

"You enjoy your dessert, Mr. Man?" I say, scratching the living shit out of his back.

"Yes."

Oh! ... God! ... I've! ... missed! ... this! "Is the main course good, too?"

He stops, pulls almost all the way out, then plunges deep inside. "Best meal I've ever had."

I deep soul kiss him as he comes, even though I know where he's been and say, "There's plenty of room for seconds ... thirds ... fourths ... fifths ..."

## TWELVE

Things are pretty funky around the house after that. I get to play me some funky music with my white boy morning, noon, and night. We change Janae's bedtime from ten to nine and even have her sleep over at Mama's one night. I just can't get enough of him! And even when Janae's here, I'm always messing with him, grabbing his ass and his stuff while he's pinching my nipples and my ass. I say "Stop!" but I don't mean it at all.

We begin foreplay when the sun rises and don't quit until the stars come out.

I even buy a modern version of the *Kama Sutra* at a bookstore in the mall to help him out. I want him every way I can get him. The salesgirl had looked kind of funny at me when I bought it. It didn't bother me, though. I had already looked through the book and saw a bunch of naked white people, like they're the only folks that have sex in different positions. When I show Giovanni the book before one of our "nooners" back at the house he turns bright red, especially when I show him the position I want us to try.

"Now," I say. I drop my pants and wriggle out of my draws. I hop up on the kitchen table.

He stares at the picture. "Won't you need to do some stretching first?"

"Come on!" I pull my legs up over my head. "I'll be fine."

"Okay." He places the book beside me and looks from the picture to me.

"Quit comparing titties."

He blushes. "I'm not."

"Liar! Mine are real, now come on!"

"Wait," he says. I watch him get the step stool from the pantry. He drops it on the floor next to the table and stands on it. "Are you sure?"

I never thought we'd ever need a step stool for this! No, I'm not sure! I pull him inside me anyway and grab his ass firmly, drawing his stuff as far into me as I can.

And the shit hurts. Bad. That damn step stool definitely gives him a better angle of entry. I push him away and turn the book to me. "Ow," I say as I read: "'This position is good for those men who have small penises.'" I look up at Giovanni. "Let's try something else."

He flips a few pages and points. I shake my head. My coochie's sore, and we're just getting started. He turns the page and smiles. I smile. He turns me around. I got me some cushions back there to protect me and ... JESUS! "You get a growth spurt or something?"

"I like tapping this ass," he says.

Ow! "Can you tap it a little more gently?"

He does ... for the longest time ... and then a little longer ... and then it starts to feel real nice ... and then I reach behind me and give him some help until we knock the shit out of the lazy-Susan, the salt and pepper shakers flying every which way, every one of Janae's drawings on the fridge dancing in the wind.

"Daa-em," *he* says, stepping back after a thundering climax accented by the napkin dispenser flying across the room.

"Daa-em, is right," I say. I get off the table and rub my booty. "What are you trying to do back there, make me another cheek?"

"Sorry."

I kiss his chin. "Don't be." I slap his ass. "My booty won't break. Fifteen minutes enough time for you to recover?"

"You want to do that ... *again*?"

I turn a few pages and stop. That's the one. Looks more painful for Giovanni for a change. "This one. Better start stretching now."

So now ... we're *raising* the national average.

Giovanni gets a reprieve from me Friday night since the bakery is busy, so Janae and I watch *Soul Food*, the African-American version of the Luchesi family, for probably the tenth time. During the scene where those two are bumping uglies all over the room, I snap off the tape.

"Janae, let's talk about sex."

"Okay!" she yells.

And parents wonder if their children are ready for this talk. All children should be schooled on sex when they're at their most

curious stage if you ask me. "Ask me a question, any question at all."

"Um, why were they frowning so much just now?"

Good question. Giovanni sometimes looks like "the Mummy" when he's making love to me. "They weren't frowning exactly. They were just getting busy, getting their groove on, and they didn't have time to smile."

"They looked like they were in pain. And why does she have to scratch all on his back like that?"

That's the fun part. It's a woman's revenge for the big penis. "It's, uh, her way of getting more into the groove." I explain how the parts fit together, and Janae makes a face. "It's natural, honey. And it's fun. But it shouldn't happen until you really love someone and that someone loves you back. And the man has to mean it, not just say it."

I explain "wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am" and tell her about R.J. Hodges, my first love. "I thought I really loved R.J. He was a big chocolate man with smooth skin and a sexy voice."

"Does Daddy have a sexy voice?"

"Yes." And a very sexy tongue. "Especially when he speaks Italian." To my man-in-the-boat. I wonder what language my man-in-the-boat speaks? I'll have to ask Giovanni.

"What does Daddy say?"

I try to say "You look *bellissimo*!" like Giovanni, but I only crack us up. "Sometimes he only says 'hubba-hubba.'"

Janae giggles. "Hubba-hubba?"

"It's a long story. But it works."

"How does it work?"

"Where'd you learn to ask so many questions?"

"From you, Mama. So how does it work?"

There's so much I could tell her, but how do I tell her about orgasms? I better slow down. "We'll get to hubba-hubba in a minute, but let's start with rubbers, raincoats, and jimmy hats."

"Huh?"

"Condoms. A man has to wear a condom on his jimmy before—"

"On his what?"

"His jimmy, his penis, his stuff, his pecker, his thing, his dick—"

"Okay, okay. But why?"

"So his sperm doesn't get into you." I have to explain sperm. This is more difficult than I thought it would be. "Okay, sperm are tiny little, um, snakes that—"

"Daddy's got snakes down there?" She backs away from me.

Bad comparison. Rewind. Start over. "Let's just call them ... swimmers, okay? Daddy's got swimmers, and these swimmers travel inside Mama until they find the egg." Her eyes widen. "I'm not a chicken, Janae. It's a different kind of egg. When the swimmers get there, they try to break into the egg."

"Why?"

"That's what swimmers do. That's the only thought going through their little heads." Dag, sperm are like most men! "Once just one gets through, amazing things start happening that eventually lead to a baby." Am I back on track yet? I think so. "Anyway, you don't want to have a baby at your age, do you?"

"No."

"Good. A man has to have a condom. If he doesn't have one, he doesn't get none. Say it."

"If he doesn't have one, he doesn't get none." She chews her lip a moment. Oh shit, she's thinking it through. "What if I have one?" I blink. She thought it through. "Can we do it then?"

She is so much farther along at ten than I was at eighteen! "Uh, well, I hope you *wouldn't* since only *you* were being responsible." She's not buying it. "Yes, Janae, but please wait until you find someone you love who loves you back, okay?"

"Okay." She giggles. "You gonna explain hubba-hubba to me now?"

How did I get into this mess? The more I explain, the more I have to explain! "I'll tell you about that some other time. Let's watch the rest of the movie."

"I've seen it already, Mama, and I want to know now. I mean, the more I know *now*, the less I'll have to find out for myself *later*, right?"

She has made a very valid, very scary point. "Do you know what an orgasm is?" She nods. "An orgasm is, um, the climax of

sexual excitement.” I sound like a textbook. “That’s when Daddy’s swimmers come out and Mama sees rainbows.”

“Really? You see rainbows?”

Oh shit, I’ve done it again! “Um, yeah. When I close my eyes, I can see rainbows.”

“Do orgasms feel good?”

So good I want me some more tonight. All this talk is getting me horny. If more parents would talk to their kids this way about sex, this country would be overpopulated in a year. “Yes.”

“So orgasms are the bomb, huh?”

I smile. “They are the bomb, girl. And the more the better.” I quickly turn on the video and fast-forward to the next talking scene. I mean, now that she knows *exactly* what they’re doing, I don’t *want* her to see them bump uglies! Am I a hypocrite or what?

At 2:30, Giovanni comes up the stairs. I meet him in the hall and push him toward the bathroom where I’m sure the water is cold by now. He’s half an hour late, and the candles are waxy puddles on the sides of the tub. “Get in,” I whisper.

He steps in ... fully clothed.

I giggle and step in still wearing my robe. “This part wasn’t in that book.”

He parts my robe down the middle. “Then we’ll write our own chapter, *bella* Renee ...”

## THIRTEEN

Every year since we've been married, Giovanni and I host the Howard-Luchesi Thanksgiving dinner at the bakery, and only the women do the cooking. Mama, Janae, me ... and Collette— Let me back up. This year, Mama, Janae, and I will take over the bakery while Giovanni, Pops, Clyde ... and Daddy—

Shit.

This year's Thanksgiving dinner is going to suck.

Janae wakes me after a night of pages fifty to fifty-seven of the *Kama Sutra*, and I am still feeling the effects of "The Mare's Position."

"Mama, wake up."

I sit up and feel it in my hips, not to mention my coochie.  
"Yes?"

"Are you naked under there?"

"Yup."

"Dag. Um, can Freddie come to Thanksgiving dinner?"

From naked Mama to Freddie? I squint at her. "Is he your boyfriend?"

She looks at the floor. "No. Daddy's still my boyfriend."

"No he isn't. Your daddy's *mine*. Find yourself your own man."

She giggles. "Well, can Freddie come?"

No Collette, no Clyde, no Daddy, and now the tittie-grabber wants to come. "What did Daddy say?" Janae *always* asks Giovanni first.

"He said 'okay' and 'ask your mama.'"

Gee thanks, Giovanni. "Okay, but Freddie has to get permission from his mama first."

"He doesn't have a mama."

I blink. "Sure he does. Everybody has a mama."

"He lives with his grandma."

Oh. That's so sad. No wonder he's grabbing titties! "Well, he'll just have to get permission from his grandma then."

She smiles. "Okay! Um, are Aunt Collette and Uncle Clyde gonna come?"

"Hmm. I don't know, honey. They may have made other plans."

She frowns. "It won't be any fun without them. I love the way Aunt Collette messes with Poppa." Pops and Collette *still* fuss about the music at the bakery. "And I'll miss the goofy things Uncle Clyde says while he's playing cards. Mama, why ain't they been around?"

I correct her. "Why *haven't* they been around."

"Sorry."

"Say it."

"Why *haven't* they been around?"

"They haven't been around because they're busy, I guess." Yeah, Collette's been busy running her volcanic mouth at work, talking shit about what a poor manager I am, trying to boost up a strike.

"You're coming by the bakery after work, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

And I haven't. Ever since Giovanni and I started slobbering and drooling all over each other again, I keep my desk at Star City clean and empty all day so I can leave at five. It means I have to actually work during work hours, but at least I can sit down with my husband for a while ... and walk my feet up his legs to his stuff to give my toes a workout. He'll just have to wear a baggier apron from now on. Shit, he'll be giving the *customers* a big tip after that.

I get to the bakery about 5:20 and sit at our table. Janae comes to the table and stares at me like she's trying to read a book. "What?" I ask.

"Huh?"

"Do I have something on my face?"

"No. Just, uh, memorizing your face, Mama, for a drawing I'm doing in art class."

"Oh. Why don't you just take one of my pictures from the photo album?"

She's staring hard again. I feel my face for a pimple. "No, I have a good memory."

I see my sandwich coming out of the oven. "My sandwich is ready. Go get it, and tell your daddy to come out here and kiss me."

“Okay.” I watch her use the big clippers and hear her bellow “Order up!” Giovanni sweeps over and slides the sandwich onto a plate that already has a pickle and some tortilla chips on it. Janae puts a mug of mocha cappuccino on a tray, and Giovanni carefully places the plate on the tray. Then, he reaches under the counter and pulls out a bottle of amaretto and drops an inch or so in the mug. Mm-mmm. Daddy wants him some Mama-booty tonight.

He carries the tray to me, sets out my mug and plate, then looks around. “Just kiss me,” I say. “No one’s looking.”

He lays one on me with lots of tongue. “Enjoy,” he says with a wink.

And then I tear into that sandwich, an Italian with extra banana peppers, as Janae joins me at the table. “Did you or Daddy make this?”

“I did.”

I take a huge bite. “Did you wash your hands?” I have made it clear to this child that mutant bacteria will strangle her and melt off her nose if she forgets to wash her hands.

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s delicious,” I say with my mouth full. Daa-em. I am eating like a horse! “What are you having for dinner?”

“Two slices of anchovy pizza.”

Usually the sight of dead fish on a pizza would turn my stomach. Tonight I say, “Mmm. That sounds yummy.”

That sounds yummy?

Daa-em. Am I pregnant?

## FOURTEEN

I spew chunks in the morning and send Giovanni to the store for a pregnancy test. Shit. Just when the sex was getting good, I have to go get pregnant. I put Janae in “time-out” in her room for the slightest offense (she left toothpaste goo in the sink), even though I know it’s not much of a punishment. The girl has a room full of electronic games, a Play Station, a stereo, and a combination TV/VCR/DVD. I just don’t want her nosing around while we play with the tester.

After calling Mama and getting no answer, Giovanni and I do the test in the bathroom, and I’m not nearly as nervous as the last time. “I *should* be pregnant, Mr. Man, all the times you’ve been knocking my booty.”

He’s smiling while we wait for the dot. “The last one took fifteen minutes, remember?”

“Yeah.” I look and see a bright, pink dot in less than a minute. Daa-em. “I’m *really* pregnant this time.”

He kisses me on my lips and stomach. “Let’s tell Janae.”

I grab his arm. “Hold up. The last time this happened, you asked me to marry you.”

He turns and hugs me. “And you did.”

“Would you, uh, would you still ask me to marry you?”

“Yes.”

I stare into his baby browns. “Really?”

He doesn’t bat an eye. “Really.”

I must test him. “I might not lose the weight this time.”

“I don’t care.”

I do! Shit! “I could balloon up to two-twenty, maybe two-thirty.”

His eyes pop. “That much? But you are only five-five.”

Gotcha. “I just said I *could*, Mr. Man.”

“Well, I would still love you.” He kisses me tenderly. “Now let’s tell Janae.”

I look up in wonder at my man. Ever since I had my eyes fixed with laser surgery a few years ago, I am—most times—in awe of this man. Oh sure, I messed with him that first night after the

surgery, you know, squinting at him and saying, "Who are you?" He told me he was my husband. I said, "I married a white man? Oh my God!" But more and more I'm not looking at him as "the white man I married." I'm simply looking at him as "the man I married" ... who puts up with my shit ... and still loves me. He never asks me for more than I can give, picks me up when I'm down, and hasn't tied me down at all. I thought I would feel restricted by marriage, the world's smallest handcuffs and all that, but I'm actually freer than I've ever been. I married a man with quiet strength, and I'm about to make him a daddy again.

We call Janae into my room. She slip-slides in, but I don't say anything. I'm too happy. She is going to be *so* surprised! She's always wanted a brother or a sister. "Janae, we have something important to tell you."

"You're having a baby," she says.

Of all the— I look at her like she's just set fire to the house. "How did *you* know, Janae?"

"Poppa told me last night."

Pops! Of course. The clairvoyant Catholic. That ... that ... *amazing* old man. How does he know this shit? "Is that why you were staring at me?"

"Uh-huh. To see if you glowed."

"Did I?"

"Uh-huh. Is Nay-Nay coming over?"

This could get tricky. "I couldn't reach her for some reason." On a Saturday morning. She always sleeps in late on Saturdays, which means ... Mama is getting a leg up somewhere other than her place. "Maybe her phone's off the hook or she's out shopping."

"At eight o'clock in the morning?" Giovanni says. I stamp my foot. "Oh, yeah, shopping. Lots of Saturday morning sales at the mall."

"Why don't we do something special tonight to celebrate?" I ask to change the subject. Has Mama found another man? She would have told me, right? Nah, that wench still never tells me shit. "What do you want to do, Janae?"

"Anything I want?"

“Anything,” Giovanni says. “And I’ll try to get off early, say around—”

“Seven,” I interrupt.

“Seven,” Giovanni says with a rise of his eyebrow (he only has one). That’s how Giovanni makes most of his decisions. He starts a sentence, and I finish it. I know that man better than he knows himself.

I float through the day, and Janae tags along behind me. We eat waffles and bacon for breakfast, then we do a couple loads of laundry. We eat minestrone with crackers and cheese for lunch before watching UNC whip Hawaii’s ass in a basketball game. I munch on chips with Texas Pete on them the entire time, and I make Janae get me something to drink every ten minutes. That’s what kids are for, right?

Mama calls in the early afternoon. “What you want?”

“Just to tell you—”

“You’re pregnant. Congratulations.”

This shit has got to stop! “How’d you know?”

“I’m your mama, now what you want?”

Now I’m not sure I want to know. “Uh, where were you this morning?”

“That ain’t none of your business. Let me speak to Janae.”

Somebody peed in Mama’s corn flakes this morning. I hand the phone to Janae, and she asks, “Nay-Nay, where were you this morning?” A second later, Janae holds out the phone. “She hung up on me, Mama.”

Daa-em. Mama got herself some. Daa-em. She’s almost fifty-five! Daa-em. There’s a love bug going around.

The phone rings again, but Janae beats me to it. “Who is it?” I ask.

“Freddie.” She runs upstairs with the phone.

Geez. The love bug strikes again. I sit on the couch watching TV and try to imagine what kind of man Mama was with last night. He’d have to be tall, employed, and ... I shiver. If he was her age or older, she would have told me about him in a second. Or maybe she wouldn’t have. Is she seeing a younger man? She doesn’t look that old, but that’s ... twisted. My mama and a ... gigolo?

Janae comes back in and plops herself on the couch. "Mama?"

"Yes?"

"Is it okay to sweat a boy?"

I didn't even know she knew what sweating a boy was all about. "It depends. Are you sweating Freddie?"

She nods.

"What for?"

She turns to me and shrugs. "Because I can."

That's *my* little girl.

When Giovanni gets home, we play Monopoly. I intend to win, and this is one game Giovanni doesn't mind losing. Play against him in spades, though, and he gets right mad when he loses, and he loses every time. He can't bid for shit, and his partner (not me, no way!) ends up cussing him. We don't play spades much anymore.

After an hour of Monopoly, we're all about even. I'm munching away on an assortment of sweet and salty snacks, and Giovanni's getting up every few minutes to get me more to drink. He's going to lose a whole lot of weight during this pregnancy.

"So Janae," I say, squirting some Easy Cheese on a cracker, "do you want a brother or a sister?"

"You owe me twenty-five bucks, Mama. That's my railroad you're on."

"Damn, girl." She's my only real competition because she pays attention. I throw the money at her. "Now answer the question."

She shrugs. "Doesn't matter to me."

I laugh. "It should. What would you rather have: a bratty, fat, slobbering, snot-faced little brother—"

"Hey now," Giovanni interrupts.

"Or a sweet, gorgeous, well-behaved sister?"

Janae looks at us both. "Poppa says it's going to be a little boy."

Giovanni smiles until the smile gets stuck. I hit him in the arm. "He already told you, didn't he?"

Giovanni nods. "This afternoon. Whose turn is it?"

"Yours," I say. "Land on Boardwalk this time, Mr. Man. I need me some more houses." He rolls and lands on Go, missing my two houses on Boardwalk by one. "You are so damn lucky."

He leans down and kisses me. "I know."

The things he says ... "Okay, y'all, let's say it's a boy. What are we going to name him?"

Janae rolls the dice. "It might be a little girl." She moves her dog onto St. James Place. Giovanni owns it and doesn't notice as usual. I hold up the deed in front of him, and he shoots out his hand. Janae pays him in ones. "So we'll need a name for a girl, too."

"Janae, honey, look at me." She does. "Your Poppa just knows things. And he's never been wrong. Never."

"He has dreams, girlfriend," Giovanni says. "And they always come true. He dreamed you'd like pizza long before you were even born."

Janae rolls her eyes. "Who doesn't like pizza?"

"But he knew you'd be a girl," I say. "Isn't that amazing?" I roll the dice.

Janae shrugs. "He had a fifty-fifty shot and got lucky."

"I have an idea," Giovanni says. I brace for the worst. "We'll just have to pick out names for both a boy and a girl."

How obvious of you to say so, Giovanni. I pick up a Community Chest card. "Pay me fitty," I say Ebonically, and they throw fifties at me. "I like Giovanni Anthony Luchesi, Junior, if it's a boy."

Giovanni smiles. "And I like Renee Lynette Luchesi, Junior, if it's a girl." The worst has come. I stare his ass down. "Just kidding, just kidding."

"Let us women name the baby, Mr. Man. And go make me some popcorn."

As soon as he's in the kitchen, Janae and I "borrow" some of Giovanni's money.

"Gonna be some changes around here," I say like the redneck Giovanni's become. "Gonna be a stranger comin' through these here parts."

Janae wrinkles up her nose. "Mama, please."

I push a strand of hair out of her eyes. "You're so beautiful, Janae." She blushes. "But promise me something."

"What?"

*J. J. Murray*

“Promise me that you’ll never—and I mean this with all my heart, now—promise me that you’ll never, ever ... be as beautiful as me, okay?”

Then ... we trash that Monopoly board, wrestling and squirting each other with Easy Cheese. Giovanni comes in firing popcorn at us, and for the next half-hour, Giovanni and I become ten-year-olds again.

Well, at least I do. Giovanni won’t turn ten until sometime next year.

## FIFTEEN

With a new passion in my marriage and a child on the way, I have so much to be thankful for this Thanksgiving. But there's something missing this year. It just won't be the same without my daddy, Collette, and Clyde here. And if Mama doesn't show up soon, I'm going to scream!

I am the only one doing any cooking. I am using all the bakery's ovens today: a turkey in one, a ham in another, sweet potato casserole, corn bread dressing, corn pudding, and macaroni and cheese (the real kind that doesn't come out of a box) in yet another. I've got green beans with salt pork and bacon simmering on the stove with the greens. The rolls aren't ready, the sweet potato pies aren't even made, and the devilled eggs probably won't get done. I'm doing all this with a cell phone to my ear trying to locate Mama while Giovanni and Janae fiddle with the TV we brought from home to watch the football game later.

And what is Pops doing? He's sliding a bunch of tables together in the center of the dining room.

I give up on reaching Mama. "Yo, Pops, what's with all the tables?" I count twelve chairs. "The only folks who are coming are already here."

He shrugs and puts out twelve place settings. "You never know who might walk through that door." His eyes twinkle. "You need help?"

"No, I can manage." Though I'm hating life right about now. "You deserve a day off."

He walks toward me and slips into his apron. "So I have to cook. Big-a deal. I am good at it. Janae?" She appears in her apron. "Come. Let's get cooking."

Giovanni leaves the TV set and flips Pops a quarter. "We'll need a little cooking music."

"Oy," Pops says, "it's going to be one of *those* days." He walks over to the jukebox, drops the quarter in, and presses two buttons without looking.

"Why doesn't he ever look, Mama?"

"It's all the same to him, girl." I pick up my cell phone and try Mama one more time as "Let's Get It On" begins. Pops had to have peeked. That's one of *my* songs. I'm listening to ring after ring when Giovanni takes the phone out of my hand and gives it to Janae. I am so shocked I can't speak.

"Care to dawwwwnce?" he asks in a phony English accent.

"Giovanni, the food," I say with a giggle, shaking my head.

He wraps his arms around me so I can't escape. "Let's get it on," he sings softly with the song.

"Stop," I say, but I don't really want him to stop. It's just too romantic. We dance by Pops and Janae who begin pressing out the rolls. This day may work out after all.

By 1:45, all the food is either cooking or simmering except for the devilled eggs which Mama usually makes, and I am feeling fine because Giovanni is letting me sip some Chianti. Mama hasn't called, but I don't give a shit. Heifer don't want to come, she don't have to come.

I go with Giovanni and Janae to pick up Freddie—and his grandma. She wouldn't let Freddie go unless she could go, too, probably to either get a free meal or check out Janae's family.

As we turn onto Elm Street, Giovanni asks Janae, "Are you nervous?"

"Should I be?"

"Daa-em, girlfriend. Jes' askin'. Chill."

"Oh puh-lease." Giovanni tries to be down, but all it does is make Janae laugh. Which, I suppose, is the point. He's so cornball, but Janae seems to like cornball in her daddy.

"Mama," Janae says, "please be nice to Freddie."

I'm hurt. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you're real hard on daddy."

"Tell me about it," Giovanni says before I can respond. "I'll keep your mama in line, Janae. If she gets too nosy or mean, I'll plunk a quarter in the jukebox and grind her for a while."

"Giovanni!" I shout.

"Daddy, that's nasty!" Janae shouts.

"But you like it," he mouths over Janae's head as he turns off Tenth Street onto Rutherford. We see Freddie and his grandma waiting out front ... of a little house that badly needs paint.

Giovanni was right. Freddie's grandma is a tall, skinny beanpole with graying hair, and Freddie is one of the original Fat Boys. The way they're standing side-by-side makes them look like a lowercase B.

Giovanni jumps out and opens the back door on his side. "Hello," he says as Freddie gets in. Freddie's kind of cute when he smiles at Janae, his face all dimpled up. "Hi, I'm Giovanni Luchesi," Giovanni says to Freddie's grandma.

"Mildred Smith," she says in an icy voice, "and you're five minutes late."

Giovanni shoots a grimace at me as Mildred gets in.

"Hi, Mrs. Smith, I'm Janae's mama, Renee."

"It's *Miss* Smith," she says. "And I prefer to be called Millie, if you don't mind."

Well, ex-cuuuuuse me, Grandma Heifer.

We drive the entire way back to the bakery in total silence. Even Giovanni, who normally hums or sings something, keeps completely quiet. Janae and I steal looks at Millie whenever we turn a corner. We are slick that way. Millie looks like a turkey with her long neck and pointy old nose. Freddie doesn't look a thing like her.

We go down the alley and park behind the bakery. Giovanni opens Millie's door for her, and Millie gets out without even looking at him or saying "thank you." Wench.

After hanging up coats, we walk into the dining room. "Call her Millie," I whisper to Pops as I pass by.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Millie," Pops says with a little bow. "I'm Janae's grandfather, Emilio Franco Luchesi."

Millie only nods. Millie's a cold-hearted woman in need of a meltdown, in need of a good stiff ... drink. Hmm.

After Millie seats herself at a table to the side, I send Janae and Freddie to the jukebox with a handful of quarters. Janae winks at me. She knows what to do. I stand behind the counter and watch as "I Second That Emotion" comes on. At first Millie's a statue, back straight, hands on her purse in front of her. Then I see a tiny little smile and one of her long, skinny feet bouncing up and down under the table.

Janae and Freddie come to me. "Phase one complete," I say. Okay, I've been having more than a *little* Chianti. "Phase two: Freddie, what does your grandma like to drink?"

"Coffee. Black. Two sugars." He sounds like an army recruit.

"Yuck," Janae says. "That's a Nay-Nay drink."

"Janae, don't you think that Millie needs a little mocha cappuccino with a dash of amaretto?"

Janae nods. "Want me to go ask her?"

I kneel and whisper in her ear. "Her beak doesn't scare you, girl?"

"No, Mama," she whispers back.

"Her nose could open cans."

"I know, Mama."

"She got a butt so tight you couldn't get a toothpick up in there."

Janae giggles. "Yup," she says like Giovanni.

I pat her on the butt. "Go ask her."

She returns in a flash. "She says she'll try it."

Giovanni already has a steaming mug ready on a tray. "No one can-a resist the mocha cappuccino with a dash of amaretto." He turns to Freddie. "Freddie, you do the honors." He slides the tray onto Freddie's hand.

"Y'all are a trip," Freddie says, and he walks carefully around the counter to Millie.

"Yup," I say to Giovanni.

Freddie delivers the mug, and he and Janae tear out the back door while Giovanni and I watch Millie from the counter. Millie picks up the mug and sniffs it. Oh, that's nasty. "She probably just blew a twenty-year-old booger in there," I whisper to Giovanni.

Millie takes a little sip. "Hmm," she says. She takes a bigger sip. "Hmm." She takes another sip, the biggest so far, and sets down the mug.

"How's your drink?" I shout.

"It'll do," Millie says.

Millie and Mama must be related. "We ought to be serving by three, three-thirty." Millie nods and picks up the mug. "Giovanni," I whisper, "how many inches of amaretto did you put in there?"

“Three.”

I blink at him. “Three?”

“Yeah. I guess four would have been better.”

I pinch his ass. “It only took three with me.”

Then the front door bangs open, and I see Mama—with a man who isn’t my daddy.

He’s black as coal, almost blue he’s so black, with tight, white, curly hair, moustache and beard. He’s wearing a navy blue pinstriped suit, he’s laughing about something, and he definitely isn’t a younger man. She must have found this geezer waiting in line at the morgue.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Mama says as she fumbles with her hands and looks at her shoes. Oh, that’s a dead giveaway, Mama. You’re nervous as hell. “I’d like you all to meet Reverend Theodore West.”

A preacher-man. My mama and a preacher-man. It’ll never last. And he sure does look like a preacher-man with his fancy watch, too-shiny black shoes, and yellow smile. I try not to give Mama the evil eye, but I can’t help it, and she shoots one right back.

“How do you do, Renee?” Reverend West asks.

“I’m fine.” But I’m hating you because you aren’t my daddy.

Then the back door bangs open, and Janae and Freddie come running into the dining room. Janae freezes a few feet in front of Reverend West. Oh shit. Here comes some drama.

“And this must be Janae,” Reverend West says. “Your Nay-Nay has been bragging on you, but she didn’t tell me how truly beautiful you are.”

I’m holding my breath. I’m pissed, too, but as an adult, I can’t say shit about this. Please go off for me, little girl. Pleasepleaseplease!

And she does.

“Well, Reverend *Worst*, Nay-Nay *ain’t* been braggin’ on you, and she *didn’t* tell me that you even existed!”

Oh shit. It’s so quiet. My child has a powerful voice. I look at Giovanni for help, but he’s trying not to laugh. Then Millie, of all people, busts out laughing, saying, “Oh, she got you good, Reverend, she done got you *good!*”

Three inches of amaretto are two inches too much for Grandma Heifer.

“Well, uh, we’ve only just met, Janae,” Reverend West says, looking at Mama for help. She looks at him as if to say, “You’re on your own, Reverend.”

Janae’s face looks ready to burst. “Well, you ain’t Chubby, and you’ll *never* be Chubby.”

“Thank you,” Reverend West says. He pats his stomach. “I might get a little chubby today, though. It smells so good in here.”

Before Janae can say another word—and I laugh my ass off!—I grab her arm and drag her down the hallway to Pops’s office. “Sit down, Janae.”

“No! You assaulted me!”

I shut the door. “I did no such thing!”

“You grabbed my arm without my permission!”

“Girl, it isn’t assault when it’s your mama, now sit down!”

I can’t believe I’m yelling at her. She only said what I would have liked to say to the good reverend. She sits in Pops’s chair and spins away from me, resting her head on Pops’s desk.

“Janae, honey,” I say softly, “I’m sure Nay-Nay was going to tell you. She didn’t even tell me.” She probably didn’t know how. How do you tell folks you’re dating a preacher-man who was there when God handed Moses the Ten Commandments and whose hair is still wet from the parting of the Red Sea? “Girl, it’s been three years since Daddy—since Chubby—died. When are you going to get over that?” It’s something mamas are supposed to say to their children, but coming from me, it comes out hollow. I miss that man, too. “Honey, I loved my daddy, and Nay-Nay did, too. And she still loves him, you have to believe that.”

Janae spins around. “She has a shitty way of showing it!”

True. Bringing Reverend Pest to a special annual dinner is wrong. “Do you want your Nay-Nay to be alone the rest of her life?” Janae doesn’t answer. I’ll bet she’s thinking “Yes.” That’s what I’m thinking. “The memory of a person isn’t enough, girl. Memory just isn’t enough. When Chubby died, I was sad for a long time. Nay-Nay was sad for a long time. But she didn’t stop being a woman.” She *did*, however, lose her damn mind bringing

that man up in here, a man who should be in an extra-strength Viagra commercial!

"Whatever," Janae says. She spins back around.

Whoa. This child is hurt deep. "Janae, I don't care if you don't like or speak to Reverend Pest, I mean, West. I'm not liking him that much right now myself." She spins around. "But I do care whether you speak to your Nay-Nay or not. That's *my* mama you're breaking bad on. That hurts me, too." Tears slide down her cheeks. Dag, she's doing the crying for both of us, too. "Now, we have guests out there who are waiting for us. I want us to have a good time today, and please don't sass Reverend *Yeast* again, you hear?" She wipes her face with a trembling hand and giggles a little. "I know Reverend *Worst* has snow on his head, girl. Maybe he caught fire and his hair is the ash."

She smiles. "He's so black he looks like he's been *paved*, Mama."

I giggle. "Come here." She slides the chair to me, and we hug. "You coming back in with me?"

She looks down at her hands, probably imagining a fishing pole, Daddy's hands intertwined with hers. "I will. In a minute."

I leave the office, close the door behind me, stride into the dining room ...

... and see Collette unplugging *my* jukebox.

"What in the *hell* do you think you're doing?" I yell.

She flips the cord on top. "Takin' it back, bitch!"

I look at Clyde standing by the front door with a hand truck, and Giovanni is just talking to him. Why isn't Giovanni doing something? The jukebox was a wedding gift to *both* of us!

"You are *not* taking a damn thing away from here, ho!" I start toward her. "You got you some damn nerve coming here on Thanksgiving to try and take away a gift that *you* gave to me!"

"What the hell?" Collette says. "Pops over there called *me* to come take it away cuz *you* didn't want it here to remind *you* of *me*!" She picks up the power cord and waves it at me like a sword.

I swat it away. "Wax off, heifer!"

Pops comes over shaking his head. "Loud woman, you are *still* crazy! I *never* call you! Why I call you? I never like *talking* to you!"

You just come to cause trouble on Thanksgiving! Talk to her, Renee!”

“Clyde!” Collette yells. “Get your ass over here!”

“Clyde!” I yell. “You take one step and I’ll kick your ass from here to Hurt Park!” Clyde smiles ... and he takes a beer from Giovanni? What’s going on?

“All right,” Collette says, “I’ll do it my damn self.” She starts to push the jukebox toward the door, so I get on the opposite corner and push, and eventually we’re pushing the jukebox in a circle.

“You think you’re the *shit*, don’t you?” Collette yells.

“I *am* the shit!” I yell back.

“Just cuz you got that big-ass promotion and I didn’t!”

“You should have gone to college, ho!” This shit is making me dizzy and tired, but I’m not giving in to this heifer.

“You had enough, Miss I-Used-To-Be-Black?” Sweat flies from her forehead, her braids whipping back and forth.

“You’re out of shape, Miss Fake-Ass-Braids-and-Blue-Contacts!”

Then Collette stops pushing, curls her lips, and hollers as loud as she can. I know the front windows are still vibrating as I add my own holler. I stop to take a breath, and so does Collette, and while we’re sucking in air for another holler, I hear this slapping sound. Collette squints at me, and we both turn and see Millie slapping the table, laughing like a hyena, tears streaming down her face. Pops, Mama, and Reverend West start clapping, and Giovanni and Clyde join in, tapping their beers.

“What the hell’s goin’ on here, Renee?” Collette whispers.

“I don’t know,” I say.

Pops slips by us and walks to the office. A moment later, loud opera music fills the bakery.

“Sounds like someone’s slaughtering a pig,” Collette says.

It lasts about fifteen seconds, then Pops turns it off, scoops up Janae, and walks right up to us. “Collette, Renee, you two should have been opera singers. You should have been divas. You could have made a fortune! Now please”—Janae hands us each a quarter—“push that machine back over there, and play us some music. You’re giving me a headache.”

I look at Collette. Collette looks at me. We have been had by this old man again, and somehow I know that Janae is in on it with him.

"That old man got us, didn't he?" Collette asks. "What are we gonna do about that, Renee?"

"I know what to do," I say, and we push the jukebox back to the wall, and while Collette plugs it in, I walk over to the tip jar, pick it up, and carry it to the jukebox. Collette and I drop quarter after quarter and press the same two buttons over and over until all the quarters in the tip jar are gone. "Betcha by Golly, Wow" comes on. Collette gives me a little dap.

"We got you, old man," Collette says.

"No," Pops says. "You didn't." And then ... Pops sings *every single word* of that song perfectly, and he almost hits a few of the high notes. I am amazed. He takes a deep bow as even I clap along with the rest. "You did not get me back, loud woman," he says to Collette. "Nor you, louder woman," he says to me. "Over the years I practice that song. Ha!"

Collette puts a long, scary finger with a long, sharp red fingernail on Pops's nose. "Just you wait, old man. Just you wait."

"Betcha By Golly, Wow" comes on again ... and again ... and again ... and again until everyone is singing it, and Pops is holding his ears.

He unplugs the jukebox. "It is time to eat. We sing silly song later."

Collette and I block Pops from going to the back while the others move toward the food lined up on the big silver table behind the ovens. "Well, kiss me already," he says, and we put some real sloppy ones on each side of his face.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"I ain't thankin' you yet," Collette says. "This food *better* be good."

Plates full, wine glasses and mugs brimming fifteen minutes later, we sit around the connected tables with Pops at the head. All but two of the seats are filled, and I keep checking the front door for the last two arrivals. I know they'll show up, because Pops wouldn't have put the chairs out.

“Join hands,” Pops says. We do. I hold Collette’s hand on my left, Giovanni’s on my right. I look over and see Janae holding Giovanni’s and Freddie’s hands. “Reverend,” Pops says, “will you bless this feast?”

Reverend West stands and prays ... and prays ... and prays. He even starts quoting scripture, chapter and verse. Shit, I’m hungry. Somebody say “Amen”! This isn’t the time for a sermon!

“Aaaaa-men,” Millie says before the Reverend’s through with yet another verse, and we all commence to get our grub on.

“Right. Amen.” Reverend West sits.

All the men go back for seconds after only a couple minutes, Freddie included. That boy can eat. I smile and giggle like I’m embarrassed to go back and follow them. When I come back with a full plate, Millie yells, “Dear *Jesus*, is there any left?” I motion for Giovanni to cut Millie off. No more amaretto for you, Grandma Heifer.

Collette looks over at me chowing down. “You’re eatin’ like you’re pregnant again, girl.”

I wish, *just once*, that I could surprise *just one* person with this news! “I *am* pregnant, Collette. How’d you know?”

“Cuz you’re puttin’ it away like I been doin’ ... for the past three months!”

I drop my fork, yell “Holy shit!” then “Sorry, Reverend,” and hug Collette.

And then ... everyone’s hugging on everyone. Mama tries to hug Clyde, but he’s too busy getting his grub on, so she kisses him on his shiny, bald head. “It’s about damn time, Clyde,” she tells him.

Clyde just shrugs, smiles, and keeps eating. Giovanni whispers something to him, and Clyde busts out laughing, a little piece of turkey flying across the table and hitting Millie on her turkey neck. And it doesn’t slide off. It’s stuck there. A big glob of half-chewed turkey dangles from Millie’s turkey neck. Clyde’s eyes get real wide, and he looks at me. Millie doesn’t notice at all. Clyde starts laughing so hard he has to get up and leave the table.

And when everyone’s watching Clyde choking to death, I catch Janae hugging on Freddie. Poor Freddie looks like he’s going to fall out. I look up the table and focus on Pops at the head of the

table, empty chairs to his right and left. He seems to be ignoring everything, talking to himself and even pausing to listen and nod. I excuse myself and approach him.

“Who are you talking to, Pops?” I whisper.

“My wife, Ruth, and your Daddy. They tell me the meal is wonderful.” He laughs. “All your yelling woke them up.”

I get a little misty and squeeze his shoulder. “Thank you.”

He shrugs. “Eh, don’t mention it. Now go away. You interrupted your father.”

As I return to my seat, I smile inside because everybody *is* here after all.

## SIXTEEN

Janae has a real boyfriend now. I don't know how I feel about that yet. I mean, the child hasn't even hit puberty yet. True, she looks much older, but ... Shit, when I was ten, I was still riding my bike, playing pick-up basketball games, and hating boys. The girls these days ... They must be listening to us grown folks. What do we say? We say, "Grow up," and damn if they aren't trying to act grown. I feel so damn old.

But, I like Freddie. He's polite, he opens doors for Janae, and he pays attention to her. Giovanni has even put him to work in the bakery, at first paying him with cookies and root beer. I changed that. The boy needs to slim down, and now Freddie gets five dollars a day and has his own apron, and Janae thinks Giovanni has stolen her boyfriend!

I think he has. In a way, Giovanni is practicing being a daddy to a boy. Freddie and Giovanni clean the exhaust filters together (which are the nastiest things you've ever seen), go to the bank together, even shoot baskets badly together on a hoop behind the bakery. Janae can smoke them both. I think Janae feels left out, and when Giovanni tells Janae that Freddie is getting a Christmas bonus, she has a fit at our table.

It's a very busy table.

"Where's *my* bonus, Daddy?"

Giovanni rolls his eyes. "You'll get yours tomorrow."

"How much? And it better be more than Freddie's getting."

Giovanni looks at me. "I'm not in this," I say. "This is your show, Giovanni." This is the first year for bonuses since the bakery broke all records in October and November, and I intend to hit him up later for mine. And it isn't all going to be money. Well, most of it isn't.

He looks back at Janae. "How much do you need?"

"A lot, Daddy. I want to get you so much this Christmas."

Giovanni looks at me again. "Will a hundred be enough?"

Janae's and my eyes roll. "Giovanni," I say, "you can only get so much with a hundred." I get an idea. "How about ... a thousand?"

"Yeah!" Janae shouts with a smile.

Giovanni gulps. "Will a thousand be enough?"

"No, Mr. Man," I say, "but we'll manage." I put out my hand.

"You want it *now*?"

"We're hitting that mall tomorrow morning at sunrise, Giovanni. We ought to be done by sundown."

Giovanni gulps again. "But that won't leave me much to buy presents for you two."

I sit back. "Who do you think I'm buying for, huh?"

"What?"

Janae giggles. "You need help buying presents, Daddy."

"I do not," he says to Janae. "Do I?" he asks me.

I nod. He does. He keeps lists on napkins of all the things he hears me say I *need* during the year and gets every single one of them for me every Christmas. It's so predictable. He hasn't figured out that what I need and what I want are two *totally* different things. "Remember that mixer you got for me last year?"

He smiles. "Yes. Eight speeds and six attachments. It even matched the blue in the kitchen."

I look deeply into his sadly mistaken eyes. "I didn't like it."

He's stunned. "What?"

"Daddy," Janae says, "it wasn't very romantic. Mama doesn't want mixers or socks for Christmas."

He looks at me. "But they were on your list!"

I shake my head. "I don't want appliances, Giovanni. It reminds me that I'm a housewife." At times.

"I know you loved the throw blanket I got you for the sofa."

It was okay. A little too frilly. "Did I *say* that I loved the blanket?"

He pouts. "No. You said, 'It'll do.'"

I lean over the table and kiss him on the cheek. "Don't worry, Giovanni. I'm going to love all the gifts you're giving to me this year."

The next morning, Janae and I get up before Giovanni for a change and take the "back way" by the airport to the mall. It's kind of spooky having the airport so close to the mall. The airplanes hover just a couple hundred feet above the mall before landing on the other side of Hershberger Road. Mama says one day a plane

will land short and blow up the mall. As a result, Mama does all her shopping at Tanglewood Mall on the other side of town, just to be safe.

We find a parking spot on the upper level near J. C. Penney. "This is the spot," I tell Janae. "It is centrally located so we can shop and dump without breaking our shopping flow."

"You're weird, Mama."

I know. I always feel strange when I have money to spend, which isn't very often.

Only a few stores are open at seven, but that's okay. At Bath and Body Works, I have Janae consult Giovanni's napkins. "What did he say I needed here?"

"Um, raspberry lotion."

I hold up a basket with lotion, three different soaps, bath oil beads, and body wash. "So *this* is what I wanted." I am going to trip like this all day!

At Fink's Jewelers, Janae reads the list: "A pair of pearl earrings."

"Just a pair? What was I thinking?" I pick out a pair of pearl earrings, and a matching bracelet, pin, and necklace.

The next item on the list is pajamas. Giovanni would go to Sears and get me something functional, conservative, and easy to unbutton, so I stop at Victoria's Secret.

"Mama, you want to wear stuff like this?"

"Uh-huh."

"These aren't pajamas."

"I know." And once Giovanni sees me in them, I won't be wearing them long.

I end up buying something nasty for every day of the week.

Our next stop is the evil store at the end of the mall, so evil that I won't say its name. "We have to go *there*," I say in a spooky voice. I shake all over and take Janae's hand. "Promise me you won't let go of my hand."

"What's so bad about—"

"No," I interrupt. "Don't say that name! It is an evil place full of evil people who stare down foot-long noses at mere mortals like ourselves." I'm beginning to sound like Giovanni. "Think pure thoughts."

The unnamed store isn't so bad, actually. In fact, it has the best selection of fashionable clothing in Roanoke. The prices? Well, they're a bit high (unless they're having one of their "semi-annual clearance" sales), but that's not why I never name it.

It's the salespeople. Vultures are nicer, and car salespeople are more sincere. They must have a sensor that goes off when you step into the store, alerting the nearest salesperson to swoop in, attack, and ignore you when you say, "I'm just looking."

We sneak into the sweater section looking for a "colorful patterned sweater." I find a wonderful collection displayed in a corner, only a few of them the itchy kind. I don't do itchy. An itchy wool sweater may be warmer, but it isn't worth the extra warmth and expense to scratch all day.

"Why are we sneaking, Mama?"

I put a finger to my lips. "Shh. Be quiet or they'll hear you and—"

"Hello! I'm Carol! How can I help you today?"

Shit! I look down at the napkin in my hand. "We're, uh, we're just looking, thanks." Now *please* go away, heifer. We were having such a wonderful time. *Please* don't ruin it!

But Carol tries to ruin it anyway. "Perhaps I could interest you in a Divani original over here?" She motions to a display of itchy, two hundred-dollar sweaters.

"No, no thank you. Like I said, we're just—"

Carol snatches the napkin out of my hand, her eyes as huge as her body. The bitch! "A patterned sweater? We have *scads* of those! What colors do we want today?"

We? Bitch, you must put two *cups* of sugar in your coffee every morning. And "scads" is definitely an old white lady's word. What the hell is a "scad"? "Uh, I'm letting my daughter pick out the sweater, so if you don't—"

"Your daughter? Where is she?"

Standing next to me, you wench. Janae gives Carol a little wave.

Carol bends down and looks Janae in the eye, her pancake makeup threatening to flake off and snow on my little girl. "Oh, you are a *dream*! What country are you from?" Oh no she didn't! "Do you speak any English?" she asks real slow and loud.

I want to punch this bitch so bad! “Yes!” Janae yells. Good for her. I hope Carol’s deaf for a week.

Carol blinks her eyes rapidly. Geez, Cleopatra used less mascara than her. She straightens and looks at me. “I’m sorry. I thought she was one of those Bosnian children. It’s so good for you to adopt. My husband, Burt, and I are thinking of adopting—”

I put up my hand. “Excuse me?”

“Your daughter is adopted, isn’t she?”

If I hit her, I’ll get gooey makeup all over my hand. I drop my hand. “Janae is my natural daughter.”

Carol drops the fake smile. “But there’s hardly a resemblance.”

A scene from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* flashes through my mind. If I kick her kneecap just right, she’ll have to limp sideways for the rest of her life. I squat in front of Janae. “Go pick out a sweater.” She goes and picks out a beautiful teal and purple sweater and brings it to me. I’m still squatting because if I stand, I’m throwing a left hook with bad intentions. “Hand the sweater to Carol.” Janae does.

“I’ll ring you up over there,” Carol says, pointing to a register.

I’m still squatting. “We’ll meet you there,” I say. As soon as Carol leaves, I stand and take Janae’s hand, and we walk out of that nameless place, leaving Mrs. Fake-Smile-Can’t-Have-No-Children holding a sweater I never intend to buy. Once we’re outside, we crack up so badly that we have to sit on a bench to compose ourselves.

“Mama, why didn’t you cuss her out?”

I put her arm around her. “I’d rather get even than get loud.” Though I was damn sure about to.

We wander around and end up getting hot pretzels and strawberry milkshakes. “Is this our lunch, Mama?”

“Yeah. We’re having at least two of the food groups, right?”

We sit on another bench next to this statue of a black woman. Don’t ask me what it’s doing here. I suppose it’s there to make people look twice. I wonder if *she* ever gets harassed by mall security. I point out people walking by and tell Janae their life stories until she has milkshake dripping out of her nose.

“That scary white man saves his belly button lint in a jar, his ear wax in a freezer bag, and his boogers in a big pickle jar,” I say,

“because one day he thinks they’ll cure cancer.” I point at an obese white lady wearing support hose that look like knee socks. “That lady hasn’t seen her bellybutton since nineteen fifty-nine.”

Then I tell her a story about Giovanni. “Just over there,” I say, pointing to some stairs, “I was shopping inside Merry-Go-Round, a nice clothing store that isn’t there anymore. Your daddy was waiting for me outside. He never comes in. He only gets in the way. Anyway, three black boys about fifteen or sixteen years old came up to him. I quit shopping right quick and slipped over beside him.”

“Why?”

“Listen to the rest. You’ll understand why. The shortest one did all the talking. He wore a shirt that had Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, George Washington Carver, and Martin Luther King on it. So Shorty says, ‘What you doin’ with my sister?’”

“What did Daddy say?”

“He said, ‘My wife, Renee, is an only child.’ But Shorty wouldn’t let that go and said, ‘You know what I mean mother—’ I don’t finish that word. It’s a word every mother should hate.

“What did Daddy say?”

I smile. “Daddy says, ‘Let’s say what you’ve called me is true. What does that say about you? That you like to watch?’”

Janae thinks a moment. “Oh! That’s *gross!*”

“Then Daddy pointed at Shorty’s shirt and asked him who the men on it were. Shorty says, ‘How should I know?’ Then Daddy read the words under the pictures to him real slow: ‘It’s a black thing. You wouldn’t understand.’”

Janae’s eyes pop. “Did he steal on Daddy?”

I sigh. “No. I was there to regulate. Besides, anytime a few people of color hang in one place for too long in this mall, a security guard will show up. That’s what happened eventually that day, and I’m sure it will happen more than once today.”

“So *that’s* why you and Daddy don’t come to the mall anymore.”

I shake my head. “No. We don’t have the *money* to come to the mall.” I drape my arm around her and pull her close. “Thanks for helping me spend some money today.”

She puts her head on my chest. “Anytime.”

And that's when we see a policeman walking toward us. He steps up to me and says, "May I see some ID?"

Janae sits up, and I say, "What for?"

The policeman, whose red hair and freckles make him look like a larger Howdy-Doody, crouches a little. "Just hand me your ID." I reach into my purse. "Slow, slow," he says to me.

"You want to pull it out *for* me?" I ask him. I hold out my purse. His right hand slides to his holster. What the hell is he thinking? The only weapon I have in here is a pen. I pull out my billfold and show him my license.

Howdy-Doody keeps his feet in place and reaches over with his left hand, snatching my license into the air. He looks at it then at me and hands it back. I look up at the second floor of the mall and see lines of people forming on the rails.

"Is this your daughter?" he says.

Oh ... my ... God! "Yes."

"Can you prove that?"

I've had my share of these encounters over the years. I've been mistaken for a babysitter or a nanny by a cashier in the supermarket checkout many times. "Can you believe this shit?" I whisper to Janae. I pull out a family picture we had taken over the summer. I show it to the policeman, and as soon as he sees it, he relaxes and says some cop talk into the walkie-talkie on his shoulder.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, ma'am."

Inconvenience? Try racist bullshit! "What was all this about?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," the cop says, but his eyes travel to the other end of the mall and back to me.

Howdy-Doody is trying to help me out. "Did someone from that store call you?"

He nods. "But I'm not at liberty to say," he says, and he walks away.

We sit for a few minutes until the crowds above us thin out. "Janae, we need to go back to that store."

"Mama, I don't want to see that wench!"

That word sounds so cute coming out of her mouth. "Janae, I'm surprised at you. You'll want to see Carol's face after what

we're about to do." I whisper the plan to her. "That's the shit, isn't it?"

"That's cold, Mama. It's almost as smooth as Sippity."

We sweep down the mall and march into Mrs. Talks-Too-Loud's section smiling from ear to ear. "Hello!" I say as loud as I can, and Carol jumps. This heifer is going to get hers and then some. "We're here to pay for the sweater now," I say. "My little girl had to use the restroom. Is the sweater still here?"

Mrs. Plaster-For-Makeup calls to another saleswoman, a caramel-colored woman with pretty hair. "Oh June, would you mind waiting on these two?"

June zips over but hesitates when she sees us. "How may I help you?"

I say everything loudly so Mrs. Is-She-Adopted? can hear. "Hi June. How do you do? My name is Renee Luchesi, owner of Luchesi's Deli and Pizzeria." Okay, part-owner by marriage, but who's going to check?

June recovers from my blast. "I've eaten there. It's on Fourth Street, right?"

"You are correct, June." Carol has hovered closer. Good. "I think I've seen you there a few times." She nods and smiles, mainly because I'm not screaming at her anymore. "June, my daughter and I are here to purchase a whole new wardrobe for me as a gift from my husband for Christmas." I pull out my billfold and count out ten hundreds. "Is this enough, honey?" I ask Janae.

"No, Mama," Janae says loudly. "We'll need more."

"Hmm. You're right." I count out five hundred more, my entire Christmas bonus from Star City. "I hope you don't mind, June, but this might take a while."

"Oh no ma'am, I don't mind at all."

"Oh June," Mrs. There's-Hardly-A-Resemblance calls out from the register. "It's time for your break." We have attracted the rat.

"June," I whisper quickly, "do you work on commission?"

"Yes."

"And do you hate Carol like we hate Carol?"

June steps closer. "Hell yes."

“Good.” I slip her a piece of paper. “Here are my sizes.” She takes them. “Now tell Carol you’re going on break. We’re buying from you no matter what you see or hear. Understand?”

June smiles and takes off.

“Well, well,” Carol says, barely squeezing between racks of dresses. “Here we are again. Did I hear someone say we were creating a whole new wardrobe for Mommy?”

“Oh yes,” Janae says. “I want to make Mommy beautiful!” The child should be an actress. Shirley Temple hasn’t got *nothin’* on my daughter. And she called me “Mommy”? She’s taking a bath when we get home.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. Where shall we begin?”

For the next hour, we work Carol-The-Barrel’s fat barrel clean off. My job is for Carol to take a dress, outfit, or sweater from a high shelf or display. Janae is to wait until Carol’s in front of her before shaking her head and saying, “No.” Then we watch her put the clothes back. We make a good team. If I like it, Janae hates it. If Janae likes it, I hate it. One time we get crossed up and agree on a skirt. Carol becomes an overgrown ping-pong ball bouncing from shelf to shelf, rack to rack, display to display.

Then June comes off her “break” and announces, “I’m ready, Mrs. Luchesi.”

Carol’s jaw drops. “*What?*”

I face Carol, only the one skirt folded neatly on the counter behind her. “Carol, it’s been a pleasure.” Not. “Take care.”

I grab Janae’s hand, and I can’t resist looking back and saying, “*Grazie.*” Do Bosnians say that, too?

We follow June to another section where she has my new wardrobe on display. “Well, this is it,” she says.

Daa-em, I’m having a fashion orgasm. This is some nice shit! Shoes, blouses, skirts, dresses, scarves, handbags, sweaters, all in glorious colors that will look good on me. June needs to get her ass a promotion.

“Wow!” I say, feeling all over the fabric of a silky mustard yellow pantsuit. “What’s the damage?” June hands me a slip of paper with the total. “And under budget. Thank you, June. Wrap them up, and let’s get—”

And here comes Carol storming down the main aisle with two fat store security guards. Now isn't this an added bonus! "There they are!" Carol yells.

"Ma'am," the fatter of the two guards says, "I'm going to have to ask you to leave the store."

"May I make my purchases first?" I pull out fourteen hundreds and hand them to June. June snatches the money out of my hand and runs to the register.

The security guards hesitate. Oh, this is priceless! The skinnier one turns to Carol and says, "But *you* said—" but Carol has already thrown up her hands and rolled off.

I hold out a hand to Janae. "Give me some dap, girl." She slides her hand across mine.

June has to help us carry our purchases to my car, but she doesn't seem to mind at all. "I hope we didn't get you into any trouble, June," I say, placing the last dress bag in the back seat.

"Are you kiddin'?" June says. "I'm only seasonal. I'm goin' back in there, get my damn commission, and quit that place. Y'all have a Merry Christmas!"

Janae can't stop looking in the back seat. "Dag, Mama, are we gonna wrap all that?"

"We aren't anal like your daddy," I tell her. Giovanni wraps the shit out of every gift, even the stocking stuffers. It slows down Christmas to a crawl ... which seems to make it last longer. Hmm. "Maybe we'll wrap a few."

We have another green Christmas in Roanoke, but I don't mind. I get everything I want this Christmas, and I can't stop complimenting Giovanni on his good taste. Janae gets clothes, clothes, and more clothes along with the usual: socks, draws, hair ties, school supplies. But there's one last gift under the tree, and by tradition, it has to be for Janae.

Giovanni brings it to her. "I've worked your whole life on this, girlfriend." Janae peels back the paper and sees a thin book titled *Poems for Janae* by Giovanni A. Luchesi. "It's got all the poems I've written to or about you since the day you were born."

She holds it up. "You got them published?"

"Not all of them," he says. "Looks pretty real, huh? Got that done at Kinko's."

*J. J. Murray*

So he's now a self-published poet, and it only cost around fifty bucks. A good investment. "Read the last one, Janae," I say. "I think that's the best one." She lip-reads a few lines. "Read it out *loud*, girl."

"Okay." She clears her voice. "'Golden,' by Giovanni A. Luchesi. Hey, it's dedicated to me. Thank you, Daddy."

"You're welcome," Giovanni says.

Janae smiles at me and begins to read:

"I am a  
gold-bronze-iron-zinc,  
Italian-Jewish-Cherokee-African-American,  
an ashy-legged, "good"-haired granddaughter  
with a Nay-Nay and a Poppa,  
with a taste for chitlins and greens,  
pasta and apple pie."

Janae giggles. "But not all at once." She continues to read:

I am a  
rainbow in a rainbow family  
where every color is love ..."

Giovanni and I clap when she finishes, and Janae starts to mist up. "Thank you, Daddy," she says, and she hugs him for the longest time.

And thank you, God, for helping us make this child.

## SEVENTEEN

It's January, and I'm not fat. Yet.

Heifer Collette is a cow. Shit, she's practically an entire herd, and she's due four months from now in April. She's a big woman anyway, and adding the beach ball in her belly, she is a big-boned bona fide black beach ball. Her feet and fingers have swelled so much that she had to have her toe-rings and wedding ring cut off. She has wisely removed the diamond stud from her belly button. That stud might have killed someone if her belly button popped. I rag on her all the time, telling her "Clyde will have to widen all the doorways in your house!" and "What's the load capacity for your house? The fire marshal is going to shut y'all down!"

All she says is, "You gonna be a fat little roly-poly, so shut the hell up."

I don't know if I'm going to get fat. I go walking every day after work, and Giovanni and I are still messing with each other, though Janae just can't understand why.

"There's already a baby in there, Mama. Why y'all have to keep practicing?"

"Because it feels good, girl."

"But Mama, that's like taking shots after the basketball game's over. It isn't gonna change the score, so why bother?"

This child, this child. "You'll understand when you hit puberty."

"Mama, if puberty hits me, I'm hitting puberty back."

Freddie went away to Petersburg to be with his real mama over holiday break, so Janae's been in a horrible mood. When Freddie doesn't show up for the first week of school in January, Janae pulls out an atlas. I help her measure the distance from Roanoke to Petersburg—close to two hundred miles—and she says Freddie can't walk that far.

"Sure he can, honey." Not. "The average person walks about four miles an hour."

"Freddie's not average, Mama."

She's right. "Okay, even at two miles an hour Freddie can be back from Petersburg ... in three and a half days if he doesn't stop to rest." Daa-em. "Let's hope he gets a ride back."

When he does return, Freddie is one changed little boy because his mama didn't want him. She just didn't want him. What kind of mama doesn't want her own child? The heifer's up in Petersburg to be close to a man in jail who isn't even Freddie's daddy, and she doesn't want any responsibilities. First of all, I can't imagine being two hundred miles from my mama. And second, if my mama didn't want me, I'd feel like a pile of shit. That shit just isn't right, and when Mrs. Bell decides to fail Freddie for his absences because of all that shit, I pull Freddie aside and explain Sippity to him. The next day at school, Freddie has a "Sippity Fit," foaming at the mouth (Janae says he used Alka-Seltzer), and acting blind in front of Mrs. Bell.

Freddie's will pass the fifth grade now.

This child inside me has rearranged some of our plans. Giovanni and I were planning on renewing our vows in May for our tenth anniversary, but I'm not going down no aisle pregnant. Oh yeah, I did that the first time. I mean, I'm not going down the aisle *showing*. So to commemorate the night we first met, we're getting "married" again *this* month on January 21. I want to look nice for my groom.

"Didn't the first wedding count or something?" Janae asks one night when Mama and Collette are over to play cards.

"Yes."

Mama scowls. "What you want to go through all that trouble and expense for anyway? Ain't no suspense in that kind of a wedding. Everybody knows you're already hitched. And if you think I'm singing with this"—she points to Collette—"you can just forget it. Heifer always gotta be singin' like she's on *Showtime at the Apollo!*"

"You just wish you could sing," Collette snaps.

"Collette, you're coming, right?" I ask her.

"Well," Collette says, "I'd like to come, Renee, but my doctor won't like it."

"You're due in April," I say.

"I know, but I'm just too pooped. You know how it is. It takes me most of the morning just to get out of bed and into the kitchen. And if I sing, the doctor says I could go into labor early if I hold a note too long."

"Oh that's bullshit," I say. "You don't want to come, you don't have to come."

Mama smiles. "What about the, um, ladies from New York?"

Giovanni had called his sister, Christina, and her "partner," Alexis, but they said they were off to a big fashion show in Paris. "They'll be in France."

"Is *that* what they call it," Collette says.

"I hope Poppa will be there," Janae says.

I wince. Pops has been feeling rundown lately. "He may not be coming, Janae."

"Why not?"

"Cuz he's *old*," Mama says. "That old man needs his beauty sleep."

Collette laughs. "He's gonna be asleep a long time."

Janae pouts. "Is Poppa sick?"

"No," I say. "Your Poppa will outlive us all." I stare down Mama and Collette. They shouldn't talk bad about Pops in front of Janae and me. He's the sweetest man we know, and if they think long enough about it, he's the sweetest man they know, too. "Well, if y'all aren't coming, that'll leave only me, Giovanni, and Janae from the original wedding party."

"Huh?" Janae says.

Damn, I thought she knew. "You were inside me when Daddy and I got married."

"I was?"

"Yes. Don't you remember?"

"No." She giggles then stares at Mama. "Is that why you said Mama and Daddy *had* to get married, Nay-Nay?"

I stare a hole in Mama's head. "Thanks, Mama."

"It's the truth," Mama said.

"Your Nay-Nay with the big mouth really meant that your daddy and me had to get married so you would have a *married* mama and daddy. Unlike *me*." Mama rolls her eyes. "But that's not entirely true. Your daddy and I had to get married, because out of

all the billions of people on this planet, we were right for each other, and it would have been wrong for us *not* to get married. Understand?”

Now Janae’s staring at Collette. “That’s not what *you* said, Aunt Collette.”

“Um, Janae, honey, this ain’t the time,” Collette says.

“What did you say, Collette?”

She looks at the table. “I said that y’all had to get married cuz ... no one else would marry your ass, Renee.”

“Bitch!” I yell.

She blinks at me. “Well, no one else has, right?”

Collette leaves us early that night. All day to get to the kitchen, my ass. Bitch probably got a bed set up next to the refrigerator.

On January 21, it’s just Giovanni, Janae, and me at High Holiness, which is just as well. This is going to be a family ceremony, and my entire family is here including the chap playing the drums inside of me. Janae spreads rose petals up and down the aisle then escorts me to the pulpit. Giovanni presses a button on a boom box we’ve brought, and we listen to “The Lord’s Prayer.” Collette did it so much better. Then Janae runs up to the pulpit and plays the preacher, reading the script Giovanni and I wrote the night before.

“We are gathered here today to give Renee and Giovanni another hook-up.” Janae giggles. “Who in the world gives this woman to get a hook-up?” She runs back down to me and says, “I, Janae Vanni Luchesi, give my mama to be hooked up.” She runs back up to the pulpit. “If there be any fools out there who want to mess this wedding up, speak now or forever eat your pizza.” She giggles again and pauses. “Let us pray. Lord Jesus, please bless Renee and Giovanni. Do *somehin’* with ‘em. Lord knows, they need help. Amen.”

“There’s been a change in the program at the groom’s request,” Giovanni says. Hey now, we’re supposed to listen to “Find Me a Man.” “This is called ‘Always,’” he says, and then, my Giovanni, who can barely sing in the shower, who can scare small children when he only hums, sings “Always” to me ... *nicely* ...

and he makes me cry! And on my “wedding day,” too! I hug him tenderly when he finishes, and he wipes away my tears.

“Thank you,” I say.

Then we hear Pops singing “*Ave Maria*” from the back of the church. That sneaky old man! I cry again. When he finishes, he strolls down the aisle and hands me a rose. “I couldn’t miss this part,” he says. “I’ll just stand here by my son, if you don’t mind.”

I motion for Janae to read from the script again. “Okay you two, time for you to say your vows. And this time, Renee goes first and Giovanni gets the last word.”

Pops laughs hard out loud as I get on *my* knees this time. Giovanni’s face turns red as a stop sign. Good. Now he knows how I felt at our wedding. “I, Renee Lynette Howard Luchesi, do take—”

“Hold up, hold up!” *Mama* yells as she busts down the aisle followed by Collette and Clyde. I stand and hug *Mama*. “You think I’d miss this?” she whispers. I nod. “Thanks a lot, girl. I don’t know if I can stay now—”

“Just stand beside me, *Mama*,” I interrupt, “and keep your mouth shut.”

After Collette and Clyde settle themselves in most of the first pew, I kneel again. “I, Renee Lynette Howard Luchesi, do take Giovanni Anthony Luchesi, to give him the son he’s always wanted, to spend more evenings saying ‘hubba-hubba,’ to do the dishes once a month, to not complain if you decide *not* to take a shower on a Sunday morning, to take a real honeymoon with you before I get as fat as Collette, and to still keep waking you up with a smile and a kiss, if you still keep brushing your teeth.”

I stand, my admirers clap, and now it’s Giovanni’s turn. He pulls out a ratty piece of paper that’s been taped together. “Pops,” he says, “get Renee a chair.” Pops produces a folding chair out of thin air and places it behind me.

“What are you doing, Giovanni?”

He only raises his eyebrow ... and kneels. “Sweet sizzlin’ soul sister,” he says so passionately, but I can’t stop laughing and neither can *Mama*. “Silken soft-skinned sis-TUH! Gimme some play. Share soma-dat darkness with a white boy today.” Giovanni pauses until everybody stops laughing. “Don’t care what your

mama says, don't care what Pops whispers, just gimme a chance, my sweet sepia sister." He folds up the paper and hands it to me. "I saved it for you."

I look at the paper, an old menu from the first time we ever met. It's one of the nicest things he's ever given me. "Thank you."

"I, Giovanni Anthony Luchesi, do take Renee Lynnette Howard Luchesi, to put up with my messy habits even though they're not that messy, to get a hearing test so I can listen to you better, to be my wife for the rest of my life, and to spend an all-expenses-paid trip to Maui ... *tonight!*"

Am I hearing this right? "Did you say Maui?"

He nods. "Tonight."

I don't believe this! "Show me the tickets."

He reaches behind him, and Pops slaps the airline folders in his hand. He places them in mine. "Now you know why we were, uh, a little short this summer."

I feel so bad ... but then again I don't. He was holding back on me! I thought we were facing financial ruin! "That wasn't very nice," I say, but I hug him anyway, we skip to the kiss, and everyone hugs everyone.

Except Janae.

"Where am I gonna stay?" she asks.

"With me," Mama says.

Janae looks like someone just cut the most vicious fart. "How long will you be gone, Daddy?"

He looks me in the eye. "Two weeks." Oh ... my ... God! I hug the hell out of him! Two weeks away from Roanoke! Yesyesyesyesyes!

"Two weeks with *Nay-Nay*? She and Reverend Worst will have me running to the fridge for them."

"This is what I worried about," Giovanni whispers to me. He kneels in front of Janae. "You'll spend the second week with Aunt Collette."

"Dag. I don't want to stay with the Elephant Woman, Daddy! Why can't I stay with Poppa?"

"He's going on a vacation, too. He's going back to Long Island to visit a few friends for a week." The few he has left, I'll bet.

I can tell Janae just isn't having it, so I pull her to the side and sit with her on a pew. "Tell you what, honey. I think I can talk Poppa into letting you spend spring break with him at the bakery."

"Oh boy," she says, but I know she doesn't mean it.

I squeeze her leg. "It'll be fun, girl. You'll get to boss Daddy around." By that time, I'll probably be on maternity leave. Hmm. "And you can boss me around, too."

"You're going to work at the bakery?"

Hell, even a pregnant woman can run a register. "Yeah. It'll be fun." And maybe I'll feel like a real Luchesi again.

"Okay!" She smiles. "I wish I could go, Mama."

"Children are not allowed on honeymoons," I say.

"My brother's going!"

Oh yeah. "Well, his eyes will be closed. I promise that he won't see a thing."

She throws her head back and stares at the ceiling. "Staying with Nay-Nay is like going to the dentist, Mama, only you don't get a lollipop afterwards."

"She's not that mean." Though it is an accurate description.

"Oh puh-lease. When I stayed with her in October, she was so mean. Know what she told me?"

"I lived with her for twenty-six years, girl. I can imagine."

"She told me that you and Daddy have spoiled me rotten."

She's right. "We have, honey." I hug her. "We've spoiled you rotten with lots and lots of love."

## EIGHTEEN

Roanoke, Virginia, has to be the hardest place on earth to leave, especially if you're flying. We board a scary little plane and fly south over the Blue Ridge Mountains to Charlotte, and we're half an hour late. Upon landing, we haul ass to get to our United flight to Chicago on time. We run into thunderstorms over Indiana and are nearly an hour late into Chicago. We run at least half a mile through O'Hare to catch our flight to L.A. and are the last folks on.

And every passenger stares at our asses, and yes, I am pissed by the time I sit down in a cramped seat in the back.

"Where'd you get these tickets?" I complain once we are in the air.

Giovanni turns away. "I'm sorry."

"Answer the question."

He turns back and smiles. "Collette got them for us."

Oh, that heifer wench! "You let her?"

"She said she owed you." He rubs my leg. "Maybe she's trying to keep you skinny so you'll look nice in that bikini."

"I look nice in anything, Mr. Man."

He rubs my leg a little higher. Nice. "I feel nice when I'm *in* you, Mrs. Man," he whispers, his breath oh so hot on my ear.

The flight attendant walks by, and I get us two blankets. The trip to L. A. is *very* nice after that. I think I come twice over Iowa and once over the Rocky Mountains.

We land in L. A., and though we have a four-hour layover, we camp out at our gate until the flight is called. "This reminds me of our first honeymoon," I say.

He sighs. "I'm still sorry about that, Renee. You know I am. But how does this compare to that?"

"All the running and waiting."

We had decided against Maui for our first honeymoon since Hurricane Chico was threatening to blow Maui out of the ocean. Giovanni suggested Nags Head, North Carolina. "We'll camp," he said. "It will be fun," he said. "It will be so romantic," he said. I believed him.

What was I thinking? I had never been camping!

He pitched us a tent on Oregon Inlet. We frolicked. I swatted mosquitoes. We swam. I rubbed mosquito bites. We danced and made love on the sand in the moonlight. I fought mosquitoes all night buzzing around my head.

And then, it rained. And rained. The tide came in. The waves crashed. The storm blew the tent and most of our clothes probably to Cape Hatteras. We huddled in his Cadillac and considered our only option. "We're going to a hotel," I said.

We went to a hotel, spent two days making mad passionate love, then went to an all-you-can-eat seafood bar. Giovanni got food poisoning and had the runs for three days while I waited ... and sprayed lots of air freshener.

Running and waiting, just like today.

The flight from L. A. to Maui is peaceful, the landing smooth in Kahului, the reception warm, the air hot and humid, the rent-a-car clean and cool, and my man ... is looking torn up. Twenty hours of travel have reduced Giovanni to a hundred eighty pounds of hairy funk.

"I need a shower," I say when we arrive at the Four Seasons Resort in Wailea. Hint, hint, stank man.

"Don't you want to go swimming?"

"After I take my shower."

"But that makes no sense. You'll only need another one when you come in." He's right? Daa-em, he's right. "Come on."

So after we run around on the beach and soak in the waves, Giovanni becomes a hundred eighty pounds of fishy funk. But I wash all that funk off his body in the bathtub and then add a little funk of my own. I don't mind if he smells like me.

For the first week, we do everything you can do on Maui in addition to having great sex and eating macadamia nuts. We take a helicopter ride to see some amazing waterfalls, and Giovanni nearly throws up. Imagine the greenest Italian you can—and add more green. I drive the rental car all the way around the island zipping around nearly impossible curves and even get stopped by a stampede of cows with real cowboys moseying them along, and Giovanni gets motion sickness. We ride mountain bikes ten thousand feet down Haleakala, a volcano, at incredible speeds,

and Giovanni wrecks at the end. Nothing serious. A scrape or two on his ego. We go out on a sailboat and do some snorkeling, taking underwater pictures of brightly-colored fish, and Giovanni gets sunburned. Badly. He has to sleep in a chair naked for two nights.

I call Janae at Collette's for an update while Giovanni is out getting us something to eat from Jack-in-the-Box. "So what have you been up to, girl?"

"Mrs. Mead moved away, and I have a new teacher, Mama, Mrs. Wedermeister. Freddie calls her 'The Wiener Master.' She's old, she's blind, and she's a witch."

"I had quite a few of those back in the day," I say. "If she acts up like Mrs. Mead, we'll set her straight. How's Freddie?"

A pause. "He's okay."

Something's up. "Just okay?"

"Well ... he tried to kiss me, Mama."

"He did?" I say, trying to sound angry. My baby's first kiss! And at ten!

"Yeah."

"What did you do?"

"I let him, but he missed. He got me on the chin."

I laugh. "Tell him to keep his eyes open the next time! How are Uncle Clyde and Aunt Collette treating you?"

"Great! They let me stay up late and watch what I want to on the TV." Great. Not. "And guess what?"

Collette the heifer is trying to turn you into a little heifer like her? "What?"

"They're having a boy! I saw his little jimmy at the doctor's office today."

Giovanni returns with two bags of food. My *big* jimmy's back! "Tell Collette I said it's wonderful news."

"I will. How's Maui?"

Giovanni does something nasty with a French fry before feeding it to me. "I'll tell you when I get back. How's the weather there?"

"It's snowing, Mama!"

Oh great. Roanoke will be shut down for days. "How many inches?"

"At least five inches so far. We haven't had school for two whole days."

Just our luck. "Well, if it keeps snowing, we might not be back by next Friday, honey. We'll try, though. Just let Aunt Collette know that we might be delayed." Giovanni massages my feet. I will have several orgasms momentarily. "Anything you want me to tell Daddy?"

"Yeah. Tell him I want to learn sign language."

"Sign language? What for?"

"I've just always wanted to learn is all."

She has to be lying. "I'll tell him. I love you, Janae."

"I love you, too, Mama. See you soon."

"What's this about sign language?" Giovanni asks as I bite into a juicy burger.

"Guess she wants to be able to communicate with you when you're old, Giovanni."

During the second week, we slow down, mainly so I'll have a husband to take home. We shop, walk, make love on a remote black sand beach, get a little naked at the nude beach (I wear a thong while Giovanni wears a Speedo), do some snorkeling out in front of the Four Seasons, search tide pools for sea urchins and starfish, spend way too much money at a fancy French restaurant where the desserts are ten bucks a pop, and watch every sunset until the colors fade from the skies, Giovanni snapping a picture every four or five minutes. We end every evening with tender lovemaking followed by long conversations ... before tearing at each other again ... and again ... until the sun rises when we can finally get some sleep.

On our last day, we go shopping in Lahaina for souvenirs to bring back to Roanoke. We are walking hand in hand when we pass an old black woman, the first black person I have seen since coming to Maui. I am too busy looking at Giovanni, at all his new freckles mainly, so I don't acknowledge her.

"Okay then," she says behind us. "*Don't* speak."

I drop Giovanni's hand and turn. "Excuse me?"

She looks like Aunt Esther from *Sanford and Son* with her dark masculine face, suitcase-sized purse, and bad perm. "I *said* okay then, *don't* speak."

J. J. Murray

"Hello," I say with a roll of my eyes.

"Your mama know you with him?"

I hold up my left hand and shine my wedding ring off her fat nose. "We've been married for ten years." Almost.

"That ain't what I asked. What you doin' with him?"

I slip my arm around Giovanni. "Having *amazing* sex."

Aunt Esther clutches her chest and continues on. Five thousand miles from Roanoke, and we still get shit.

Because of snow hitting Chicago and Roanoke, and an ice storm hitting Charlotte, we have to take an earlier flight from Maui to L. A. but still get stuck waiting for hours by the time we get to O'Hare. I hate the wait, and Giovanni hates me hating the wait, and by the time we are in the air to Charlotte, I hate everybody, especially the flight attendant who won't give me another blanket.

We land in Roanoke, snow piled high all around the runway, and find our luggage is still on its way to Chicago. Giovanni gives the luggage dude our address while I call Janae at the bakery.

"Hello?"

Why is Janae answering the phone? "Janae, it's Mama!"

"Are you home?"

"No. We're still at the airport. We'll come by and pick you up. How have you been?"

"Busy, Mama. We have a full house."

I check my watch. "At three forty-five?"

"Yeah. I can't talk now. Just get a newspaper, and you'll know why."

I tell Giovanni to find a newspaper, and he runs off. "Why? What's going on, Janae?"

"Mrs. Wedermeister hit Freddie, and now there are reporters everywhere. Mama, I really gotta go. Poppa can't do it all alone."

"You're not in trouble are you?"

"No, Mama."

"Good."

Giovanni hands me a newspaper, and there on the front page of the *Roanoke Times* is Janae! Above her beautiful face is the headline: "Student Speaks Out." Wow! "I just got a newspaper, honey. We'll get there as fast as we can."

I read the story to Giovanni as we race to the bakery: “On Thursday, Mrs. Edith Wedermeister, a teacher with forty years’ experience, was arrested and charged with assaulting Freddie King Smith, a fifth grade student at Highland Park Magnet School. In an interview aired on Channel Ten last night, Janae Luchesi, one of Mrs. Wedermeister’s students, gave the following account of the incident.”

“She was on TV, too?”

“What can I say? She’s a star. Now let me tell you what Janae said. ‘Mrs. Wedermeister took a note from Freddie, and Freddie snatched it back and tore it into a million pieces.’ As he *should* have. That note was none of Edith’s business. I’ll bet Freddie was giving it to Janae. ‘Mrs. Wedermeister started calling Freddie Ferdie. She called me Janny and Trung Le Tingly. She was always messing up our names on purpose.’ The bitch! ‘Mrs. Wedermeister then said that she had never seen or heard such a display of insubordination before in her entire life.’ Wow. I didn’t know baby-girl knew such a long word. ‘Freddie then called Mrs. Wedermeister The Weiner Master and a [expletive], and that’s when she slapped him.’ I bet Freddie called her a bitch.”

“Bet,” Giovanni says. He’s always taking bets, especially with Janae, and he never wins any of them.

“What do I win?”

He smiles. “Me!”

“Gee, I win what I’ve already won.”

“I’ll massage your feet again.”

God, that makes me so hot. “You’re on. The story goes on, uh, ‘Mrs. Mildred Smith, Freddie Smith’s grandmother, has removed Freddie from Highland Park until the issue has been resolved to her satisfaction. She has also called in NAACP President Dr. Julius Givens to address this issue at a press conference today at the Harrison Heritage Cultural Center, blah blah blah.”

“This is big news,” Giovanni says.

“No it isn’t,” I say. “This shit has been happening around here for years, and it took our daughter to get it out in the open.” I fold up the newspaper. “See what happens when we leave our child alone for a few weeks?”



## NINETEEN

The streets are clogged with TV news vans, and even the alley behind the bakery is blocked by a few cars. We end up parking on Allison Avenue a block away and enter through the back door. I sneak up behind Janae and hug her, whispering, "I'm so proud of you, girl."

She turns around and hugs me hard. "Thank you." She blinks. "You're *black*, Mama. You're darker than Reverend Worst."

"The sun loved me in Maui." And so did your daddy.

Pops tosses Giovanni his apron then holds me at arm's length. "You will help us tonight?"

I'm beat, but I'm still on Maui time. "I can last a few hours. Where's my apron?"

Pops hugs me. "That's what I like to hear. Janae!"

Janae brings me an apron and gives me a few pointers. "Okay, the lady at table five is a reporter named Kenya who has the hots for Jess. Jess is her camera man." She pulls me and whispers, "Jess is white, so could you put some amaretto in his next mocha cappuccino for me?"

The little matchmaker. "Sure, but which one is table five?" She points. "And what did Freddie call your teacher?"

"A bitch." I win again! My feet rejoice!

I get a crash course in how to be a waitress with Janae's help as Giovanni and Pops entertain their audience with their flying pizza act. Pops stretches and flips a dough ball to Giovanni, Giovanni stretches it again and spins it high in the air, Pops steps under and catches it, stretches it some more, places it in the pan, Giovanni sautes it, and Pops cheeses it. The photographers love it, taking shot after shot as reporters write furiously in spiral notebooks and others talk on cell phones.

I know I'm falling behind with the orders, but no one seems to be in a hurry. Everyone's eating, drinking, gabbing, laughing, and singing along with James Brown and Diana Ross. As long as I freshen coffee cups and smile a lot, I'm going to take home a couple hundred bucks in tips tonight.

I am having a blast—and then Mama shows up with Reverend West, Dr. Givens, and two other black men in matching black suits. Mama marches through the tables to the jukebox and pulls the plug. The bakery becomes silent right in the middle of “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.”

“Earlier today,” Dr. Givens says, standing in front of the case of cookies and cakes, “we had a press conference, and one, just *one* reporter showed up. Evidently, you didn’t feel we were worth your time. So, we are here now to say what we have to say. *If* you’re still interested, that is.”

Cameras pop up with their bright lights, and a few more reporters with camera crews crowd in near the doorway. Kenya Mbele, the Channel 10 reporter Janae wants to hook up with Jess, stands and says, “Dr. Givens, I was assigned to the school today. I cannot speak for my colleagues who were supposed to be at your press conference and didn’t show up.”

“That’s no concern of ours,” Dr. Givens says with a frown. “You make the news however you want to. But please, ask me a *relevant* question, Miss Mbele.”

What an ass. And where’s Millie? Isn’t he representing her? Unless ... unless this isn’t about Millie or Freddie anymore.

“Dr. Givens,” Kenya says, her eyes on her feet, “what is your organization planning to do as a result of yesterday’s incident?”

Dr. Givens stands a little straighter. “The N-double-A-C-P is suing the Roanoke City School Board for separate and unequal treatment of all African-American students, a direct violation of the nineteen fifty-four *Brown versus Board of Education* ruling. We’re planning a boycott of Roanoke City Public Schools by all African-American children until this matter is settled to our satisfaction.” Now everybody’s shouting “Dr. Givens!” This shit’s more serious than I thought. Dr. Givens points to a tall dude with the worst-fitting toupee I’ve ever seen.

“Dr. Givens, do you have any facts to support this suit?”

Dr. Givens scowls. “Those of us who have lived here all our lives know all the facts, and we’ll bring all these facts into the open during the trial, and there *will* be a trial.”

"Aren't you overreacting?" I find myself saying. Daa-em, I called Giovanni an asshole for saying the same thing a few months ago. Dr. Givens *better* not return the favor.

Dr. Givens looks around until one of the men next to him points me out and whispers something in his ear. Dr. Givens smiles, but I know it's fake. "No, Mrs. Luchesi, we're not overreacting." The reporters around me are scribbling like crazy now. "And that's a strange question coming from you. Hasn't your own daughter, Janae, who's generated all this publicity for this ... bakery, hasn't Janae been a victim of separate and unequal treatment at Highland Park over the years?"

Mama has been running her damn mouth. I walk slowly toward Dr. Givens. "That's not what this is about."

"And what do you think this is all about?" Dr. Givens asks with a nasty smile on his face.

I'm going to wipe that smile off now, Julius. I stand behind Janae. "Why don't you ask an eyewitness to give you some facts, Dr. Givens?"

Dr. Givens clears his throat. "I heard what she had to say last night, but that isn't what this is about."

I smile at him and roll my neck hard. "A student cusses out a teacher and gets slapped. Both of them are wrong, Dr. Givens, or do you think it's okay for black people to cuss white people whenever we feel like it? You ever cuss anyone out and get smacked? And did you call the N-double-A-C-P to help you out?"

Dr. Givens' forehead is getting right shiny. Good. "You're missing the point."

"Am I? By the way, where's Millie?" No response. "I don't see her. Hmm." Still no response. "This is what I think the *point* is, Dr. Givens. You think you're going to correct close to thirty years of racial problems in Roanoke on the basis of one white teacher slapping one foul-mouthed little black boy. Am I right?" The man *can* be mute. I stare hard at Mama, who gives me the evil eye, and I give one right back. "Dr. Givens, if that little boy had called me a bitch, I'd have slapped the black off him!"

Mama starts to smile because I've just said one of her Mama-sayings. The men beside Dr. Givens whisper something in each of Dr. Givens' ears. That must be so confusing.

“By the way, Dr. Givens,” I continue, “didn’t you graduate from Roanoke City Public Schools?”

“What does that have to do—”

“And look at you now,” I interrupt. “You said *all* African-American students in Roanoke were treated badly. It doesn’t look like it did you too much harm. Yes, I’ll agree sometimes Janae gets treated unfairly. But that’s where me, her daddy, and her Nay-Nay—that lady hiding over there trying not to laugh—that’s where *we* come in to straighten it out.”

“But,” Dr. Givens says after still more whispering, “not every parent can fight as effectively as you can for their children. We are fighting for those who can’t. Don’t you see?”

I blink. That’s the biggest load of bullshit I’ve ever heard coming out of anyone’s mouth. “That is ... the most *irresponsible* thing I’ve ever heard. If parents *won’t*, not can’t as you say, if parents *won’t* fight for their child’s rights, they don’t deserve to be parents.”

After a few more whispers from the “twins” at his ears, Dr. Givens smiles. “Mrs. Luchesi, you don’t even live in the city, do you?”

“Dr. Givens,” I say, smiling back, “you don’t have a single thought of your own, do you? Put a leash on Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dumber.”

Janae laughs out loud, Pops shushes her from the back, and Mama has to cover her face after that one. The two men in black back away from Dr. Givens.

I smile. “Yes, Dr. Givens, I live in the county, but I *choose* to send Janae to a city school because she’s getting a good education, and she’s being educated with children of all races. There’s nothing separate about that at all! Roanoke City Public Schools helped me get a scholarship to Roanoke College. I now have a fantastic job. And where my education and job have helped me to live is none of *your* concern.” I look at my audience. “Now, I don’t know how all this is going to end, but I for one am going to continue sending my daughter, Janae, to Highland Park, and that’s all there is to it.”

And I thought I hated that school. Hmm. Oh well. I turn to Janae and make a face. She giggles.

“Giovanni!” I holler.

“Yes, *bella*?” Giovanni yells back.

I blush. He’s not supposed to talk that way to me in public. “Plug in the jukebox, and play G forty-three.”

A few seconds later, we hear “Let’s Get It On,” and the party starts again. Dr. Givens, Reverend Worst, and the “twins” leave, but Mama stays after shouting a few angry words at Reverend Worst outside.

“Get me an apron, Renee,” she says when she returns.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Daa-em,” I say.

“Yes, daa-em,” she says, and I squeeze her hand. “Y’all need my help tonight.”

Pops must have read her lips. He presents an apron to Mama. “*Grazie*,” he says.

“Yeah, whatever.” She puts on the apron. “What you want me to do?”

“Janae, teach your Nay-Nay how to make bread sticks,” Pops says.

“Nah, nah,” Mama says. “I’m going where the action is. Gimme an order book, Janae.” Janae takes hers out of her apron and hands it to Mama. “I’ve got to find me a new man.”

Janae whispers, “Stay away from Jess at table five. He’s already taken. And leave the tall guy at table nine alone. He’s from Richmond. I don’t want you moving there.”

Mama blinks at me. “Girl, your daughter is acting like I’m gonna get lucky or something.”

“You have to,” I say, “because you’re my mama.”

## TWENTY

I become an unwilling celebrity overnight. The phone doesn't stop ringing, and reporters come right up to our door while Hershey barks his guts out all day Saturday and Giovanni and Pops try to run the bakery without Janae and me. I call Giovanni at eleven, and he says the bakery is already slammed. I guess the flying pizzas on the all the local TV stations grabbed folks' attention.

I lose track of all the different reporters who ask both Janae and me questions about everything, and some of them I ask to get steppin'. Miss Lancaster, a fakin'-bakin' tan white woman with a little pink tape recorder from some local magazine I've never read, asks me, "So, Mrs. Luchesi, does Janae have a boyfriend?"

She's right over there, heifer. "Ask Janae."

She turns to Janae. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"What's his name?"

"Scott."

This is news to me. "Scott? What happened to Freddie? Last time I heard, he was kissing you on the chin."

"Well, uh, Mama, I—"

"Is this the same Freddie who got hit by the teacher?" Miss Lancaster interrupts.

"Yeah," Janae says.

"So you broke up over this incident?"

Janae looks at me. "No. I just like Scott now."

"What color is Scott?"

Here we go. I roll my eyes, and Janae giggles. It seems that every reporter is interested in my daughter's love life down to the tiniest racial detail.

"Scott's kind of pink with lots of freckles." Scott sounds Scotch-Irish.

"Mrs. Luchesi," Miss Lancaster asks, "what do you think about that?"

"What's to think?" I say. "Janae's made her choice."

"No," Miss Lancaster says, "I mean, how do you *feel* about this?"

The bitch is getting on my nerves. What does it matter how I feel? "How do I feel? About her having a boyfriend at the age of ten or having a white boyfriend?"

Miss Lancaster takes a deep breath. "About her having a white boyfriend."

"It doesn't matter at all. I'm not the one going with him. Janae, how do you feel about Scott?"

Janae looks for the answers in her hands. I always ask the harder questions. It's part of my job. "Well, I like him a lot." She pulls a chain from around her neck. Is that a Mizpah? "He gave me this. He has the other half."

"What do Scott's mom and dad think about you?" Miss Lancaster asks.

"I dunno," Janae says with a shrug. "I've never talked to them."

"Do you think they'll like you?"

Janae frowns. "Well, if they're like Mama and Daddy, they'll love me."

"But you're unique, Janae."

I've almost had enough. "And your point is, Miss Lancaster?"

Miss Lancaster flips her limp brown hair over her shoulders. "Janae, your mama and daddy are from two different races."

Well shut my mouth! Why didn't someone tell me this shit? I mouth "Uh-duh" to Janae, and she giggles.

"They're both human, Miss Lancaster," Janae says. Take that, ho!

"It's a little more complicated than that, Janae," Miss Lancaster says. "I mean, you don't look white."

"Neither do you," Janae says. Damn, she beat me to it.

Miss Lancaster breathes deeply again. We are about to make the bitch hyperventilate. "I am Caucasian."

"So am I," Janae says quickly. My baby-girl is *good* with the comebacks. She'll be a lawyer for sure.

Miss Lancaster looks at me, but I only raise my eyebrows. "But you're also African-American, Janae."

"And your point is?" Janae says. That's *my* little girl! We are kicking Miss Lancaster's ass!

Miss Lancaster rubs her eyes. "To anyone who looks at you, you are African-American." Or Bosnian, I almost add. "And that's what makes it complicated."

Janae rolls her eyes, and I laugh. "It isn't complicated to me. Mama and Daddy are different colors, that's all."

"Mrs. Luchesi, you see what I'm driving at, don't you?"

I stand and look out the window at Miss Lancaster's Ford Probe. Yes, and I see what you'll be driving out of here *without* the rest of your story. "Lady, if I thought like you, Janae never would have been born. This interview is over. You may leave. The front door's that way. Come on, Janae."

Janae follows me into the kitchen. We hear the door slam, then we sit at the table like proper ladies. "That lady was a racist, Janae. She sees in her heart and head only what she sees with her eyes. She looks at you with her eyes and sees an African-American. I look at you with my heart and see Janae Vanni Luchesi."

"And she was a bitch, too."

I smile. "You were a pretty good bitch yourself."

"I was?"

"You were." I grab her hands. "Now tell me about Scott."

She lets go of my hands. She's hiding something. "He's a new kid in my class." I wait. "And, oh, he's hearing-impaired."

"Like your daddy." I laugh. "So, you just wanted to learn sign language, did you?"

"Yeah." She rolls her eyes. "I want to talk to him."

"Does he read lips?"

"Uh, yeah. Oh, and he has green eyes." I stare laser beams into her eyes. "And, uh, Scott kissed, I mean, I kissed, um, we *both* kissed each other yesterday at school."

I lean in. "Was he good?" She nods. "Did either of you use your tongue?"

"Mama!" She blushes and giggles. "Yeah. On the last kiss. Don't be mad."

I get up and put a kettle of water on to boil. "Why should I be mad? My daughter and her new boyfriend were making out in school." In the fifth freaking grade! Is Jesus coming back soon or what? I never should have shown that child *Love and Basketball*!

"I'm not mad, Janae." I'm mystified. What is this world coming to? What kind of a world is my son coming to?

"Oh, we weren't making out, Mama."

I squint, and she sits up straighter. That's what a good mama-squint will do to a child. It helps with a child's posture, too. "Did he put his hands on you?"

"Um, no, uh, I put his hands on me." The little hussy! "I put them around my waist."

I smile, but I'm still squinting. "And where did you put *your* hands, little girl?"

She gulps. "Around his neck."

"Uh-huh." I narrow my eyes to what I hope are little dots. "Did you pull him toward you, or did he pull you toward him?"

She starts to answer and stops. "Um, we, um, we pulled each other to each other, but I kept my eyes open the whole time, I swear, Mama!"

"Honey," I say without the squint, "I'm just being nosy, that's all. You don't have to tell me everything."

"But you asked!"

"So don't answer."

"But you'll get mad."

"Maybe. But what happens between you and Scott is your own business. And if people like Miss Lancaster say anything about it, ignore them."

"What could they say?"

I sit and tap my fingers on the table. This shit always gets me hot. "All sorts of stupid things, like 'the colors don't match,' or they may even call Scott a 'nigger-lover.'"

She cringes because "nigger" is one of the words I've schooled that child never to say. "But Scott won't hear it unless he's looking right at the person."

Lucky him. "That may be true. But *you'll* hear it, Janae, and it will piss you off."

"Do people say things about you and daddy?"

"Sure, all the time. You know your daddy. He just smiles real broad and curses them in Italian without moving his lips. Me? I try to put them in their place. Sometimes I say, 'You're just jealous'

or ‘Get a life!’” I tell her about the sister in Maui, and Janae laughs.

“But Mama, what if I can’t think of anything to say?”

“Then say nothing. Smile. Give them a cold, hard stare. Whisper something to Scott. Laugh. Roll your eyes. Stare at them like they’re from another planet or have a big green booger stuck in their nose.” I take her hands. “But whatever you do, don’t let them know it bothers you, because that’s what they want to happen. It’s going to bother you, Janae. You just can’t let it show.”

The next morning, we all go to High Holiness. Because of that bakery, Giovanni hasn’t been to Sunday service at High Holiness in years. He used to go all the time when Janae was little, but since she was such an active child, they rarely made it through to the end of the service. Giovanni would carry Janae out just before the sermon, and they’d play hide ‘n’ seek in the basement or take long walks outside until the service ended.

Giovanni isn’t the only white man at High Holiness, but he’s definitely the most handsome man in his dark brown suit and pointy black shoes. He cleans up nice. I have to help him with his tie. My man hates ties, and he keeps messing with the top button of his shirt during the service.

Because of the week’s controversy, TV crews film Reverend Noel’s sermon, and he is especially powerful today. The church is packed, and though it’s cold and windy outside, almost everyone has a fan. That’s High Holiness for you. They’d wave fans in a blizzard.

Reverend Noel throws us a curve and has us turn to the Old Testament, not the New Testament like usual, to *Psalms* 103, verses 8-12. “Follow along with me, and listen to the word of the Lord,” he says. “Verse eight: the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.”

He pauses and lets that sink in. I underline that one. That’s my Giovanni to a T, especially the “slow” part.

“Verse nine: he will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever.”

Reverend Noel steps back and surveys the entire crowd. He still makes it look like he’s looking right at *me* after all these years,

making me feel guilty. I can't tell you how many times I've asked the Lord for forgiveness during his sermons.

"Verse ten: he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. Verse eleven: For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. Verse twelve: as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

He leans back then jumps forward with each sentence, and a few men from the "Amen Corner" shout "Amen!" and "That's right!"

"God doesn't accuse. God isn't angry forever. God doesn't get revenge on us. God loves us as high as the heavens, and that's very high, oh so very high. And God forgives us, removing our sins as far as the east is from the west. You know how far that is? It cannot be measured it's so far. When God forgives us, God forgets. Amen?"

"Amen!" the crowd yells. Now we're cooking.

"God doesn't live in the sinful past, so neither can we!" Reverend Noel shouts.

"Amen!"

"We got to live in the present, got to prepare for the future, got to prepare our children for the future, and what a glorious future it will be if we follow what He says!"

"Yes, Lord!"

"Got to work together because the Lord says, 'All things work together for good for them who love the Lord!'"

"Hallelujah Jesus!"

"You love the Lord?"

"Yes!"

"You believe what He says?"

"Yes!"

"Then do what He says. Got to forgive, got to forget. Can you forgive?"

"Yes!"

"Can you forget?"

High Holiness gets real quiet. Only a few people say "Yes."

Reverend Noel shakes his head and walks down from the pulpit carrying his Bible. "Can't forget, can you?"

A few ignorant folks shout “No!”

He thumps his Bible with his free hand. “You believe what it says in this book?”

“Yes” comes out more a grunt than a shout.

“This book says the Lord forgets our sins, and it isn’t because He’s got a bad memory, oh no! Our merciful Lord *chooses* to forget. Isn’t that wonderful?” No one says “Amen.” I see what he’s getting at. “Isn’t anyone here glad the Lord God Almighty *chooses* to forget?”

“Yes!” We’re shouting again.

“You want to be like Him?”

“Yes!”

“Like the choir sang, we need to take His hand, blessed Lord, need to let Him lead us on, need to let go, let God!”

“Thank you, Jesus!”

Reverend Noel waits until it’s completely quiet. “There are those among us who want to live in the past. There are those among us who want to dwell in the darkness and stay out of the light. There are those among us who aren’t so compassionate or gracious. There are those among us who are quick to anger. There are those among us who are abounding in hate.” He raises his Bible. “This book says we shouldn’t do that. This book says we shouldn’t bring up the past sins of others. This book says to forgive and forget. Say it with me.”

“Forgive and forget.” I roll my eyes at Janae and whisper, “That was weak.”

“Say it louder.”

“Forgive and forget!” Better.

He waits for silence again. “Two days ago, a young man said something that *he* shouldn’t have said, and a woman did something that *she* shouldn’t have done. This book says I have to forgive *both* of them.” Ba-BOOM. It’s so quiet I can hear my breakfast digesting. “I’d be a sorry Christian if I only forgave one of them.”

High Holiness has never been this silent. I squeeze Janae’s hand.

Reverend Noel looks directly to the back of the church where the cameras are. “Freddie King Smith, I forgive you. Edith Wedermeister, I forgive you. And in time, I will try to forget

what happened ever happened because this book tells me to.” He scans the pews. “And if anyone in here thinks what I’ve just said is wrong, I forgive you, too. Just remember this: you don’t have to answer to me. No, no. You have to answer to the Lord God Himself.”

He walks slowly to his pulpit. It’s so quiet I can hear his shoes squeak on the carpet. He looks out at us and smiles. “Isn’t anybody gonna say ‘Amen’?”

“Amen!”

“I want to send a message to those who would boost up hatred in this city. And this message isn’t from me. No, no. This message is from God. Look at verse six in *Psalms* one-oh-three: ‘The Lord works righteousness and justice for *all* the oppressed!’ The Lord *Himself* does it for *all* the oppressed! I don’t know about you, but if the Lord says He’s going to do something, He’s *going to* do something.”

“Amen!”

“The Lord says to forgive, and I forgive!”

“Amen!”

“The Lord says to forget, and I’m going to try.”

“Amen!”

“Are you going to try?”

“Yes Lord!”

“Good.” He closes his Bible. “And to prove it, you make sure *all* your children are in school tomorrow.”

Whoa. That jolts even me, and I hear grumbling all around me.

“And now it’s time for the benediction, the good words,” Reverend Noel says. “Go home tonight and prepare your children for school. Pack their lunches and help them with their homework.” He doesn’t smile. He heard the grumbling, too. “You are dismissed.”

I call in “sick” the next morning and take Janae to school. There are still a few reporters, news crews, and police surrounding some wooden sawhorses in the street. “Why are they still here, Mama?”

“To see if anyone shows up.” How boring! Watching grass grow would be more exciting.

Kenya Mbele comes over to us. "Well, this is it."

"This is what?" I say.

"So far attendance is high at the middle schools and high schools." We see the first bus pull into the lot. "Gotta go."

And then the cameras capture buses rolling in with ... full loads as usual. I'm sure the media is disappointed. Full buses do not a story make.

Janae and I weave through the kids coming off the bus and go down to her room. She sticks her head in first then pulls it back right quick. "Mama," she whispers, "there's a new teacher in there."

I stick my head in ... and chuckle. The new teacher is young, beautiful, and mixed. She has the same golden complexion as Janae, light brown eyes, long "good" hair, nice gold hoop earrings and matching bracelet, and a jade green dress. I feel right frumpy. I look back at Janae, and she looks like she's going to burst. I pat her on the butt and say, "Go on."

"Hello!" the teacher says, and she comes to the door. "I'm Miss Thomas." She squats in front of Janae. "And you're Janae Luchesi. I saw you on TV. You're very pretty." She looks up at me. "You have a stunning daughter, Mrs. Luchesi." She looks back at Janae, who is blushing as I've never seen the child blush. "And I almost hate you, girl. You look good in whatever you wear. I have to work at this." She stands, and I can't think of a single thing to say. "Sorry the room is a wreck, y'all." A teacher said "y'all." I think I'm going to like this one. "That desk is a wreck. I'm going to be staying late today to sort it all out."

"I can stay after if you need help," Janae says.

Miss Thomas smiles. "Would you? You probably know where everything is in this room, right?"

Janae nods.

"Well, I'd like that very much, if it's okay with your mama."

"It's fine by me," I say, and I see a ... *glow* on my child that I've never seen before. My daughter has just died and gone to heaven because she has an angel for a teacher.

Later that evening at home, Janae can't stop talking about Miss Jamelle Thomas, age twenty-three, favorite color green, Mary J. Blige fan, who has never been one of the Spice Girls. "She says

she's blended, Mama. Her daddy is black, and her mama is white."

"Blended." Hmm. Sounds a lot nicer than "mixed."

"She got called all sorts of names like 'light skin' and 'yella' when she was growing up, but her mama told her she was golden. Isn't that neat?"

I hug that child for the longest time. I have a golden rainbow for a daughter and will soon have a golden rainbow for a son.

## TWENTY-ONE

Janae brings home lots of homework after that, and it's all designed to involve a parent. At first, it inconvenienced me—I have better things to do like swelling, peeing, and lounging on the couch in front of the TV being pregnant—but now I look forward to it.

This isn't the homework that I grew up with.

She brings me an excerpt from Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* one evening near the end of February, Black History Month. We didn't have Black History Month when I was little. All we had was White History Year. I hadn't read anything by Maya Angelou since Mr. Jeffries' class at PH.

Janae reads it out loud for both of us, and we learn that Maya is in Ghana, a country on the west coast of Africa, and is about to return to the United States when she decides to go on a trip to the eastern part of Ghana. When Maya gets there, every time people see her, they put their hands on their heads and cry.

"Why are they crying, Mama?"

I remember why. They're relatives. I *still* do that whenever I see some of my own relatives. "You'll see. Let's keep reading."

Maya finds her long-lost African family, and they're all crying because she went far away during slavery.

"I understand," Janae says.

"Do you?"

"I think so."

I point at a particular passage that had jumped out at me and read it again to her. "Do you ever feel separated from the rest of the world, Janae?"

She shrugs. "No." I want to tell her that she will ... but maybe this child won't. Maybe Janae will blend into the melting pot without too much stirring.

"Okay, now," I say as I look at the questions on another sheet, "tell me the main idea of this passage."

Janae scowls. "I know what Freddie would say." He had returned to class the same day as Miss Thomas's arrival. I'll bet "blended" Miss Thomas was part of the deal to get the NAACP off

the school's back. "He would say the white man came to Africa and stole black people because the white man was too lazy to work for himself."

"He would?"

"Yeah. Since he came back, he only drinks chocolate milk at lunch and makes fun of Scott, saying he's my 'White Shadow.'"

I wince. I say things like that all the time. "Well, what do *you* think is the main idea of this passage?"

"Black people survived," she says simply.

It's a good response, but Miss Thomas left them nine lines for the answer. "Is that all?"

"Yup." She grabs a pencil and writes those three words on the first line. "I can answer the rest without your help, Mama."

"Okay."

Black people survived.

And so will you, Janae Vanni Luchesi.

## TWENTY-TWO

Dr. Givens was right about one thing: the publicity generated by the slapping makes the bakery a very popular place, so popular that Giovanni begs me to find him some help.

"Are you kidding?" I ask. "A *non*-Luchesi in your bakery? Is that even allowed?"

"Don't you want to see more of me?" he asks with his puppy eyes.

Of course I do. The closer I get to having this baby, the more I need him. I had a mild case of toxemia with Janae, and the doctors say I could have our son even earlier than I had Janae because of the toxemia and my age (thirty-six). I'm not supposed to lift anything or over-stress myself, so I need Giovanni at home as much as possible.

I call around on a break at work, and after only two calls, Ernestine Whitaker and Pooh Johnson (who calls himself Khalid el-Hassan now) agree to work four to close Thursdays through Sundays, the bakery's busiest times. Ernestine is big-bone-ded and plump, a beautiful dark chocolate woman with colored beads in her hair who calls everyone "sugah." Khalid is just as dark but skinny and about as warm as a toilet seat on a February morning.

They are both exceptionally hard workers, though, and after only a few hours' training their first night, Pops is satisfied. "Giovanni, go home," he says. "Be with your family."

"Ernestine is a trip," I tell Janae as we work on her homework at the kitchen table while Giovanni showers. "She used to work for Star City with me and Aunt Collette. You'll like her. Just don't curse around her. She's very religious."

"Okay."

"What do you think of Khalid?"

"He was awful quiet and kind of snooty."

"Trust me, he's not. We went to PH together a long time ago, and don't you ask me how long ago. But he was Pooh Johnson then."

"Huh?"

May as well tell her the truth. "Pooh got in trouble when he was a junior, I think. He got sent off to Coyner Springs for selling drugs. He got out and got busted for the same thing right after he turned eighteen. They sent him to jail for a long time. When he got out of jail, he was a Muslim with a different name. And please don't call him 'Pooh,' okay?"

"I won't. But what's a Muslim?"

I look at the pile of work Miss Thomas has sent home for *us* to do and decide to be brief. "You know those men in those Malcolm X-looking suits with bow ties who hand out newspapers at the intersection of Hershberger and Cove?"

"Yeah."

"They're Muslims."

"They never give Daddy a paper."

"Because they're *Black* Muslims."

"Oh."

"Now let's get to work."

While she struggles and I eat chocolate ice cream with potato chips, I think about the bakery now being run by a Catholic (Pops), a Catholic-Jew (Giovanni), a Baptist (Ernestine), and a Muslim (Khalid). The United Nations ought to drop by to see how it's done.

Giovanni is so cute around me now that my tummy's poking out a little. He can't sit still, but then again, I won't let him *be* still. When he comes in after his shower, I put him to work.

"Do you need a few pillows, honey?" he asks as Janae and I watch TV, most of the homework finally done.

"Sure," I say.

"Daddy, bring me a pillow, too," Janae says. She wants in on this action. I don't blame her a bit.

Giovanni bounds up the stairs and comes back with three pillows, settling two behind my back and one behind my head. "Where's mine?" Janae asks.

"You have legs, girl," I say, and Janae pouts.

"Are you hungry, Renee? Thirsty?" Giovanni asks.

I look at Janae and raise my eyebrows. "Yeah. I want a hot fudge brownie sundae from Shoney's— Oh, damn, they're out of business. Uh, get me a banana split from Bruster's and a Philly

steak 'n' cheese from Ciro's, no mushrooms, extra cheese. And make sure you get the sub second so it's still hot when you get here."

Giovanni whips out and writes down my order on an order book from the bakery. He's so efficient.

"Oh, and get me a large sweetened ice tea from Hardee's, but ask if it's fresh first. If they have to tip the container, I don't want it." I turn to Janae. "Do you want anything, Janae?"

She stops pouting. "I want some cashew chicken and two egg rolls from Szechuan."

Giovanni shakes his head. "I'll get it from China Wok on Williamson. It's much closer."

"But it doesn't taste the same, Daddy."

"But *nothin'*," I say. "Just be glad you're getting anything at all, little girl."

Janae pouts until Giovanni returns ... with her order from Szechuan. He spoils her so much, and he has to know that the little girl is manipulating him like I do. I'm glad he doesn't mind, though. That's another way he lets us know that he loves us.

I start eating ... and eating, but then I get another craving. I send Giovanni out again, this time for some kettle chips and pistachios.

"Why do you keep sending Daddy away like that, Mama?"

"I get cravings. Sometimes I crave a hot dog with the works from Steve's or the Wiener Stand, but by the time your daddy returns, I want a fish sandwich from Chuck's. In a few months, we'll have leftovers from every restaurant in Roanoke."

That's the fun part about being pregnant. I have a refrigerator full of delicious leftovers: hot wings from Mac 'n' Bob's, white pizza from Chico and Billy's, a lemon pie from the Wildflour Café, a burrito from El Rodeo. I even put some of these delicacies in Janae's lunch which she shares with Scotty-Body, the hearing-impaired heartthrob. The two of them "talk" on the phone every night through an operator, and they even exchange gifts on Valentine's Day.

But Freddie's being a problem, a big problem.

During standardized testing, Janae and Freddie almost get into a fight. Miss Thomas calls me at work later that day. "It all started

when Janae marked 'other' in the section on race on her answer sheet," she says.

"When are they going to do away with all that?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Luchesi. Soon, I hope. Anyway, Freddie told the class that Janae marked the wrong circle. Janae put her hand to Freddie's face"—as she *should* have—"and Freddie quieted down. I thought it was over. Sadly, Freddie said some things he shouldn't have, Janae jumped up—"

"What did he say?" I interrupt.

"This is what Janae said that *Freddie* said: 'Every white kid in here thinks you're a nigger, even Scott.' Freddie denies it."

Of course. "Is that when Janae knocked him out?"

"That's what I expected to happen, too, but it didn't. She jumped up and said, 'My mama's black, my daddy's white, and I'm somewhere in between. But at least I have a daddy, and my mama lives with me in my house, not far away in Petersburg waiting on some fool to get out of prison instead of taking care of you.' I, uh, wrote it down as she said it for the report."

Oh shit! "She said all that?"

"Your daughter says things very loud and clear, Mrs. Luchesi. Anyway, I pulled them both into the hall and, well, I tried to instigate a fight between the two of them. I told them that I hadn't seen a good beat-down in years, but they just stood there."

I like this lady's style. "Are they getting suspended?"

"No. I'd rather handle it this way."

"Thank you." I'm smiling ear to ear. I won't be getting a call from Mrs. Bell!

Miss Thomas sighs. "I wouldn't have called you at all if it weren't for Janae's visit just a few minutes ago. She stopped by after school to apologize to me, and I'm afraid I said some things I shouldn't have. She went away crying, and I'm sorry."

I'm not smiling anymore. "What did you say?"

"I got on her about busting out with Freddie's business."

I nod. "You were right to. Janae shouldn't have gone there."

"And then I stuck up for Freddie. To a lot of people Janae is an African-American."

I'm gritting my teeth now. "What did she say to that?"

"That she's both. I told her that I tried that when I was younger, and it didn't work. Janae said she wasn't raised to be a color."

Damn straight. "She wasn't."

"Neither was I, but the world isn't color-blind, Mrs. Luchesi. In the end, I told her that I thought it would be better for her to be an African-American."

"You what?" And here I thought I would like this one.

"I told her it would be better, all things considered, if she were to be an African-American. When I look at her, I see me, Mrs. Luchesi. I'm just trying to save her some pain in the future."

"Well, you're wrong, Miss Thomas. Wasn't your mama white?" She doesn't respond. "Janae loves her daddy more than life itself, and you *can't* expect her to disrespect him that way. That child is both, and if you have a problem with that, that's *your* problem. Good day, Miss Thomas."

I hang up and dial the bakery where I know my baby's crying her eyes out because her "angel" has just given her hell.

Pops answers the phone. "Luchesi's?"

"Pops, how's Janae? Did she come into the bakery crying?"

"She is fine. After she hugs the white off Giovanni, she eats some cookies and helps me with the bread."

"She did what?"

"She hugged the white off Giovanni. Did I say it wrong?"

"No." No, Pops. You said it just right.

## TWENTY-THREE

February showers bring March flowers in Roanoke most of the time, but this year, March showers bring April flowers. Pops says that “April showers bring May flowers” is a Northern saying, Mama says that Roanoke is stuck between the North and the South so no sayings apply, and I just say, “Spring has sprung.”

And so has the damn bathroom scale.

I am a cow. I am fat. I am not pretty. My face is so big I can see my chin, my fingers have swelled so much that I can’t wear my wedding ring or my anniversary band, my hammer toes look like little sledgehammers, and my ankles—those Clydesdale horses have nothing on me. But I still expect Giovanni to mess with me every night, and like the wonderful man he is, he messes with me every night. Carefully. Then he puts his face up to the lump in my stomach and kisses his son good night. I make him say good night a long, long time down there.

Until I have to pee.

All the tulips and daffodils are up and blooming in our yard (thanks to Hershey’s abundant fertilizer pellets, no doubt), and Giovanni and Janae are hard at work on my “bouquet,” which is really just a rainbow of flowers they plant seed by seed around the front of the house. Mama says it looks too wild for her tastes, but Mama just doesn’t understand rainbows. I love me some color, the more varieties and shades the better.

Janae’s been helping Giovanni with the bouquet since she was two, and Giovanni even wrote a poem about it called “But We Must Plant Our Rainbow”:

We two delve, we dibble, we dig,  
removing rock and weed.  
We score darkened earth with trowel  
to dress the earth with seed.

Janae, my sweet country lass,  
shows tiny hands to me,

*J. J. Murray*

baptized by dirt and golden sun,  
mud-smudge upon each knee.

Candytuft, balsam and larkspur,  
zinnia, marigolds--  
seedpods and dry wisps that tickle,  
now treasures that she holds.

I guide grubby hands to the ground—  
I pray to God for grace,  
so our dots on the lips of loam  
rest in a soft, safe space.

Fair winds, though, blow seeds to blue sky—  
like snowflakes they drift down.  
Janae attempts to entice them—  
my giggling plow girl clown.

We rush to recover each seed—  
we trample precise rows—  
then I understand we've really  
been planting a rainbow.

This year, they're planting two rainbows in front and a really  
big rainbow in back. While I sit and bloat on the porch, they get  
right to work.

"Ready to throw rainbows?" Giovanni asks.

Janae grabs a handful of seeds from a little bucket and stands  
next to a little area Giovanni has dug up. "Ready!"

"Throw rainbows!" He is so cornball.

When Janae was real little, sometimes their rainbows grew up  
in the grass and in our neighbor's yard on the other side of the  
fence because Janae had terrible aim. Sometimes the wind blew  
the seeds clear across the street. But today she's being more  
accurate with her throws.

Janae tosses the seeds, and Giovanni covers them with nice,  
dark dirt. I watch them do the front first between the sidewalk  
and the house. That's my space, so they're generally more

Careful. The second space out back is Janae's, so naturally they're not as careful. Giovanni doesn't want a space, because he says Janae and I are already his flowers. And we are. Then, they use the rest of the seeds in a big new semicircle out back to welcome my little boy home. Hershey knows to stay away from the dirt, but he gets too close sometimes, and Janae has to shoo him away. They cover the rainbow-shaped area with seeds, and Janae still has a handful or two in her bucket. "Daddy, I have some left."

Giovanni shrugs. "Throw them all down! We'll just call it a 'jungle' instead of a bouquet." Janae throws the rest, giggling and dancing in the mud. My little boy is going to love his rainbow ... and his big sister.

April also means Mama's birthday, her fifty-fifth, a speed she drives through mall parking lots, so Collette and I organize a big birthday party/baby shower at the bakery. Naturally, Mama doesn't want any part of it.

"Girl, it could be a real *birth*-day party," Mama says. "You two heifers are liable to drop your chaps during the singing of 'Happy Birthday.' Why don't y'all just have a baby shower and leave me out of it?"

"No way. You only turn fifty-five once, Mama."

Giovanni and Pops make a huge black cake with eleven levels. "Five candles on each tier," Pops says. "Just to test her, to see if she runs out of breath."

That will *never* happen.

We decorate Luchesi's with black and gold balloons and streamers, fresh yellow roses and black candles on each table. It almost looks like a Pittsburgh Steelers party ... and the way the Steelers have been playing, it may be the only party they have for a while.

Collette and Clyde arrive first with his parents and Collette's Aunt Junie, who spends most of the night ordering Clyde around. Collette is due any day now, so Clyde travels everywhere with a packed suitcase in the trunk of his car. And unlike Giovanni, Clyde has actually gained weight during Collette's pregnancy. Giovanni is right bony.

Mama arrives with Aunt Phyllis, who Janae has never met before, and the party really starts. Aunt Phyllis is the greatest

nosy-body who ever lived. Really. She taught Mama everything she knows. There isn't dirt too dry or gossip too dull for Aunt Phyllis to share with the world. I tell Janae to sit next to me and Aunt Phyllis if she wants to trip all night, and the three of us sit at a table in the middle of the bakery.

And we trip.

"Ooo-oooh, child, things are gonna get easier," Aunt Phyllis sings along with the jukebox. "You're lookin' fine, Collette!" Aunt Phyllis whispers to me. "She gonna drop that baby tonight, you watch. We gonna be on TV for sure." She starts batting balloons around. "I got to be at the VFW with Shirl by midnight, and I might take me some of these black and gold balloons down there, do a little Josephine Baker number on 'em."

I gulp and hope she brings *lots* of balloons. Aunt Phyllis has a bowling-ball shaped body held up by two skinny pins.

Another song comes on the jukebox. "You keep me hangin' on!" Aunt Phyllis sings loudly. "I always wanted to be a Supreme. 'Stop in the Name of Love,' honey, that was the *song*. At my age, I don't say that no more. Nuh-uh. I say, '*Don't* stop in the name of love.'"

Giovanni brings us two baskets of bread sticks and a bottle of Chianti. Janae gets to sip a little tonight, but I tell her that if she gets drunk, she's in big trouble.

After Giovanni leaves, Aunt Phyllis asks, "Who dat white man?"

"That's my daddy," Janae says.

Aunt Phyllis looks hard at Janae. "I knew that. I was just testing you." She listens to the jukebox and sings, "And I second that emotion. Da da da, da da da."

Janae catches my eye and giggles, and I mouth, "I told you!"

"Did y'all look at the food back there? Must be half a *ton* of wings. Y'all really know how to throw a party."

Giovanni walks around taking pictures. He knows not to take any of me in my condition.

"Oh, take my picture, honey!" Aunt Phyllis shouts, and Giovanni snaps a picture of her. "And while you're up, could you get me another one of these?" Giovanni is in demand for his mocha cappuccino and amaretto mixture, and he has a bar set up on the

counter. As he goes, Aunt Phyllis says, "I really prefer gin 'n' juice, you understand, but this shit is just fo-ine!"

Mama looks nice, but she isn't dressed up, and Aunt Phyllis can't let that go. "Shirl is to' up from the flo' up. Jeans and a ratty ol' T-shirt to her own birthday party. She need her hair done, and them nails—"

Mama comes over. "Hey, Phyllis."

"Oh Shirl! You look so nice! I just love your outfit. Happy birthday, girl!"

Mama rolls her eyes and walks away.

Aunt Phyllis leans closer to me. "Hope some of them lottery tickets we bought her hit so she can do something about her hair."

Giovanni brings her a mug, and I can smell the amaretto from where I'm sitting. There has to be four inches in there.

Pops announces that it's time to eat, and Aunt Phyllis is the first one up. "I'm starvin' like Marvin, and I don't mind if I'm the first in line. Tell your husband to play some Marvin Gaye on that jukebox! I could sure use me some sexual healing right about now, know what I'm saying?"

Aunt Phyllis is five years older than Mama, and just the thought of Aunt Phyllis having sex makes me ill. We wait in line to get to all the food covering the long metal table in the back: hot dogs cooked in vodka, three kinds of wings, fried jalapeno cheese, Swedish meatballs, a couple veggie trays, croissants stuffed with chicken salad, and mounds of hot, fresh bread sticks.

We fill our plates and return to our table. "Can y'all keep a secret?" Aunt Phyllis says with her mouth full. "Shirl says she's got a new man, and he's mixed. She says he right out of the Yella Pages, got a raggedy smile, and he lisps. His name's Leon, and she says he looks fine as long as he don't smile or talk."

Mama's been lying again. Aunt Phyllis will believe anything.

After stuffing her face, Aunt Phyllis turns to me. "Renee, everything is so good, but where's the cake?"

"Pops and Giovanni are keeping it hidden in the back," I say.

"Well, tell them crackers to bring it on!"

I send Janae to tell them, then I turn to Aunt Phyllis and say, "They aren't crackers, Aunt Phyllis. They're Italian."

She grabs my hand. "Oh, I'm sorry, honey. My mistake."

"Don't worry about it."

"Guess we ought to call 'em 'bread sticks' instead of 'crackers,' huh?" Aunt Phyllis laughs and pats my stomach. I hate it when people do that. "Hey, little chap in there, wanna know somethin'? Your mama likes a little cream in her coffee!" She cackles. "She likes a bunch of crackers in her soup!"

And to think I used to like this person.

Pops and Giovanni bring out the cake with all fifty-five candles lit, and it is magnificent!

"Oh-oh, here's the cake," Aunt Phyllis says. "Fifty-five candles!"

Mama gets ready to blow them out after an extremely raunchy version of "Happy Birthday."

"Blow hard, Shir! Them cigarettes will kill you!" Aunt Phyllis turns to me while Mama makes her attempt. "You knew your mama smoked, didn't you?" She doesn't, Aunt Phyllis.

Mama gets maybe half the candles blown out before she gives up, and Pops helps her finish blowing them out.

I follow Aunt Phyllis to the cake. "I'll take that corner piece," she orders, "the one with all the gold flowers on it. Black icing on a white cake. That looks real nice. Dag, Renee, y'all even integrate the cake. When's Dr. King gonna get here?"

We return to our table, and Aunt Phyllis keeps up her running conversation with herself. "Mmm, this is delicious."

Janae and I start to giggle.

"What y'all laughin' at?"

Janae points at Aunt Phyllis's teeth.

"Huh? My teeth?" She pulls a mirror from her purse. "They're black! What y'all laughin' at, Renee? Your teeth's as black as your mama's behind! Get along with your bad selves!"

Later, Pops, Giovanni, and Clyde clear an area for dancing. I put on a CD in the stereo in Pops's office, and by the time I walk into the dining room, Aunt Phyllis is by herself on the "dance floor."

"C'mon, y'all! We gotta dance the electric slide!"

Only a few people join her, probably because she takes up so much space.

“C’mon, y’all, this is a party, so get off your rusty butts and get your groove on!”

Janae slides in, and in a few moments, everyone but Collette is up and doing the electric slide. Collette is content to do a “chair dance.” Pops and Giovanni are having all sorts of trouble, but they don’t seem to care.

“Your man don’t have *no* kinda rhythm, Renee,” Aunt Phyllis says loudly over the music, “but he got hisself a nice ass. Shake that thing, white boy!”

During the last part of the party, Collette and I open tons of presents for Clyde Junior and Giovanni Junior: tiny Nike, Guess, and Fila outfits, lots of little toys, sheets, comforters, and boxes of diapers. Mama gets the lottery tickets, which she refuses to scratch in public, a nice watch from me, and an envelope for a gift certificate to the “nameless” store from Giovanni, Pops, and Janae.

Pops brings out two old-fashioned rocking horses that he and Giovanni made with “Clyde” stitched into the blue saddle of one, and “Giovanni” stitched into the green saddle of the other.

“They couldn’t go out and *buy* a rocking horse?” Aunt Phyllis whispers a bit too loud.

“It’s called a family heirloom, Aunt Phyllis,” I say, and I ignore her for the rest of the evening. Some of my family just should not be let out of the house.

Collette and I are opening cards when Collette says, “Ooooh.”

I hold my breath, and it gets real quiet. Clyde even fumbles for his car keys.

Collette looks around the room. “What?”

“Is it time, baby?” Clyde asks.

“No,” Collette says with a scowl. “I just pooted, y’all. Shit.” I’m glad I held my breath.

The party winds down around midnight. Most folks are yawning but not Janae. The little bit of wine she’s sampled has had a reverse effect—that girl is tripping. Luckily, we won’t have to take her drunk ass home since spring break has begun. Pops will have to deal with that in the morning, and by the time I arrive to help out, she had better be cured.

When it's just family left in the bakery, we clean up, but there isn't much to do. Folks have made plates (I watch Aunt Phyllis make three!), so there aren't any leftovers. While Giovanni and Pops do the dishes, I pop balloons while Janae and Mama attempt to pull down the streamers. Then, we get together at the counter and make a few toasts. After a few toasts to Mama, Pops raises his eyebrows to me and eyes Janae. I nod. My little girl is getting shit-faced. She will never want to drink again after this.

"A toast to the prettiest girl in the world," Pops says.

Janae gulps her Chianti. Ooh, that's going to hurt in the morning. The rest of us fake our sips.

Janae makes a toast. "A toast to the best Poppa in the world!"

"A toast to healthy babies!" Giovanni says.

Janae gulps some more.

"A toast to ginger snaps and walrus noses!" Janae says.

What? Daa-em. Janae won't be long for this world now.

I make a toast. "A toast to headaches and hangovers!"

Janae wobbles a bit. "Huh?"

"Drink, drink," I say.

She takes another gulp, her eyelids flutter, and her head connects with the counter.

I put down my glass. "Be especially loud in the morning, Pops," I say.

He winks. "Don't you worry. I play lots of opera divas for her."

## TWENTY-FOUR

I sleep in the next day, a wonderfully warm and sunny day, and finally arrive at the bakery at four. I see Ernestine fussing over Janae at the counter while the radio plays over the bakery's loudspeakers.

"Good afternoon, Janae!" I yell.

"Mama, please don't yell."

I feel her forehead. "I told you to sip last night, not guzzle."

"I know, I know. I am never drinking that stuff again. Ever."

I look at the brew Ernestine's trying to get Janae to drink. "What is that?"

"A sure-fire cure for a hangover," Ernestine says. "Always worked for my daddy."

"I am not drinking that, Mama. It probably has worm guts and bug brains in it." Ernestine laughs and takes it away.

"You want some Chianti instead?" I ask.

"No way."

"Good." I look around the dining room. Where's my man? "Where is everybody?"

Pops walks out wiping his hands with a towel. "First nice day in months. We will have nothing but bread business. A good day for picnics."

"Where's Giovanni?"

"At the bank."

I sit in the nearest chair. "And what's up with the music?"

Janae stares me down. "I'm in charge this week, Mama. I want to hear the radio."

"Oh yeah, I forgot."

A Mariah Carey song comes on, and in a moment, Ernestine and Khalid come out into the dining room wiping tables and arguing.

"She is not one of us," Khalid says, wiping a table to a shine. "Just look at her, Ernestine. And what, she married a rich Italian?"

"Who divorced her, right?" Ernestine says.

This shit could get ugly. I clear my throat until Khalid notices me.

"I am sorry, Renee," Khalid says.

"Don't be," I say. "Giovanni isn't rich." And the word "divorce" is not a word in our vocabulary. I cannot even for a second imagine my life without that man.

"But I'm tellin' you," Ernestine says, "I read it in *Jet*. Her daddy's a black man."

"Don't believe everything you read in *Jet*, Ernestine," Khalid says. "The only reason people read *Jet* is to find out who got married, who the beauty of the week is, what sport star made what millions, and what the top twenty songs are. Sex, sports, and music. That's all *Jet* is about, and that's all white America thinks we're about. And that's all you probably think we're about, too. Here's a question to prove it: How many professional black athletes are there in the United States right now?"

Ernestine looks at me. I shrug. "I don't know," she says.

"Take a guess," Khalid says.

"Okay. Fifty thousand."

Khalid steps within inches of her. "Would you believe twelve hundred?"

"No way," Ernestine says. "There has to be more than that."

Khalid walks away. "I read it in *Sports Illustrated* in an article written by a black man." Khalid's eyes are fierce. "There are only twelve hundred. There are fifteen times more black doctors in this country than black athletes, yet we push our children into sports they don't have a realistic chance of ever playing on the professional level."

Ernestine winks at me. "Don't believe everything you read in *Sports Illustrated*, Khalid. And anyway, where are the black doctors around here?"

"There aren't any, and that's my point," Khalid says. "There used to be way back in the day, and supposedly, there isn't even a single black doctor in the entire state of New Hampshire."

Ernestine rolls her eyes at me, and I roll mine back. Khalid is Malcolm X, Junior.

"You want to live in New Hampshire with all that snow, honey?" Ernestine asks.

"You're missing the point," he says.

"And so are you," she says, "especially on mixed folks. Mixed folks is folks, too."

"Ah, but some are blacker than others."

"Okay," Ernestine says, "what do you think about Halle Berry?"

"She's black," Khalid says, wiping more tables.

"Just like that?" Ernestine says.

"She acts black."

"She did that nasty movie, though, and that James Bond movie, too," Ernestine adds. "You ask me, Halle Berry is both."

"She played a black woman to earn her Oscar," Khalid says, "so she is black."

I have to get in this. "So, under your definition, Khalid, a person has to act black to be black? What about Bryant Gumbel then?"

"Or Tiger Woods?" Janae adds.

"Yeah," Ernestine says, "what we gonna do about Tiger Woods?"

It's three on one now in this racial tennis match, and Khalid can't possibly win. "Tiger Woods," he says, "plays golf. That should answer that question. And we wouldn't be claiming him if he couldn't play a lick."

Pops comes out of the back drying a pan. "What about Frederick Douglass?" he asks in his booming voice. "His father was white, and Douglass later married a white woman."

"Those are lies written by white men," Khalid says.

Pops shrugs. "Look it up if you don't believe me. I read it in *American Heritage*, a respected magazine of history."

Giovanni returns from the bank and kisses me tenderly on the lips. "What's up?"

"We're getting racial," I say.

"Oh. Who's winning?"

"No one wins an argument on race," Khalid says.

Giovanni nods. "Let's call it a discussion then. We're not going to be very busy today, so why don't we clear the air?"

Ernestine smiles. "Fine with me. I ain't the one with a chip on my shoulder."

Khalid sits. "And I am?"

"Live and let live is my motto," Ernestine says, settling into a chair. "You don't bother me, and I won't bother you."

"But what about the last four hundred years?" Khalid says. "Doesn't that bother you?"

"Why should it? I only been around for twenty-nine." She smiles and laughs deeply, and so do I because Ernestine is at least fifty.

Khalid scowls. "A white man gets off a boat, calls where he lands his country, and he gets rich. He steals land from people and says, 'Here's your space. Be happy.' He steals people from their homelands to work what is really other people's land and writes about freedom and the equality of all men. What is freedom if it only applies to white men?"

Daa-em. He's making all kinds of sense. Not bad for a brother who barely got out of high school. Islam agrees with him.

Ernestine claps. "Preach on, Brother Khalid."

Khalid scowls again. "That's the problem. No one takes any of this seriously."

Ernestine leans forward, and I'm worried that the table is going to break. "I'll give you some advice, Khalid. You take something too seriously, they take you away. Look at Malcolm and Dr. King and Medgar Evers. They're gone, child."

"They were martyrs for a cause, Ernestine," Khalid says. "They died for us!"

"Christ Jesus died for me, and He's the only one that matters," Ernestine says. Preach on, sister! "I'm grateful to those who have struggled and died along the way, but I ain't gonna hate folks on the basis of something that did not and does not affect me."

Khalid smiles. "So, you don't think Roanoke's a racist city."

Ernestine winks at me. "I didn't say that. Roanoke can be a racist city."

"You're talking in circles," Khalid says.

"I am? Well, let me finish. Roanoke can be a racist city, as can any city or town anywhere in this country, but I just don't let it get me down like you let it get you down. No one told you to sell drugs, Pooh."

Oh no she didn't! It's on now!

Khalid jumps up. "My name is Khalid el-Hassan."

Ernestine laughs. "You're always gonna be 'Pooh' to me. That other name is too hard to pronounce, and it ain't the one your mama gave you."

Khalid sits slowly. "My ancestors, our ancestors, couldn't name themselves because of slavery. 'Pooh' is a slave name. I am not a slave, so I have renamed myself."

"Your own mama nicknamed you that, Pooh. She wasn't no slave."

"Pops?" Giovanni says.

"Yes, Giovanni."

"Did our people ever own slaves?"

"No, Giovanni."

"Why not, Pops?"

Pops laughs. "Because we had no money and no need. We had each other. *La famiglia*."

Giovanni nods. "And what happened when you got off the boat, Pops? Did you steal anyone's land?"

"No," Pops said. "I rent. Paid much for little space not fit for living."

"Just checking," Giovanni says. "Please, Khalid, continue."

Without arguing directly with Khalid, Giovanni has calmed Khalid down. "Mr. Luchesi, I didn't tell you about all that stuff that happened before because I didn't think you'd hire me."

"How old were you when it happened?" Giovanni asks.

"Eighteen."

"Half a lifetime ago." He smiles. "No big deal. I would have hired you anyway."

Khalid doesn't look convinced.

Giovanni smiles. "Khalid, I am a Jewish-Catholic. I believe in guilt *and* forgiveness. You're no longer Pooh, right?"

Khalid nods.

"So all that's gone," Giovanni says.

"Not everyone is as understanding as you, Mr. Luchesi," Khalid says. And that's as close to a "thank you" as Giovanni's going to get from Khalid.

"I have question," Pops says, sitting across from Khalid. "It is important to me because I have never understood. Why do black people say such mean things to each other?"

"Such as?" Khalid asks.

"I cannot say them," Pops says. "Mean things."

"I think he means," Ernestine says, "why do we play the 'dozens' and john on each other so much."

"Yes," Pops says. "That is what I mean."

All eyes are on Khalid. "If we knew the answer to that, we'd have solved that problem already. But put yourself in our place. Stolen from our homes, our families split up, taught a new language—"

"I no like English so much either," Pops interrupts. "Makes my face hurt. Sorry, Khalid. Go on."

"Sold, whipped, worked to death, hanged, lynched, spit on, separated, legislated against, unfairly executed. Our reality has been hell on earth, so it shouldn't surprise you if a little hell comes out in our conversations with each other."

"I am not talking about conversation," Pops says. "Conversation does not involve such hatred."

For some reason, I'm enjoying this. Pops *really* wants to know.

"It's not so much hatred, Pops," I say. "It's more of a defense mechanism. So I rank a lot on white people. I rank as much on black people or any people for that matter, and I do it to cut down what I *can* to make up for what I *can't*. Do you understand?"

Pops slaps the table. "But what about *that word*? I know you've forbidden Janae to say this word and I am grateful, Renee, but if I call Khalid here a ... I cannot say it. If I call Khalid that, he will be upset and hit me or sue me or get me put in prison or call out the NAACP. I listen to the music sometimes, I listen to the conversation in here, and I hear that word over and over again. Why not let that word die?"

Khalid shakes his head. "You can't kill a four-hundred-year-old word in a day."

"No one says it, it dies. End of story." Pops raps the table with his knuckles.

"It's not that easy," Khalid says.

Pops stands. "I prove it to you. We take 'deli and pizzeria' out of the sign out front, change all the menus, call the phone company, tell them to change our ad. We say 'Welcome to

Luchesi's' when customers come in. In no time, this place is not a deli or pizzeria anymore."

"Pops," Giovanni says, "our customers will still remember. Heck, we'll still remember. Just getting rid of a word doesn't erase its memory."

Pops stares hard at Giovanni. "It should. Is Pooh gone? Yes. He's Khalid. Pooh does not exist anymore, therefore it works. End of story."

Khalid smiles at Pops but doesn't speak. A few customers come in. Ernestine rises and gets a menu, and we all hear her say, "Welcome to Luchesi's. Where would y'all like to sit?"

Janae and I spend the rest of the evening marking out "Deli and Pizzeria" on the menu.

"Even if it doesn't work, Mama," Janae says, "at least we tried."

## TWENTY-FIVE

Collette's baby is late, almost four weeks late, and the doctors will have to go in there and get Clyde Junior because he's already infected with Sippity.

"That's the way it ought to be done," Mama says after her Mother's Day meal. She has been coming around more and more the last few weeks, "just checkin' on my baby," she says. And whenever Mama shows up, Giovanni races to the bakery to help Pops, Khalid, and Ernestine catch up.

"I don't know, Mama," I say. "There's something strange about making an appointment to have a baby. What if the baby isn't ready?"

"Girl," Mama says, "it's been over forty-four weeks. Shit, I know Collette's the size of an elephant, but that don't mean she gotta have a pregnancy as long as an elephant."

Janae giggles, and we both look at her.

"Don't you be laughing now," I say. "One day you'll be in a similar predicament."

"I ain't never havin' no babies," Janae says.

"I am never having any babies," I correct.

"Why you correct her like that?" Mama says. "I understood her."

"Mama, I didn't get where I am today talking slang," I say. Well, I didn't.

"Our language is slang?" Oops. Mama's squinting.

I squint back. "You know what I mean."

"No," Mama says. "I don't know what you mean. Enlighten me."

Bitch. "Mama, I am in charge of fifty employees, most of them white. If I threw slang at them, they'd freak out."

"Or," Mama says, pointing a finger at me, "they'd *learn*. We gotta know their screwy language, they should have to know ours. I'm sure Giovanni learned, right?"

I roll my eyes and look at Janae. Help me, kid. Nay-Nay's winning. "What do you think of all this, Janae?"

"You're both wrong," she says with authority. "I'm going to talk the way I'm going to talk, and if you don't understand me, forget you."

I wink at Mama then smile at Janae. "Do you talk the same way to Scott as you do to everyone else?" I've got her. I know I have.

"That's different, Mama. Scott and I speak the language of *amore*."

After a split-second, Mama and I crack up. "*Amore?*" Mama says. "Child, you are too young for that."

When Janae doesn't answer, I ask, "Are you excited about Scott's birthday party?"

"Why should I be?"

I blink my eyes rapidly. "I imagine the two of you will be spending lots of time together alone."

"His family will be there, Mama."

"Just don't let him take you to his room, child," Mama says smiling. "He may have a special present for you."

Janae blushes. "Well, if he does, I'll just give him a present back!"

Mama stares open-mouthed at me. "Is this what you've raised, girl?"

Janae tries to leave the table, but I hold her to me. "We're just having a little fun, girl."

"Leave me alone."

I squeeze her arms and stare into her soul. "And you make sure that he leaves you alone, too."

She nods. "Yes, Mama."

Later that night, Collette finally goes into labor, and at two-thirty, Clyde Willis Dunbar, Junior, bounces into the world at nine pounds, fourteen ounces. Ouch. "Collette is doing fine," Mama says during a call from the hospital, "but Clyde needs our prayers."

"Did he fall out?" I ask.

"Seven stitches."

Daa-em.

I break the news to Janae while I'm lotioning her body. "I'm picking you up at the bakery tonight so you can meet your cousin."

"Mama, he isn't really my cousin."

"Janae, he is your cousin, now and forever, okay?" I rip the comb through her hair. "Maybe we should cut some of this jungle off, girl."

"No, Mama. I like it long." Only because her daddy likes it long.

"It's going to be real hot this summer."

"I'll be okay. The bakery has air-conditioning."

I finish brushing. "Don't you want to do something different this summer?" Like be a kid for once? Or do anything away from this yeasty place?

"Like what?"

"I don't know. We could get you into the summer honors program at Madison or maybe send you to a camp."

She puts a hand on a hip and shakes her head. "Mama, summer honors is for nerds, and camp sounds like jail. I don't want to eat mosquitoes for breakfast. I'd rather work at the bakery."

"I know, I know." I rub my tummy. "But this summer is going to be full of changes, Janae. I just want you to be happy."

"The bakery makes me happy."

I smile then wince. "Junior" is awake and kicking. "Your brother has a strong leg."

Janae rushes to put her hand on my tummy, but she's too late. "I wish I could feel him kick just once."

"Maybe later," I say. "We'll talk more about the summer later, too."

Later that night Janae and I meet Clyde Junior, who is the chubbiest baby ever born on this planet. His brown cheeks are so fat that his eyes disappear when he cries, and he cries a lot. He looks like a pair of squishy butt cheeks with a nose in the middle. Collette hands Clyde Junior to Janae, and for a moment he's still. Even the nurses breathe a sigh of relief.

"Janae," Collette whispers, "you have a way with boys, don't you?"

Then Clyde Junior lets loose a scream so loud Janae almost drops him.

"Don't worry, honey," Collette says. "He's just hungry. Hand him back."

Collette then drops the top part of her gown and shows the world a fat tittie. Janae jumps back as Clyde Junior chomps on her nipple and makes the nastiest slurping sounds.

“Daa-em,” Janae says. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

“Nah,” Collette says. “He doesn’t have teeth yet.”

Which brings back an awful memory for me. “And that hurts,” I say. “Janae, you were the hardest child to get on the bottle. You just couldn’t get enough of my titties.”

“Mama!”

And neither can Giovanni, come to think of it. I wonder if it’s an Italian thing.

After half an hour of slurping and burping, Clyde Junior falls asleep. “Want to hold him now, Janae?” Collette asks.

“No. I don’t want to wake him.”

“You kiddin’? This is your Uncle Clyde’s boy! Feed him, and he’s gone for hours. Come on. You gotta get some practice before your little brother is born.”

I help get Clyde Junior situated comfortably in Janae’s arms then swing Collette’s feet to the side. “Come on, heifer. Let’s all go for a walk.”

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere, ho,” Collette says, and she pulls her legs back under the covers.

“You have to get up, girl,” I say.

“I’m not movin’.”

“The sooner you’re up, the sooner you’re out. And since your insurance runs out tomorrow, you have to get your fat ass out of bed.”

“You shouldn’t be talkin’ like that to me, Renee. You’re gonna be right here where I’m sittin’ soon.”

I push Janae gently out the door. “Come straighten it then, lazy ass.”

We walk down the hall. “Mama, why do you talk so mean to Aunt Collette?”

“Watch.”

We turn and see Collette struggling up the hall and dragging her IV beside her.

“Piss your aunt off, she’ll do just about anything.”

## TWENTY-SIX

I go in for a routine six-month checkup at Lewis-Gale two days later. They weigh me (I am Shamu), check my pulse (seventy-five), take my temperature (normal), then they go ape-shit when they take my blood pressure.

"No good," Dr. Twardzik says in his European accent. "One-ninety over one-ten not good. Mrs. Luchesi, you will have baby today."

I think he's joking. "I took the stairs instead of the elevator, Dr. T." I cannot pronounce his name to save my life. "Take my blood pressure again in a few minutes."

He ignores me as nurses bring in a fetal heart monitor. What the hell?

"Hey, come on, y'all. Just wait a few—"

They aren't listening to me. A nurse straps the monitor on, and they watch the paper come out of the machine. "You're in labor," the nurse says.

I'm in labor? These people are on crack! "I feel fine," I say as another nurse attaches a blood pressure machine to my arm. "I've been in labor before. I know what it feels like, y'all, and this isn't it."

"Call husband," Dr. Twardzik says. "Get him here. He must take you to Community Hospital."

"Why?"

"They have nick-you." I blink at him. What a time to speak ... Bosnian? "Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. N-I-C-U. Nick-you. For premature babies. Best in valley."

Oh shit. The blood pressure machine comes on, and I'm two hundred over one-twenty. "Is it the toxemia?"

Dr. T. nods. "And now no time for husband." A nurse brings in a wheelchair. "We have to transport you. Call husband, tell him to meet you at Community Hospital, sixth floor."

I pull out my cell phone and dial the bakery as tears stream down my face. This isn't supposed to be happening!

"Luchesi's?"

"Giovanni, meet me at Community Hospital, sixth floor."

“Why?”

“I’m in labor.”

“Ha! April Fools Day was—”

“I’m not kidding, Giovanni. They’re taking me to an ambulance as we speak. Community Hospital, sixth floor.”

I get strapped to a gurney and try to remain calm on the ride to Community, but I can’t. Twenty-four weeks! He’ll barely weigh two pounds! He’ll be in that NICU for weeks, maybe months. God, please keep this baby inside me for a few more weeks! I’m not done cooking him yet!

They unload me at the emergency entrance and zip me on an elevator to the sixth floor. Giovanni appears before me as the doors open, and I weep. I take his hand and hold it to my cheek while he whispers Italian to me in soft bursts all the way to a private room at the end of the hall. They lift me off the gurney onto the bed and start attaching all this shit to me, set up an IV, and then vanish with “Dr. Cutrell will be with you shortly.”

“Sorry,” I say to Giovanni, who takes my hand.

“No, no,” he says, and he wipes a tear from my cheek. “He is just more *allegro*, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Dr. Cutrell comes in a half an hour later, and I have to lean forward to see her because she’s barely five feet tall. “Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Luchesi.”

“Hi.”

She checks the tape coming out of the monitor and takes another blood pressure reading. “We’ve given you something to slow down your contractions, but I’m afraid it isn’t having much effect. Your contractions are coming every eight to ten minutes now.” But I don’t feel a thing! “Your blood pressure readings are dangerously high.” I tear up again. She squeezes my free hand. “Don’t worry.” Easy for you to say. “You had a C-section with your first, right?”

“Yes.”

She winks. “I’ll try to use the same scar.” She checks her watch. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“This morning, um, at eight.”

"Hmm. We'll shoot for four o'clock then." In less than four hours. "Epidural at three. I'll be back to check on you." She looks at the tape again. "Your son's doing fine. He has a strong heart."

When Dr. Cutrell leaves, I break down entirely. "I'm so sorry, Giovanni, I'm so sorry."

"Shh, *bella*, rest. I am here."

"What about Janae?"

"Shirl will take her to Scott's party, and Pops will pick her up afterwards." He smiles. "We are, in a way, better prepared this time." He pulls a toothbrush *and* a hair brush from his pocket. "Now your hair will be perfect and your teeth will be fresh for our son."

And then, Giovanni brushes my hair. After all the medicines they've given me, Giovanni's gentle hands pulling a brush through my hair soothes me, brings my blood pressure down, slows down my contractions ... and puts me to sleep.

I wake up in time to get a needle in my back, Giovanni holding my hands.

"Be very still," he says. No shit.

I blink my eyes. In a few moments, I don't feel a thing below my chest. "Is it three o'clock already? Where's Mama?"

"Outside. She didn't want to see this part." He smiles. "And she has a book."

"Figures."

Four o'clock comes and goes. Dr. Cutrell comes in and tells us we're on next. At five-thirty, I'm wheeled down to pre-op. Giovanni kisses me then goes to gown up.

I feel so exposed on that table with all the lights, all the masked white people, and all the machines. They put up a curtain in front of my face and tie my arms down. At some signal, the doors open and Giovanni comes in, his nose stretching his mask to the limit.

"Hi," he says. "I've missed you."

I try not to cry, but tears sneak out anyway. "You look funny upside-down," I say.

"And you look beautiful from every direction."

And then the C-section. I feel pressure, pulling, and eventually a lightness on my back. I tune out the doctors talking doctor-talk and watch Giovanni's eyes.

"You okay?" he keeps asking.

"It's a boy," I hear someone say, but I don't hear the sound of crying.

"What's wrong?"

"Shh, *bella*, shh. Everything will be all right."

I watch his eyes travel to my left. "What, Giovanni?"

A tear slips from his eye. "He's so small, Renee."

"What are they doing?"

"I don't know. They're putting something in his mouth."

Oh, dear Jesus! "Find out!"

Giovanni stands but sits quickly. "It's a ventilator." More tears fall. "My mama was on one of those."

Dr. Cutrell comes over. "We've put him on a ventilator and are taking him to the NICU. As soon as you're out of post-op, Mr. Luchesi, you may see him."

"What about me?" I ask.

"Maybe tomorrow. You've just had major surgery, Mrs. Luchesi. You need your rest."

This is not how I dreamed it would be! I'm supposed to be holding my son right now! I'm supposed to be pointing out that he looks more like me than his daddy! I'm supposed to have my boy holding my finger and chomping on my tittie!

As a result of my stress and even more tears, I take a long time to get out of post-op. And when I'm finally wheeled to my room, Giovanni doesn't leave me.

"Don't you want to—"

He puts a finger to my lips. "Shh, *bella*. Rest. Sleep."

"But—"

"I will see him as soon as you are asleep."

"How can I sleep?"

Giovanni asks Mama to leave, and it's just the two of us. He dims the lights and turns off the game show Mama was watching. He pulls out a brush. "It worked before, yes?"

I nod. "I love you, Giovanni."

He kisses my forehead. "I love you, Renee. Now sleep and dream of your giggling son."

## TWENTY-SEVEN

I wake the next morning feeling ... peaceful. I have no other word to describe it. Giovanni is in the couch-chair beside me, his long skinny legs dangling over the edge, his hair a classic example of hospital bed head. Curled up in his arms is Janae, a blanket wrapped tightly around her. I check out the changes to my body. My fingers have almost returned to normal size, my cheeks feel loose, and I have human ankles again. I feel a thousand pounds lighter, and except for the dull pain below my stomach, I feel pretty good.

Then I immediately feel bad because my boy is probably fighting for his life just down the hall.

Giovanni's eyes open on my first "Ahem." He slides out from under Janae and leaves her on the couch-chair.

"You look terrible," I say.

"Thanks." He yawns. "How do you feel?"

"Like shit. Take me to my son." His eyes drop. "What's wrong?"

"Maybe you ought to take it easy, get your strength back first." He sits on the edge of my bed.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Actually, no. He's off the ventilator already and only getting a little oxygen. He's almost breathing on his own."

"That's good, right?"

He rubs my right foot. That feels so good. I slide my left foot over. "They tell me it's a miracle."

"Who does he look like?"

He laughs, and I wince. "Sorry. He looks like a hairier me. He has shovels for hands, a big toe that looks more like a thumb, my nose, and your sexy mouth."

"Has he cried yet?"

"No. He hasn't opened his eyes yet either. They say that's normal." He looks at Janae. "We watched him dream, then we prayed for a while, then we came back here."

Janae opens a sleepy eye. "Morning, Mama." She yawns, and I can smell her breath from across the room.

"Morning. How was the party?"

She pulls the blanket up to her neck. "Crummy. Scott couldn't keep his hands off me so I dumped him."

So soon? I pity the next boy. "What do you think of your brother?"

She shrugs. "He needs a shave." She looks at Giovanni. "So do you, Daddy. Yuck."

"And you need to brush your teeth, girl," I say. "I can smell your stank breath from here."

She giggles. "No you can't."

"You see any flowers in here?"

"No."

"It's because your breath killed them all."

It feels so good to laugh again, even if it pulls at the staples. Weeping lasts for a night, but joy *does* come in the morning. But I still want to see my boy!

A few minutes after the blandest breakfast I ever *didn't* eat, Pops shows up carrying a huge bag, pretty red roses, and a handful of colorful balloons. "*La chioccia!*" he yells, placing the bag on the table and the flowers on the window sill. He lets the balloons go, and they hit the ceiling.

"What did you call me?" I ask.

"Mother hen," he says, and he gives me a sloppy kiss on the forehead. "You hatched an egg, you are *la chioccia*."

"My son is not a chicken," I say.

Pops laughs and opens the bag. He pulls out four sandwiches, a few bags of chips, a dozen bread sticks wrapped in foil, a slice of carrot cake, and even a few bottles of root beer. "I can bring more if you need more," he says.

"I'll need more," I say. "Give me a bread stick. Stat!"

After eating ... and eating, they finally let me see my son. Pops wheels me down the hall where we wash our hands with this nasty red soap and put on gowns. They have to put two gowns on Pops and make him wear a mask.

"Boo," he says to me.

"You don't scare me, old man," I say.

But Giovanni Junior does scare me. He's under a heat lamp in an incubator with a Plexiglas dish over his head, an oxygen tube

snaked inside. He's so tiny, so white, and so naked to the world with tubes sticking out of his mouth, his nose, and his belly button. His eyes are still closed, and his hands are strapped down. My son looks like Christ on the cross! I start to cry.

"*Ecco il bambino!*" Pops says. "*Come stai? Sto buffa* Poppa, Emilio Franco Luchesi. *Stai magnifica, meraviglioso, coraggioso!*"

I grab Pops's sleeve. "What are you saying to my son?"

"Shh. You go on crying. That is your thing. We are talking. It is Italian thing, you wouldn't understand."

I smile.

"I have asked him how he's doing, told him I'm his funny Poppa, told him he's magnificent, marvelous, and brave." He squeezes my shoulder. "And so are you."

I look down at Giovanni Junior ... and he opens his eyes. "Pops, he's—"

"*Fa la faccia!* His eyes, they are *marrone!*" He lets go of my shoulder. "Sorry. I am nervous, Renee. Italian is a better language for the nervous. Your English, no. Not for the nervous."

A nurse comes over and writes furiously on her clipboard. She adjusts one of the lines and takes blood from Giovanni Junior. "For a blood gas," she says. "I'll put most of it back. I only need a little."

Damn right she better! There can't be much to take! I look into my little boy's eyes. I'm not sure he can see me, but I can tell he sure doesn't like the Plexiglas. He pulls his right hand loose and works his hand under the dish until it's inside. With a jerk, he knocks the lid off the dish.

The nurse laughs. "That's the second time he's done that."

"Is that bad?"

"No, and since his blood gas is normal ..."

She removes the tube from his mouth, and my brave little boy actually yawns! His whole face swells up into a big O—just like me!

"Can I touch him?"

The nurse nods.

I dangle a pinkie into his palm, and he grabs it. Oh, the tears that fall. He has such a strong grip. He has his daddy's hands. I am

having a goose bump attack of epic proportions. "Is that a smile?" I ask. It looks like one.

"No," the nurse says. "He probably just has gas." How nice. Also just like his daddy. "I'm going to page Dr. Cutrell."

"Why?"

"Your son weighs *less* than two pounds today, and now he's awake and breathing on his own. His blood gas is excellent. It's a miracle."

Within half an hour, we're all in the NICU. They make an exception for the four of us since only two are usually allowed in. "We make exceptions for miracles," Dr. Cutrell says.

Mama is, as usual, the first to speak. "You made another pretty baby, Giovanni."

"Thanks," Giovanni says.

"Except for those bird legs," Mama snaps.

"I just wish I could hold him," I say.

"It won't be long, Mrs. Luchesi," Dr. Cutrell says. "And maybe in a day or two, you'll be rocking him to sleep. But please, everyone, understand that he's still in danger. He's still making himself. He has much to develop before he's out of danger. His lungs seem fine now, but they could weaken. He has to learn how to breathe, suck, and swallow before he can leave the hospital."

That doesn't sound too hard. "So what exactly are you trying to say?" I ask.

"Just that it's going to be a while before he can go home," Dr. Cutrell says. "He could be here as long as two to three months, maybe longer."

I close my eyes. Two to three months? I want to take him home now!

Pops winks at me. "Doctor, do you want to bet?"

"It's not a matter of betting, Mr. Luchesi," Dr. Cutrell says. "It's a matter of how much weight he can gain and keep over the next few weeks, how well he can breathe, how much he can eat and keep in his body."

Pops slaps his stomach with both hands. "He will have my belly for sure. I say he's home before Saint John's Eve, when the soul goes on a journey and returns in the morning."

"Huh?" Mama says.

"June twenty-third," Pops says. "Less than six weeks from this day."

"Oh," Dr. Cutrell says, "that's much too soon."

Mama leans over the incubator. "Hey Doc, this old man here ain't never been wrong before."

"He is this time," Giovanni says. "My son will be home by June thirteenth."

Pops nods. "Ah yes. I have forgotten."

"Okay," Mama says, "what miracle happens on June thirteenth?"

"It is the feast of Saint Anthony of Padua," Pops says.

"The feast of who?" I ask.

"Saint Anthony," Giovanni says. "He is the saint for the recovery of lost things. I think Saint Anthony can make an exception for an exceptional little boy who is lost and needs to find his way home."

"Saint Anthony, please come around, someone is lost and must be found," Pops chants.

"Does it work?" Mama asks.

Pops smiles. "Always!"

"Good," Mama says. "Maybe y'all can find your damn minds on that day."

Giovanni squeezes my hand tightly. "Dr. Cutrell, what do you think?"

She shakes her head. "Even under the best circumstances—"

"He wasn't supposed to make it this far," I interrupt. And I hate doctors who only give bad news. "He'll be home by the thirteenth."

"I agree," Janae says.

Mama scowls. "Y'all Catholics are worse than the Jehovah's Witnesses. You've now infected my daughter and my granddaughter." She leans down close to Giovanni Junior, who seems to be listening to all this. "They're all crazy, boy. You best live with me." Giovanni Junior kicks his legs, yawns a long time, and smiles. Give her a hot one, boy. "Such a pretty smile, such a pretty wittle—daa-em, boy!" Mama backs away. "Why you gotta poot on your Nay-Nay?"

It feels so good to laugh, and I catch Dr. Cutrell laughing along with us. "Okay, okay," she says, "we need to let Giovanni Junior get some rest."

"Sleep tight," Giovanni says.

"Remember what I said, boy," Mama says. "You're gonna live with me."

"*Dormi*," Pops says. "We talk later."

Janae smiles, winks, and says, "I have so much to tell you."

They leave me alone with Giovanni Junior, and I stay until his tiny eyelids close. "Sweet dreams," I say. "Dream of all the crazy people you've seen today."

## TWENTY-EIGHT

I spend the next month visiting Giovanni Junior at Community Hospital. Giovanni drops me off in the morning and joins me during lunch breaks and after the dinner rush for the first two weeks. We learn how to feed and bathe him and even take an infant CPR class. Giovanni Junior gains weight like a true Luchesi, recognizes our faces, and loves to be held.

Then we learn that Giovanni Junior can't hear and can't speak. And he never will.

He just didn't have enough time to develop, they tell us. Naturally, I feel responsible. The guilt ... I've never felt anything like it. I waited too long to have another child. I curse my thirty-six-year-old body and weep.

Giovanni mourns over this news the only way he knows how to mourn: he works himself to death and lights candles at St. Andrews. Mama has to drive me to Community during the third week.

And then, suddenly, Giovanni is back as if nothing is wrong. After apologizing to me—me, the woman who gave him a deaf-mute child—he says, “He will hear with his eyes and talk with his hands. He will be a true Italian.”

Janae prepares his room with Disney stickers and plants another special rainbow garden under Giovanni Junior's window. She hasn't said much about her brother's problems, and knowing how much she's like her daddy, she probably won't. She just wants him home like we all do.

And on Saturday, June 13, at 1 P.M., Giovanni Anthony Luchesi, Junior, comes home weighing just over four pounds. He is a doll baby, and though he's small, he isn't fragile. Giovanni takes him on a tour of the house while Janae and I sit on the new rocker in his room.

“Mama?” Janae asks.

“Yes?”

“I believe in miracles.”

“So do I,” I say. “I'm holding one right now.”

Giovanni brings Giovanni Junior into the room, and that little boy reaches immediately for Janae. I'm not hurt. He likes messing with her hair, and the boy has a good strong grip. Giovanni hands me my son, and I rock him, kissing his tiny head, while he grabs Janae's hair. She lets him yank and yank, and she doesn't cry out.

But I'm about to. My son is *home*.

"Come on, girlfriend," Giovanni says. "Let's leave your mama and brother alone for a bit."

Janae gets up and slip-slides out.

Giovanni kisses my forehead. "I'll be snoring in your room in a few minutes. You can wake me if your want."

I shake my head. "Not tonight, Giovanni," I say. "I have a date with your son."

He kisses my lips. "Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

He kisses Giovanni Junior and leaves.

"We are not making another baby, boy," I say to Giovanni Junior. "You are my last little chap." He blinks. I kiss his nose. "Giovanni Junior, you are a golden, golden boy. And I'm so glad that you're finally home."

As the tears fall, I thank God for making more than one rainbow.

## TWENTY-NINE

Giovanni Junior is christened at St. Andrews the next day. Giovanni holds him as the priest drips the water, and Pops becomes his godfather.

All I have to do is smile.

After the service, Pops and I light a candle for his wife, Ruth, then we all go to Luchesi's (it's not just a bakery to me anymore) to celebrate. Since it's far too beautiful a day to celebrate indoors, we walk down Allison Avenue to Highland Park carrying baskets full of bread, wine, and cheese.

Though Janae says "I'm too old for swings," she allows Giovanni to push her, her new white dress fluttering around her. The other folks at the park probably think we're crazy wearing suits and dresses to a picnic, but that's okay. I'm far too happy to care what other folks think today.

"Let them stare," Giovanni tells Janae as she climbs higher and higher.

"They're just jealous, right, Daddy?"

"No," Giovanni says. "They're dazzled by your beauty, my queen."

I hand Giovanni Junior to Mama, and she's all too happy to show him off to whomever she meets as she strolls through the park. I sit on the swing next to Janae and pout. "Don't I get a push, too, Mr. Man?"

"May I push your mama, my queen?" Giovanni asks Janae.

She smiles at me first. "She might push you back, Daddy."

Then Giovanni pushes me, and for a moment, we're the only two people on earth. His white hands, strong yet gentle, move me higher and higher until I become a brown blur with flashing white teeth. He slows me to a stop, whispers "Our table is waiting," and I laugh.

"Giovanni!" Pops yells. "We're all out of wine!"

Giovanni makes a face. "Oh no! Whatever shall we do?"

"Stop," I say. "Go get us some more wine." I wink, and he winks back. Yes! We're going to get busy in a few moments on our table! My coochie rejoices!

"I'll go, Pops," Giovanni says, but instead of running off, he just stands there looking at me and Janae.

"What?" I say.

"Just wish I had a camera."

"You are not taking any more pictures of me, Mr. Man."

"Ever?"

I sigh. "Maybe by the end of the summer."

He kneels beside Janae. "How about a picture of your daughter?"

"Another one?" Janae whines. "Daddy, you take too many pictures of me."

"But you are so beautiful," he says, and he kisses her on the cheek. "I want lots of memories for when I'm old and wrinkled like your Poppa."

"You'll never grow old, Daddy."

He kisses Janae once more, this time on the lips. "And you'll always be my girlfriend." He stands and plants a long, juicy kiss on me. "I'm going to push you both once more, and I bet you both will still be swinging by the time I get back."

"Bet him, Janae," I say. "Your daddy has never moved that fast."

"I have my moments," Giovanni says. He grabs the chains over Janae's head. "So, do you want to bet or what?"

"Yup," she says. "If you're not back by the time I stop swinging, you have to give me all your Friday night tips ... for a month."

"Ouch," Giovanni says.

"Hey now, that money is *mine*!" I yell, kicking out my feet. "Baby needs new shoes, Giovanni."

Giovanni laughs. "What if I get back in time?" He winks at me again! Yes! We're gonna do it twice! We're gonna clean out all the cobwebs!

Janae bites her lower lip. "If you get back—"

"Hey," I interrupt. "You're betting *my* money, so I get to pick. Let me see. There are so many things that I *don't* want to do this summer. How about ... dishes for a month."

"Mama! You never do the dishes!"

Giovanni winks at me one more time. Three times? Shit, we haven't done that since the first week we were together. Bring it on! "You're on," he says, and he holds us both high in the air. "Ready?"

Janae and I giggle. "Ready!" we yell together.

And then he drops us. I catch flashes of him running away with his long skinny legs until he disappears up Allison Avenue. After a few minutes, we stop swinging.

"Well, we won the bet, girl," I say. "What are you going to do with your money?"

"Spend it!" she says. That's *my* little girl.

I let five more minutes pass to give him time to light the candle and get the music started. I check my watch. "I wonder what's taking him so long."

"I'll go check on him," Janae says.

"No, I'll go." I slide off the swing. "I need to get off my butt so I can lose some more weight. I'll be back in a half hour or so."

"A half hour? What y'all gonna do, Mama?"

"Shh." I kneel in front of her. "You are too smart, girl. Your daddy had no intention of winning that bet. He was, uh, kinda paying for your silence. Understand?"

She smiles. "I understand."

"We were too pooped to move last night, and, well, it's been a long time—"

"I said I understand, Mama," she interrupts.

"Don't tell anyone, okay? I mean, it's Sunday and all."

"Okay, Mama." She kisses my forehead. "Think y'all could make me a sister this time?"

"It isn't up to me, girl," I say with a smile. "But I'll ask him."

I don't have a care in the world as I strut up Allison Avenue. I have a brilliant, beautiful daughter, a precious son, a loving family, and a man who still puts the hubba in my bubba after ten years. The sky is blue, the trees are green, the air fresh, and the temperature is just right. I'm going to make love to my man at the place where it all started, going to hold him, going to feel him, going to see rainbows ...

I turn onto Fourth Street and see ... my husband lying on the sidewalk, a few people around him. My heart catches. He's all

right. He probably just tripped over his big feet and fell. As I get closer, I see an old white woman with a dog leashed to one hand, her other hand holding Giovanni's left hand.

"What ... what ..."

I rush over, kneel down, and see his face, see blood gurgling from his lips, hear him rasping for air. I remove the old woman's hand from his and squeeze it. He barely squeezes back. "I'm his wife," I tell her. "What happened?"

She looks at me with faraway eyes. "He couldn't have seen the car. It just came tearing up the sidewalk doing fifty at least. He was just standing there by the door looking the other way."

Waiting for me. Dear Jesus, he was waiting for me!

Giovanni coughs, more blood bubbling out. I stroke his hair and hear the sirens. My heart thuds in my chest. "Giovanni, blink if you can hear me."

He blinks.

I hear more sirens. I try to smile. "Is the candle lit?"

He blinks, a tear sliding down his cheek.

My eyes spill over with tears. I can hear "*Ave Maria*"! "I hear the music, Giovanni. It's beautiful." I turn his wedding ring around so the diamonds shine out. "Please don't die on me, Mr. Man."

His eyes flood with tears, and his fingers loosen.

"Hold on, Giovanni. Please hold on. Don't let go of my hand!"

His fingers relax, his eyes close, the gurgling stops.

"Oh God oh God oh God!"

The earth spins ... Janae's voice ... "Daddy!!!" ... Pops weeping ... sirens ... flashing lights ...

I hold my man there and remember the first time I saw him in his apron with that orange hat that made him look like a wooden kitchen match, and I rock him, rock him all the way to heaven. The ambulance crew has to pry my fingers away from his hands, his beautiful hands.

Pops picks me up and holds me and lets me beat my fists into his chest.

"Why didn't you see this?" I yell at him. "Why didn't you see this coming?"

"I am sorry," he says, howls, and hugs me tighter. "I am sorry."

Another ambulance turns left off Allison down Fourth Street toward a car wedged between a tree and a house. I break away from Pops, walk right by Mama holding Giovanni Junior and Janae, and run down Fourth Street.

I'm going to kill me someone now, an eye for a fucking eye, get out my way you *motherfuckers*!

A fireman holds me back.

"Let me go," I say. "Let me go!"

The firemen have to go in through the back door of a hoopy, and several whiskey bottles fall from the car as they do. All empty. They pull the driver over the back seat ... and he's black. He's old, and he's black, and he's drunk, and he just killed my husband!

I lose my mind. I push the fireman out of my way and leap on that old man, hitting him in the face as hard as I can. Several hands yank me away, and in a moment, I'm handcuffed, my face flat on the hood of a police car, moaning, "He killed my husband! That motherfucker killed my husband!"

The cop holding me down leans forward. "The guy up there is white, ma'am."

"My husband! It's my husband!"

A second later I hear Pops's enormous voice. "Take your hands off my daughter!"

I hear a tremendous crack, and I'm lifted into Pops's arms again, my arms still handcuffed behind my back. Pops is cursing in Italian over my head at the cops, and they wisely back off after uncuffing me. I turn and see an officer out cold on the ground.

Pops kisses me on the cheek. "I am sorry." He turns me toward Mama and Giovanni Junior who are coming down the hill. "Go." I take a step. Pops puts out his wrists to another officer. "I am sorry," he weeps. "My son ..."

They don't cuff him. He begs them to take him away, but they won't, so he sags to his knees in the street.

Mama approaches me, tears in her eyes, and tries to hand Giovanni Junior to me.

I shake my head. I don't have the strength to hold him now.

"I'll help Pops," Mama says. "Go find Janae."

I don't care where Janae is now, I don't care that I have a baby that needs tending, and I don't care if Mama or anyone on earth is mad.

My husband is dead. My soul mate is dead. My world just died. How can I give love to a baby in a world where love dies in the blink of an eye?

I stagger up Fourth Street, watch the ambulance carrying Giovanni pulling away without its lights on, feel the eyes staring at me, and walk through the intersection at Allison and Fourth without looking. Maybe there's a car for me, too.

None comes.

I turn down the alley beside the bakery and see Janae, her back against the red bricks of the bakery, her feet propped up on the rusting green Dumpster. She stares at the backboard without a rim, biting her lower lip. Blood trickles down her chin and stains her new white dress.

I walk past her without speaking because, like me, she's not really here. She's in her daddy's arms on the way to the bathroom. I'm in Giovanni's arms on a beach in Maui, a sunset dazzling me. She's watching Giovanni missing a foul shot by five feet or more, his eyes closed, a smile as big as his heart on his face, so he'll lose another bet because that's what daddies do, they lose to their children, they lose all the time to make their children laugh. I'm watching Giovanni creating a pizza at the make table, working the dough, flour all over his face, his arms, his hair. Smiling. He's always smiling. She's hearing him call her in on a cold day to drink some hot chocolate, "Have some ginger snaps, I just made them," he's saying, I'm hearing him say he loves me. She's wearing the special apron he had Christina make for her. I'm in my wedding dress, crying and smiling because my man is so handsome and I am so happy.

And now he's gone.

I don't reach for her hand, I don't hold her, I don't kiss her tears away ... because there's no one now to do that for me.

So I walk away from the bakery, its ancient bricks holding up my daughter, and continue down the alley as a candle snuffs itself out on our table.

## THIRTY

We hold the wake, which is a stupid name for a tragic ceremony, at Luchesi's, and lots of folks come. I don't let Pops play any music. He understands. I also don't let anyone sit at our table.

Janae, who still hasn't spoken, G.J. , who will never speak, and I, who am afraid to speak, sit at the table where Giovanni's candle is a puddle of wax. Folks come to us, pay their respects, and leave. Mama takes Janae and G.J. home, and I sit and listen to the silence.

It doesn't last long.

I hear the ovens warming up, their whirr and clank strangely comforting. Water runs into a bucket and splashes into the Berkel. I imagine Giovanni hoisting the fifty-pound flour bag over his head, tearing it open inside the Berkel, dumping it, a fog of flour rising into the air. Every morning of his life started this way. He did this every morning before the sun came up while I was safe and warm in my bed.

I've been sitting too long. I walk into the back and watch Pops without him seeing me. He adds at least ten different seasonings, some yeast, some oil. He also adds his tears.

I've never seen him really weep before. Oh Jesus! I break down and crumple to the floor.

"They will be the best bread sticks you have ever tasted, Renee!" Pops shouts. "A special recipe! You will not be disappointed!"

"How can you *work*?" I howl. "How can you work on a day like this?"

"It is what I do!" He closes the Berkel with a clang and turns it on. A moment later, he's standing in front of me with his hand out. "Come."

I shake my head.

He reaches down and grabs my hand, pulling me to my feet. "I need your help."

I can't stop crying. "I don't know what to do."

"You are a Luchesi. It is in your blood." He pulls me to the Berkel. "Open it."

I can barely stand. "Please, I can't!"

He puts my hand on the latch. "Open it. We have work to do." His voice softens. "Please, Renee. Help me today."

I pop the latch, a beautiful yeasty aroma assaulting me. I start to back away, but he stops me, reaching around me to remove the blade. "Please, please ... not today."

"Put the dough on the table, Renee."

I weep again. "I can't!"

He pushes me to the Berkel and shoves my hands into the warm dough. "Put the dough on the table."

I grab the dough in my fists ... and it feels like someone's holding my hands. The more I sink my hands into the dough, the stronger the grip of the dough. The dough's warm hands are holding my hands. I stop crying.

Pops sprinkles flour on the long metal table. "Come."

I roll the dough into the world's largest block of Play-Doh and carry it to the table. As soon as it hits the table, flour dust rises into the air, speckling my black dress. He hands me a square silver cutter and hacks away at the blob of dough with a cutter of his own.

"How big do I make them?"

He tosses a cut piece to me. "This big."

For the next five minutes, we hack away until there are thirty squares of dough. He picks up a square. "Watch." He rolls the dough in his hands so fast I don't see what I'm supposed to see. In the end, he has a small round dough ball the size and shape of a small beret. "You try."

I roll the dough in my hands slowly, pulling and stretching it until I have created a dough mushroom. "Not very good."

Pops smiles. "Not as bad as Giovanni's first dough ball. His was, how you say, shitty."

I almost smile. He said that name, a name I can't even call my own son yet.

"You will get better." He tosses another hunk to me. "All it takes is practice."

*J. J. Murray*

I watch him work, his hands a blur, as I struggle through the few I do. Practice. Pops has had more practice ... in grief. He's buried a wife and is about to bury a son. I'm new at this. I've only buried a father. Tomorrow I bury a husband.

So we practice, and after a few hours and several batches, I've got the hang of making a dough ball.

And I go home smelling like Giovanni.

## THIRTY-ONE

On a clear, hot sunny day, we bury Giovanni near Daddy at Evergreen Cemetery.

I don't weep, and neither does Janae. I'm worried about her, but I know that she'll come around. She just needs time to work things out. Mama cries for all of us anyway, and though we can't hear him, G.J. cries, too. Christina and Alexis, Collette, Clyde, and Clyde Junior, and Ernestine and Khalid are here along with a bunch of folks who I've seen at Luchesi's. Pops stands behind us humming something, and during the mini-sermon by Reverend Noel, I smile because I figure out the tune: "Betcha By Golly, Wow."

I don't know why I'm not more weepy or angry. It's not like I'm trying to be strong. I'm holding a tiny child, my other hand on my daughter's shoulder. I should be crying. I'm now a single, thirty-six-year-old African-American mother with two biracial kids, one of them probably scarred for life, the other handicapped for life. I could be angry at the man who died just when I needed him the most, I could be angry at the man who killed him, and I could be angry at myself for not being angry. But I'm not angry. It's like I have no emotions left.

I just don't cry.

Until everybody leaves when it's just me and the mound of dirt.

"You didn't come home last night, Mr. Man," I say to his headstone. "What's up with that? You ought to be home with me and the kids. We miss you." I squeeze the headstone and look at Giovanni's ring on my right hand. "And I love you. I'm sorry for not saying that enough. I love you."

I feel my eyes misting up and take a few steps to leave, but a cool breeze blows in my face as if to dry my tears. "Okay, I'll stay," I say, and I return to the headstone. "I'll stay."

I trace his name with my fingers. "I'll remember your hands most of all. The way they moved me, touched me, warmed me." I smile. "The way they made me horny as hell. They weren't attractive hands at all, Giovanni. They were ugly hands."

Calloused and red from too many dishes, nails caked with dough, cuticles speckled with flour, knuckles chafed and chapped. I laugh. "And they were definitely ashy."

But they were strong hands, the strongest hands I've ever known, hands that held my sweaty hands fiercely in moments of passion, hands that lifted my chin when I pouted, hands that planted garden after garden, hands that lifted our daughter out of bed to soothe away her fears, hands that brushed my hair to put me to sleep, hands that held me when I was afraid. I'm misting up again, and I'm really afraid for the first time in my life. Where are his hands now?

"You just couldn't keep your hands still, Giovanni." They were always moving whenever he talked, cooked, waited tables, or took orders. "Or undressed me," I say aloud. "I liked the way you undressed me. I'm going to miss that a lot. More than probably *I* even know."

I press my hands against the cool stone and close my eyes. "Your hands were *my* hands, Mr. Man." To hold, to squeeze, to tickle with my middle finger when I wanted some, to grab and pull to my stomach to feel our children kick, to pull around me in the night when I needed to feel safe. I need them now, God, I need them now!

My tears flow freely. "I'm going to miss those hands. I'm going to miss those ugly, white, ashy, calloused hands."

I look at my empty brown hands ... and weep.

## THIRTY-TWO

The day after the funeral, I decide to get my house in order so I'll have something to think about that won't make me weep.

Unfortunately the first stop is the bills.

I sit at the kitchen table, G.J. in a bassinet on the table, Janae locked in her room keeping her vow of silence. She'll be one of my many stops today.

The most important one.

Financially, we're okay. For now. Giovanni didn't have a will, but the only thing in his name alone that he owned free and clear is that damn Cadillac parked outside. I have to sell that thing. Pops owns Luchesi's outright, and though he doesn't have to, he says he'll give us half of the profits each month. I asked him to "hold that thought," and he's holding. I just don't feel right about it yet. I don't want any charity, but if things get tight, I may have to.

Giovanni's life insurance pays for his funeral, some of G.J.'s enormous hospital bills (my crummy Star City health insurance only covers eighty percent of the hundred grand-plus bill), and most of my car. I always paid ahead on the bills when we had the money, always sent in an extra hundred to apply to the principal on the house note, we only had one credit card, and that was just so we could go into debt and pay it off so we could get our first house. Talk about twisted. You have to go into a little pile of debt to earn a larger pile of debt. I hadn't used that MasterCard in years until Maui. How un-American of me.

As for social security, there simply isn't enough. Giovanni died too young and had worked his entire life under-reporting his tip income, and the three hundred fifty-dollars and thirty-seven cents we'll get each month barely covers one-third of the house note.

"At least Daddy will be paying for a floor of the house," I say to G.J.

He coughs, and I cringe.

"Please don't get sick on me, boy." I settle the blanket closer to his chin and feel his forehead. It feels cool. "One crisis at a time, now."

I get out a phone book and look up daycare centers for the first time in my life, and there are so many. I'm planning on taking the rest of the summer off until school starts. I could take the next six months off with my maternity leave and still keep my benefits, but I won't. I'd go out of my mind. I'll take off long enough to help Janae get back to normal and fatten this boy up before going back to work. It isn't like I don't have enough to do with this house and this boy. I'm not bored. I just need to keep the money rolling in. So in order to make enough for us, I have to pay someone else to take care of my child. What's up with that?

Mama says she'll retire early, sell her condo, move in with us, and take care of G.J. "Just say the word," she says.

The word is "No!" It took me twenty-six years to get out of her house, and I've enjoyed the last ten years away from her. I know that sounds mean, but I'm far too independent now to take orders from anybody.

"No one tells me what to do," I say to G.J.

He fusses, shaking his little hands in front of his red face.

I pick him up, laugh, kiss him on the forehead, and rock him. "Only you can tell me what to do, little man. No one but you."

I call five daycare centers, and they all tell me the same thing: no kids until they hit six months, and take out a second mortgage to pay the weekly bill. Daa-em, the kid doesn't do anything but lie there, burp, and shit! Why does it cost so much? If I'm providing the diapers and the formula, it shouldn't cost half that much. I ought to retire and start my own scam like that.

"Does he have any special needs?" one daycare director asks.

"He's hearing-impaired and mute."

"Oh my." A rustle of papers. "I don't know if we're licensed to handle a child with those needs. I'll have to check on that and call you back, Mrs. Luchesi."

He can't hear, so you know he'll be able to sleep through anything. And he doesn't make a sound ... he's the perfect infant. What's to handle?

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Luchesi," she says when she calls back. "But we aren't equipped to provide your son with the best possible care."

"Before you said you didn't know if you were licensed."

“Um, we are, it’s just that—”

“You’re just not equipped,” I interrupt, “to deal with a silent child who can sleep through a hurricane?”

“It’s not that, um, you see—”

“If you can’t handle my son, you shouldn’t be running a daycare.”

I hang up, give up, and decide to see what Collette is planning to do with Clyde Junior. I warm up some formula and hold it for G.J. as I write out the checks for the house, water, electric, phone, gas, car, car insurance, cable (yes, even I have to pay for cable), MasterCard, and hospital bills.

I look at the balance in the check book after I’m through. “Hey, we can eat this month.” I look at G.J. snoring peacefully. “I hope you get on regular milk quick. That formula shit has got to be part of some conspiracy to make poor folks poorer.”

While G.J. naps, I tackle the laundry. I collect the pile in my room, the container in G.J.’s room, and knock on Janae’s door. “Janae, honey, I need your dirty clothes.”

She doesn’t answer.

“You hear me?” I hear bare feet slip-sliding around her room. In a moment, the door opens, a duffel bag of dirty clothes rolls into the hall, and the door closes. “Thank you,” I say. At least she’s listening to me.

I put the first load in the washer and open the dryer to clean out the lint-screen. Giovanni always forgot to do that. The screen is coated with a thick layer of blue lint, and I’m picking it out when I notice a white T-shirt still in the dryer. I freeze. Pops was supposed to have cleared out all of Giovanni’s clothes. I’m afraid to touch it. I sit.

“This is crazy,” I whisper.

I can’t fall apart every time I see something that belonged to Giovanni. I don’t fall apart when I see his kids, so why should a T-shirt freak me out? I reach behind me without looking and pull the T-shirt to me. I hold it out in front of me. “It’s white, it’s actually white,” I say, and I take a sniff. “He used bleach.” I laugh. “He finally got it right.” I’m about to toss it into the trash when my fingers ... just won’t let go. I hold it up to my chest.

I’ve just found a new night shirt.

I take it upstairs and throw it on my pillow then sit on my cushioned chair in front of my vanity. The woman I see is not that attractive anymore.

“Girl, you look like shit.”

I pull my hair down in front of my eyes and see my bangs looking as jagged as icicles with one long dagger in the middle. I look like Eddie Munster. “We need a cut.” I pick up a smaller, magnifying mirror and look at my eyes. Bloodshot. Circles. “Looks like I been in a fight that I didn’t win.” I put the mirror down and brush my hair straight back, slap on a Nike visor, and stare at myself. “Dag, I still look like I’m sixteen years old.” I smile, or try to, and sit up straighter, throwing my titties out in front of me. I sag. I’m still fat. I need to lose at least fifty pounds. My nails look chewed, my skin is ashy, and I look like a fat teenager.

I will not go out in public today. Or tomorrow.

I slap on some sweats and Giovanni’s T-shirt and start picking up, straightening this, wiping that, refilling toilet rolls and soap dispensers, sweeping, fluffing. I’m the housewife you never see in commercials because I’m black. To spice it up, I put on a disco CD from *way* back and do some funky steps around the house to “YMCA” and “Hot Stuff.” A piano begins the next song, so I grab my broom and sing my guts out to “I Will Survive.” When I get to the chorus, I jump up on the couch belt it out as loud as I can, and I don’t care if Janae thinks I’m crazy. I know she can hear me. We’re going to survive this, little girl, even if it means we have to sing into a broom today.

I plop down and rest when the song ends. I haven’t sung this way in years! I only listen to the second verse, and it makes me think of Giovanni in the worst way, and, yes, I’m crying.

Luckily the next song is “Knock on Wood” so I can get funky again. I’m almost through with “Giovanni’s bathroom” in the basement when a sultry voice moans and sings “Don’t Leave Me This Way.” Shit! I thought disco was supposed to be fun to dance to! This shit’s depressing as hell.

But I sing the hell out of the chorus anyway using the toilet brush. I’m so glad no one can see me. I don’t cry as much as

before, and Giovanni's bathroom is spotless for the first time, probably ever. Tears will do that. It's the miracle ingredient.

I save the kitchen for last and walk in to see G.J. "crying," throwing his hands and feet in the air, his face as red as a beet. I rush to him and pick him up, rubbing the shudders out of his back. How long had he been crying? How am I going to know? How can you tell if a deaf-mute baby is crying unless you're holding him? "Shh, shh, *bella*," I say. "Shh. Mama's got you."

I turn and see Janae slip-slide into the kitchen, go to the fridge, grab a soda, and race out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

"Janae!" I call.

She backs halfway down the stairs and stares at me through the rails.

"Janae, I need your help. We have to come up with a way to hear if your brother is crying."

She nods and runs up the stairs, returning a minute later with a pair of her old slippers that have little bells sewed into the heels. She sets them on the counter and takes a pair of scissors from the drawer, snipping the bells off. She hands them to me.

"Good idea, Janae. We'll need some thread."

She looks in another drawer and pulls out a small spool of white thread. That's when I realize that I don't know where anything is in this kitchen. I'm going to have to take inventory and soon.

She holds it out to me. "Here," she says.

She spoke! I try not to cry and force down the lump in my throat. "Why don't you do it for me?"

"Okay." *Two* words!

She cuts off a piece of thread and works it through the bell as it jingles. I hold out one of G.J.'s tiny wrists, and she ties it on. "Not too tightly."

She shakes G.J.'s arm. "We better use two, huh Mama?"

A sentence! I wipe away a tear before she can see it. "Yeah. Maybe even four. You have any more bells?"

"Mama," she giggles. "*All* my old slippers have bells on them. Remember?"

They were gifts from Giovanni. He liked to know where Janae was at all times. "I remember." I can't believe I let her save them.

*J. J. Murray*

They should have been thrown out years ago. “Let’s get two more for his ankles.”

“He’ll sound like an ice cream truck, Mama.”

I smile. *She’s back!* My little girl is back, and I didn’t have to stop for her.

She stopped for me.

## THIRTY-THREE

And the next day, she can't stop screaming at me.

I get up early while G.J. sleeps and sneak into her room, sit on the edge of her bed, and kiss her lightly on the cheek. She doesn't move. I take a piece of her hair and dangle it on her neck. She swats at it with a hand but stays asleep. I slide the hair down her cheek, and she slaps herself hard—and *still* doesn't wake up. Daa-em. That hurt me just watching. I run a fingernail lightly across her arm. Nothing. How did Giovanni do this? Oh yeah. He used his whiskers. I feel my legs—and they're right whiskery—and consider doing the unthinkable for a moment. It'd probably scar her more. I touch her leg and shake it gently. "Janae, get up."

"Morning, Daddy," she says, yawns, and opens her eyes. "Mama!" she yells.

"Yup!" I yell back.

"What are you doing in here?"

"I live here." I open her drapes and pull up her mini-blinds. Dust and cobwebs float down onto the windowsill. "What a mess. Dag, these mini-blinds haven't been opened in a while."

"Cuz Daddy never opened them," she *hisses*.

I turn and stare her down. Oh no, you didn't just hiss at me. I'm sorry I screwed up your morning ritual, but today we're establishing a new one, and it does not involve hissing. "He should have opened these more often," I hiss back, expecting her to laugh. She doesn't. This could be a long morning. "Your room is going to have lots of sunlight from now on."

"Well, I don't like it."

"Too bad." I look out at the uncut grass and Hershey chasing a butterfly. I'll have to introduce myself to the lawnmower later so we can harvest that minefield. I wonder where my boots are? I turn back. Janae hasn't moved. "I told you to get up, Janae."

"I'm not getting up."

I yank the covers off her bed and toss them on the floor. "Yes you are. We're washing all the linens and towels today." This is a big step for me. I'm washing Giovanni's scent from my sheets. "And I need you to take a bath first."

She falls back on her pillow. "I'm not getting up, Mama."

I pull the pillow out from under her head, tear the pillow out, and toss the pillow and pillow case onto the floor. "Get out of bed, Janae, and I won't say it again."

She crosses her arms. "Make me."

Ba-BOOM Ba-BOOM BOOM BOOM. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Mama, and I won't say it again."

"As you wish, my *queen*," I say. I scoop her roughly off the bed and into my arms. "Does the queen need to be carried to her bath?"

I shouldn't have said what I said or did what I did, because Janae yells "You're not Daddy!" and slaps me so hard on the cheek that the teeth on the *opposite* side of my face feel loose.

I am beyond stunned. I haven't been slapped in thirty years, and that was for talking back to Mama. I look into my daughter's eyes and see a strange, wild animal loading up for another SWAT. I set her gently on the bed, straighten, take a step, bend down, collect the sheets, straighten again, walk out of her room, and shut the door quietly behind me. Only then do I exhale.

My God, what is happening? Yesterday she was my little girl again, and now she's possessed? All I said was ... and all I did was ... and then I got popped.

I just got hit hard with malice aforethought by my ten-year-old daughter, and *I'm* the one in the hall? My child has just *assaulted* me, and I haven't done *shit* about it? Waaaaait just a damn minute, Missy Man! *Yesterday* I was the mama, and *today* I'm the mama! *Yesterday* you were the daughter, and *today* you're the daughter. I'm not so sure you're going to be the daughter after this, though. What am I doing out here?

I toss the sheets on the floor and kick my own daughter's door open. "Who in the *hell* do you think you are, little girl? I have *never* in all my life—" I stop because I begin to sound like my mama. "What'd you hit me for?"

Janae's crying, her head buried in her knees, her arms around her legs.

"Janae, I'm talking to you, girl!" I leap toward her bed. "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" I've got my left mama-finger shaking, and I'm ready to slap the yellow off her with my right.

She raises her chin enough to cry, "You killed Daddy."

"What?"

"You killed Daddy. He was waiting for *you*."

I drop both hands and close my eyes. Daa-em. I sit on the edge of her bed, my back to her. "I ... I didn't kill your daddy, Janae. Troy Pruitt killed your daddy. I was with you, remember?"

She raises her chin again. "Nuh-uh. *You* did!" She jumps off her bed and gets in my face. "If he was only getting the wine for Poppa, he wouldn't have even been there! He would have come back to the park, and he would have pushed me some more in my swing, and *Daddy* would have woke me up this morning, *not you!* You killed him!"

I tremble. I do not want to think about this. "It was an accident, Janae. A freak accident. Troy Pruitt got drunk and drove up on the sidewalk—"

"Shut up! Shut up!" she screams. "You killed my daddy, you *bitch!*"

Slapped. Cursed. Accused. And deep down inside I feel guilty. Giovanni *was* waiting for me. I'm guilty. I offer her my other cheek. "Go ahead and hit me then," I whisper, and she does, harder than the first time. Daa-em, this child could be a boxer. "Is that the best you can do?"

It wasn't. For the next minute or so I let my child slap the living shit out of my face. I let her punish me for being the cause of her daddy's death. I let her hit me like I hit Troy Pruitt until she and I are both weeping while she's whaling away. My face and lips are swollen, my nose is bleeding, my eyes are full of tears, and I can barely hear my voice saying "I'm sorry, baby" over and over again.

Then she stops windmilling me, her arms dropping to her sides, the saddest look on her face. She almost looks like my daughter again.

I fall to my knees in front of her. "Please forgive me, Janae."

She throws her arms around me, and the two of us hold each other for hours. We aren't doing the damn laundry today.

We've got a more important chore to do.

## THIRTY-FOUR

After nearly two weeks in the house with no visits from anyone (at my request and not just because of the lumps on my face), the three of us go out in public for the first time.

“Can we take Daddy’s car?” Janae asks.

“G.J.’s car seat is in mine.”

Janae looks at the ground.

I sigh. I’ve been sighing a lot lately around her. “Uh, I’ll just have to put it in Daddy’s car then, honey. Hold your brother.”

I attach G. J.’s car seat to the middle of the front seat. I know that G.J.’s safer in the back seat, but I have to be able to see him, and he seems to need to see me. And since this old boat is made of steel, we’ll be fine. I settle him into the seat, Janae buckles up, and we’re off, swimming down our street in a lime-green hoopydy.

And we’re nearly out of gas. That man, that man. He was running on empty in everything he did. But he always got us there. And here I am learning one of the hardest lessons of my life: it’s hard enough to find a good man, but losing a good man is even harder.

I pull into the pumps at the first convenience store I come to on Peter’s Creek Road. “Stay with your brother,” I tell Janae, and I start pumping. And pumping. I look up at the numbers flying by. Daa-em. This boat drinks like a fish. As soon as the numbers hit twenty-five dollars, I stop. I walk away from the car before remembering that I have a premature infant in the front seat. I had read about a lady who left her daughter in her car seat for ten seconds to drop a letter in a mailbox, and she got charged with child endangerment. And she was *white*! I open Janae’s door. “Hand your brother to me.”

She unbuckles G.J. and lifts him out. “Can I come in?”

I pick up G.J. “Just don’t ask for anything. We’re on a tight budget now.”

G.J. squints in the sunlight and turns his head in every direction as we move toward the store. “That’s right,” I whisper. “Drink it all in, boy. Hear everything with your eyes.”

Janae opens the door for us, and I go to the counter.

"Oh how precious," the cashier says. She has more wrinkles in her upper *lip* than a Shar-pei. "How old?"

Are you? Shit, white girl, you planted the redwood trees out in California. "Two months," I say. Jingle jingle.

"But he's so small." She squints at the bells. "And he's wearing bells?"

"He's a deaf-mute," I say. I slide my MasterCard across the counter. Why did I tell her that? "He came a little early." Jingle jingle jingle.

She swipes my card and hands it back. "I'll say. She, or is it he?"

The blue onesie he's wearing didn't give you a clue? "He. This is G.J." Jingle jingle.

"Well, he's a doll baby, an absolute doll baby."

Doll babies don't eat and shit like he does, lady. I sign the credit slip. Jingle jingle jingle. Janae holds up an overpriced sucker. "No," I say.

"Please?"

"Janae, I told you not to ask for anything. No."

"Daddy always got me one."

"Do you see your daddy here?" Shitshitshit.

Janae busts through the door to the car.

I look at the cashier. "How much for the sucker?" Jingle jingle.

"Fifty-nine cents." And then the heifer shakes her head and tisks *me*.

"What are *you* looking at?" I snap, then I leave without buying the sucker.

We go straight home, and I spend the next half an hour having a conversation with Janae's door. G.J. must think I'm crazy. Jingle jingle.

"It was a stupid thing to say, Janae. I'm sorry." I hear her crying, and my heart hurts so bad. "Please open the door." The knob has a hole for a nail to open the door, but I don't want to go that far. "Janae, honey, I'm sorry. Maybe we can go eat at Luchesi's for dinner."

The door opens, G.J. jingles, and Janae sticks her head out. "Can we go there for lunch?"

So “Luchesi’s” is the magic word. A magical word and a magical place.

“Hug me first.”

She buries her head in my stomach.

“I’m really sorry I said that.”

“I know.” She shrugs. “Nay-Nay says it to me all the time. It just didn’t bother me until today.”

“It bothered me, too. I promise I won’t say it again.” Jingle jingle. I smell G.J. and come up wincing. “This boy is stank.”

“Just like Daddy.”

I hug her again. “Just like Daddy.”

Luchesi’s is busy, and when we walk in, Ernestine gushes all over us while Janae runs into the back to hug Pops. “Oh my goodness!” Ernestine shouts. “Look who’s here!”

Pops waves from the back. “Are you here to work or to eat?”

I smile. “To eat.” I start walking to our table out of habit ... and see an old white man with a red nose drinking coffee there. What is *this* shit? “Ernestine,” I say. I point at the table.

She doesn’t get it at first. Then her eyes pop. “Oh, oh I’m sorry. I’ll just—” She waddles to the table and talks to the man a moment. G.J.’s bassinet is getting heavy. Instead of getting up, the man motions me over. “He says he knows you,” Ernestine says, and she slips away to another customer.

“Please, sit,” he says.

I remain standing. You’re sitting in Giovanni’s chair, Rudolph.

“Don’t you remember me?”

“No.” I put the bassinet on the table and notice the wax puddle missing. Damn, why did they have to get rid of it? That candle represented Giovanni’s last romantic act on this earth!

“Ed Thompson. Your mama used to live across the street from me.”

So? Finish your coffee and leave. “Oh.”

“Sorry about your husband. He was a good man.”

The *best*. Now get to steppin’. “Thank you.”

“I remember the day he carried you across all that snow.”

So do I, but I don’t want to be reminded of that just now.

“Hasn’t snowed again like that, has it?”

“No.” And it probably never will again. Now leave.

He finishes his coffee and wipes his lips with a napkin. Then he waves his mug in the air in Ernestine's direction. "Best coffee in Roanoke."

I turn and scorch Ernestine with my eyes as she approaches with a fresh pot. Don't pour it, wench! But she pours it! And I got this heifer hired here?

"Thank you, Ernestine," Mr. Thompson says.

I'm still standing, G.J. is jingling, the opera music's much too loud, and Janae's giggles from the back are driving me crazy. "Mr. Thompson, can you please find yourself another table?" I point at an empty table for four. "You're sitting in my husband's chair, and this has traditionally been our table."

He stands and takes his coffee. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay," I say.

"Wait," Pops voice booms. He has sneaked up on me *again*. I should put bells on him. "Sit down, Mr. Thompson."

"But she said—"

Pops puts a hand on Mr. Thompson's shoulder until he sits. Pops grabs the bassinet and walks down the hallway. "Follow me, Renee."

When I get to the back I am ready to explode ... then I see *our* table against the wall near the double sink. The wax puddle is still there, and Janae is chowing down on a slice of pizza in Giovanni's old chair.

"Hi Mama," she says.

Pops takes G.J. out of the bassinet and kisses him on both cheeks. "Make yourself at home, Renee," he says. "Your sandwich will be out in a moment. I will need Giovanni's help for a few minutes."

"Uh, sure." I sit in my old chair, my heart thumping. Whoa, girl. It's only a chair. Janae is chewing furiously, smacking her lips and making a mess. Normally I'd say something, but ... I'm in my chair again. I reach over and rub my fingers over the smooth wax.

"This is really good, Mama," Janae says, showing me most of her pizza.

"Don't chew with your mouth open."

"Daddy—" She stops. "Sorry."

I stare and stare at that table. If only it could talk. We probably made both our children on this table. I tug the metal tubing underneath. And it still doesn't wobble. They don't make tables like this anymore.

Pops brings me my sandwich, G.J. in a pouch above his stomach.

"Where'd you get that?" I ask.

"I found it in the store room. I hope you do not mind."

Mind? I may use the damn thing myself at home. "No. Does he like it?"

Pops shrugs. "I hear no complaints." He listens. "Just lots of bells. Enjoy your sandwich."

And I do. I tear into that sandwich without stopping until I've eaten half. I look up and see Janae staring at me. "What?"

"Dag, Mama."

I open my mouth and chew furiously. She giggles and shows me her pizza. "Oh, you're disgusting!" I say.

"So are you!"

I never knew chew 'n' show was so much fun!

After we eat, I kiss my fingers and pat the table. Janae sees me ... and does the same. "Good-bye, Daddy," she says. "See you soon."

I collect G.J. and drive to Collette's where she gives us all hugs, and the first thing I *don't* notice as we walk into her kitchen is her weight. It's gone. The bitch is skinny, and I hate her.

"Where's C. J.?" Janae asks.

"You mean *Junior*, right?" Collette says. "That's what we're calling him. He's asleep."

I smile at Collette. "How is little *Clyde*?" This is going to be one confused little boy with three names.

She ignores me. "He ain't little. The boy weighs fifteen pounds now." Jesus! G.J. hasn't even reached five pounds yet.

I hand G.J. to Janae. "Take him outside. He needs some sun." G.J. jingles like crazy as they go out the kitchen door.

"What's with the bells?"

"So I can hear him if he cries."

"Must be nice having a quiet baby."

I scowl.

"Sorry."

"No, it's all right. He's just like his daddy was." I smile. "So, where'd all your weight go?"

"Girl, I got me on a wonderful diet, and I want you to try it." She goes to the refrigerator and pulls out a huge pot. "I have lost seventeen pounds!"

She opens the pot, and I see what looks like cabbage soup. "What is this shit?"

"It ain't shit. It's fat-burning soup."

"It looks like shit."

Collette slams the pot shut. "Forget you then." She returns the pot to the fridge. "What you gonna do, heifer? You look like the before picture for Jenny Craig."

"I don't know. Something."

"Better do something quick if you want to get you another man."

I blink. "I don't want another man."

"The sooner the better, though, right?"

I hadn't thought about it a bit. As quiet as the house has been, it's like Giovanni is still there. I keep expecting him to come home from work. "I'm going to need more time."

"Don't you wait too long, now. You ain't getting any younger. Or prettier. Lots of fine black men out there just waiting for a heifer like you." She laughs. "You better go on my diet first, though, you know, get down under two hundred."

I sit back. "What makes you think I'd want a black man?"

"Just figured is all. You got two black kids, right?"

"Wrong."

She covers her mouth. "Oh yeah. They're *biracial*. Forgive me." She stares me down. "We live in Roanoke, Virginia, Renee. Your children are black, and you need a black man to help you raise them."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. "I didn't ask for your advice."

"I'm just stating the obvious, girl. When was the last date you and Giovanni had in public?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

She raises her eyebrows. "You can't remember, can you?" I can't. Maui wasn't exactly a date, and before that ... Janae was

always with us. "I remember when you used to go clubbin' like crazy, had men hangin' all over you." She taps my wedding ring. "Get rid of that thing." She taps Giovanni's ring on my right hand. "And that." She smiles. "Girl, you're single now. I'm almost jealous of you. They're gonna be linin' up."

For me? "You can't be serious."

"Sure I am. You got yourself a nice house in a nice neighborhood, you got yourself a good job, you got yourself a college degree, you got yourself a smart kid, you got—"

"A premature, half-white, deaf-mute infant." That was too cold even for me to say. I wince inside.

"He'll grow! Shit. Just keep him out in the sun."

I want to leave. "Whatever. If I decide to find me a man who's willing to put up with all that, I'll consider him, and it won't matter if he's black or not. Good men are good men no matter what their color is."

She scowls.

"And another thing. Who are you to say that I need a man anyway?"

She looks down at her hands. "Shit, get you a boyfriend at least."

"Who will help me raise my kids? Puh-lease. I don't need me a boyfriend. I need me a responsible *man* who'll be a father to my children."

She pats my hand with hers. "I just don't want you to be sad no more."

"I'll be all right." I swat her hand away.

"Well, if you need any help in that department, Clyde and I would like to help."

I roll my eyes. "I'll let you know. Now what are you going to do about daycare?"

"Nothin'."

"Nothin'?"

She smiles. "I ain't workin' no more, ho. I'm what you predicted I'd be: a stay-at-home housewife. Clyde got himself a nice promotion, and I won't have to go back to Star City." She laughs. "Haven't told 'em that yet, but I will, soon as them half-salary checks stop comin'."

This isn't fair! "You can't ... retire. Shit, you're only thirty-nine."

"Thirty-eight, and I can't wait to retire. Girl, I been workin' since I was sixteen. Twenty-two years is long enough. Yep, retired at thirty-eight. That's what a good black man can do for you."

Here we go again. I stand. "Listen, if you hear of a good daycare center that takes special needs kids or anyone who keeps kids at a reasonable price, let me know." I open the kitchen door and call for Janae.

"I could keep him."

BOOM. Why are tears coming to my eyes? Shit. Why is life so unexpected?

"Wouldn't be no trouble. Maybe Junior can rub off on Giovanni, put a little meat on his bones."

I turn slowly and look at my *best* friend. Shit, she's my only friend.

"Tending two kids that can't run around can't be all that bad. Hell, they'll be sleepin' most of the time anyway." She sighs. "You cryin'?"

I nod. "Collette, I ... That would be wonderful."

"I know," she says with a smile. "What you gonna pay me?"

All the numbers from earlier in the day come back to haunt me. "Whatever you think is fair." As long as it isn't a three-digit number.

She laughs and pounds the table rapidly with her fists. "You still got pull with Pops, right?"

"Yeah."

She puts her chin on her hands and widens her eyes. "I want to be just like you, Renee."

"Huh?"

"I want to go into Luchesi's and order whatever I want and *not* have to pay."

That's so ... petty. "That's all?"

"Girl, that's everything! I have always *hated* tipping that old man, and for some reason, he's *always* the one servin' me." She nods her head. "And now I'll be able to ask him, 'Yo, Pops,

what's fifteen percent of nothing?' Yeah. *That's* how I want to be paid."

She is tripping. "What about your diet?"

"I didn't say I was gonna *eat* what I ordered. Shit. That'll be Clyde's dinner."

I laugh and sit as Janae comes in with G.J. "You really want to do this?"

"Yeah. I feel like I owe you something, girl."

"Owe me?" I squeeze her hands. "You don't owe me a thing."

A tears slips out of her eye. Oh, why has she gone and done that? "If it wasn't for y'all getting married, I might not have all of this. You and Giovanni all taught Clyde a thing or two about love, and, well, this is how I want to thank you." She blinks a tear that falls to the table. "And you can't say no."

"I won't." Now we're both crying rivers. I look over at Janae. "Aunt Collette's going to mind G.J. when I go back to work."

Janae looks slowly from Collette to me and back to Collette. "Dag, Aunt Collette. It won't be that bad. G.J.'s easy to take care of."

I don't explain why we're crying because I don't think she'll understand. Only when Janae finds a best friend will she know what tears of joy truly are.

## THIRTY-FIVE

We survive July with frequent visits to Collette and Clyde Junior. We do back-to-school shopping before they raise the prices for the so-called back-to-school sales, go to the Mill Mountain Zoo, spend the day at Explore Park, and even go back to the railroad museum so Janae can show the trains to G.J. I still cry myself to sleep and hold Giovanni's T-shirt close to me, but I wake up happier each day.

I can survive this.

Then I get a phone call from a *Roanoke Times* reporter who asks me, "How do you feel about Troy Pruitt only getting eight years for killing your husband?"

Eight years! I can't breathe. "When was the sentencing?" I look at the calendar in the kitchen.

"This morning."

Eight years! "My calendar has the sentencing for next week! Why didn't they call me?"

"I barely made it myself. It got pushed up."

I sit at the kitchen table. Eight motherfucking years! "Why ... why'd he only get eight?"

"The judge said that Mr. Pruitt needs a liver transplant."

Which *my* taxes will help pay for! Bullshit bullshit bullshit! "Did Pruitt say anything?"

"Just 'I'm sorry.' So, Mrs. Luchesi, how do you feel—"

I hang up. This isn't happening. This *can't* be happening. Troy Pruitt pleads guilty to vehicular manslaughter and only gets eight years for killing my soul mate. Where is the justice in that? Fuck him, and fuck Norris McMillan, the cracker commonwealth's attorney who accepted Pruitt's lame plea! Pruitt should have gotten life, and McMillan should be castrated!

A man gets drunk, drives without a fucking license fifty-five miles an hour through a residential area, runs down my husband on a fucking sidewalk, and all he can say is "I'm sorry"? Damn right the motherfucker's sorry! He's about the sorriest man I've ever known! "I'm sorry," I say, and I hurl the phone across the room, shattering it against the pantry door.

Damn, that felt good.

I leap out of my chair and grab the can opener. It dents the pantry door with a thud. Never worked right anyway, dripping like a motherfucker, never finishing the damn circle so I had to pry up the lid, sometimes even slicing my thumb. The toaster! No. That's a four-slice, wide-slot model. Does a nice job on my bagels. I have to have my bagel in the morning. The plant? Not the plant. Not the ten-year-old Bonsai hanging-around plant. No. That plant will outlive us all. The knives in the wooden block! Yes! Zip-BOING! Nice shot, girl. Split McMillan's head in two. I pick up another knife and aim for McMillan's little head, the one between his legs that only has one eye and no brain cells.

"Mama!"

I turn casually to Janae. "Hi honey." Zip-BOING! Ooh, too high. I got him in one of his titties though. "Just cleaning up the kitchen. Want to help?"

Her lower lip trembles. "Should I call Nay-Nay?"

I point at the phone. "Phone's broke." Zip—THUNK. That one needs to be sharpened.

"Mama, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." I pick up a cleaver. Now here is an instrument of castration. Nice sharp point. The Ginsu has nothing on this bad boy.

"Mama, let's go somewhere."

I look around me. "But the kitchen's a mess, honey. I have some more"—zip-BONK—"cleaning to do." That door needs replacing something fierce! What's it made out of—cardboard? And I'm out of knives already? I open a drawer. Steak knives! I weigh one in my hand. Nice balance. Nice sharp, pointy teeth.

I see a hand grab mine. "Mama, let's go for a walk."

I launch the knife at the plaster ceiling, and it sticks. No BOING. Steak knives are boring. "Sure, honey, let's go for a walk."

Janae straps G.J. into his stroller, propping up him up with a pillow so he'll fit. "Should I bring his diaper bag?"

"Nah," I say. "We won't be gone long. It's too hot out to go for a long walk."

It is at least ninety degrees when we race-walk out of our neighborhood. I flip off our neighbor's cat for worrying Hershey to death. I even hiss. We walk through First Team Auto Mall's parking lot. I flip them off for having too many cars to walk around. A salesman does a quick three-sixty when I do that. I have power in my middle finger!

I slow down a bit in front of Stritesky's, the florist that did my wedding, but continue on, crossing four lanes of traffic at Putt Putt. I flip off *everybody* playing there.

"Mama, let's play putt-putt," Janae says.

"After I just flipped them all off, girl? That wouldn't be Christian. And I'm not in the mood to play putt-putt today. That would ruin our walk."

We roll through a parking lot at a strip mall where I flip off an *empty* police car—I'm not *that* crazy—and go up Williamson Road. Janae's barely keeping up, G.J. is asleep, and my head is on fire, but we're not stopping. We pass a retirement home, a stank-ass green pond in front. Folks are feeding the ducks through the chain-link fence.

"Can we stop and feed the ducks, Mama?" Janae asks.

I stare Janae away from the fence—and flip off an old lady feeding the ducks.

We pass Shenandoah Baptist—I don't flip it off though I think long and hard about it—and cross the road at the light, resting in front of Brookside, a pitch and putt golf course. I didn't know there was any pitching in golf. Daa-em, it must be hard to hit that little ball with those skinny clubs.

"Mama, can we go home now?"

We're at least two miles from our house, I am drenched in sweat, Janae is dripping, and G.J. is still asleep. "Not yet. Want to hit some golf balls?"

Janae looks at me like I'm the Creature from the Stank Lagoon. "No."

"Come on. It will be fun. I want to hit me some little white balls." And every one of them is going to belong to Norris McMillan. My husband was worth more than eight fucking years!

"You said golf is a stupid game."

It is. What am I thinking? McMillan didn't *have* any balls. If he did, Pruitt would have gotten life. And golf? I look out at the course crawling with white people. It would be like playing pinball, but I do not play golf. "You're right." I flip them all off with both hands and do a little moonwalk.

We climb the hill, and I see Hilltop Lanes. "We're going bowling, Janae."

Janae looks relieved. "Okay."

I knock down almost two hundred little white McMillan dicks in my first game with my big black ball. The folks around me think I'm crazy. I am. I flip off everybody watching with my special "fuck y'all" grip. I *got* to get me a lane in my basement, and I *got* to get me a pool table. Yeah, I can knock the shit out of that white ball until I sink Troy Pruitt.

"Mama, G.J.'s awake."

I'm two miles from home with no formula for the boy, and he is starving. I hand Janae a dollar. "Get him some milk," I say, and I continue bowling. Strike! Ten dicks with one black ball! Janae comes back with a carton of milk as I'm about to pick up a spare. "You feed him." I pick up the spare. I am on a roll. Take that you assholes!

"Mama, he keeps spitting it out!"

I wheel around. "Because it's white milk, girl. You should have gotten him some chocolate milk."

"Huh?"

I have almost lost it. What the hell am I doing? I kneel in front of the stroller. G.J. looks miserable, his eyes wild with hunger, his diaper threatening to burst. I look at my thumb. Daa-em. It's already blistered. I look at my middle fingers. They're fine, but they're tired. I look at Janae. "We have to get home." I pick up G.J. and hold him close. "Sorry, little man," I whisper. "I'm sorry."

"Are we walking back, Mama?"

I hand her thirty-five cents. "Call us a taxi," I say.

She smiles. "I never rode in a taxi."

I sigh. "I have never *ridden* in a taxi." I'm recovering. I'm almost myself again. "Say it."

She rolls her eyes. "I have never ridden in a taxi."

"That's better." She runs to a payphone, and I start to feel better. Maybe Troy Pruitt won't get a liver in time and he'll die in prison. Shit, I bet he's going nuts in there without any alcohol. Hope his DT's match all of my worst nightmares.

"They're on the way."

"To take me away to the funny farm where life is glorious all day long," I whisper.

Janae leans in. "What'd you say?"

"Nothing, baby. Nothing."

The Liberty Cab arrives, and we get in. I tell the driver our address, and he narrows his eyes. "You know where that is, right?"

"Yeah. It's just around the corner."

He doesn't have the AC on, he's stank, and it's stifling hot. "Well, let's go."

He shrugs and drives us home. I have to hold my breath the entire time.

"Four-fifty," he says when we arrive at the house.

I hand him a five and wait for my change. Motherfucker doesn't get a tip if he doesn't use deodorant or the AC. He drops two quarters into my hand one at a time, using that fake squint smile white people are famous for. I pocket the change.

And flip him off.

The phone rings off the hook for the rest of the day, but I don't answer it, and I don't let Janae answer it. I check the Caller-ID box, though. Collette, Mama, Luchesi's, that asshole reporter again. I put Janae and G.J. to bed and grab an unopened bottle of amaretto. "Just me and you," I say to the bottle.

I walk out into the dark sun room, which should really be called a "greenhouse for humans" it's so hot, fall into a comfy lounge chair, and stare at the overgrown grass in the back yard. I toast the grass, at least I think it's grass. As high as it is, it might be wheat. I toast the wooden privacy fence Giovanni built over the course of several weeks. He had trouble digging the post holes because of all the rocks. "I think the Ice Age stopped right here in our back yard," he told me. I didn't give a shit. I was tired of having eighteen posts sticking into the air like skinny brown fingers with no fence in between. He did nice work, though. For a baker's son. He complained his ass off about the blisters on his

hands, his sore shoulders, his nasty sunburn. The skin on his back peeled completely off in one long sheet the very next day, like a snake shedding his skin or like Elmer's glue once it dries. Nasty. I toast the fence again, mainly because I'm glad it's there. I need my privacy tonight.

Hershey barks, so I toast him. I toast Hershey's piles of shit. I flip off a few of the ugliest fat robins perched on top of the fence. Those damn birds streak Giovanni's fence with their shit, and they're probably relatives of the baby robins Giovanni saved from certain death one spring. Janae saw them rolling about in the yard with Hershey dancing between them. Hershey wouldn't have killed them, but he might have slobbered them to death, so Giovanni built these two seriously ugly robins a nest in one corner of the yard on top of an empty bird bath. We watched for several days as the mama and daddy robin fed them seemingly continuously. The pigs. I flip them off again.

I toast the mountains in the distance. I bet it's cooler up there today. Lower humidity, too. I bet the bears aren't sticking to their caves like I'm sticking to this chair. I bet there's even a nice breeze whistling through there. Is that Read Mountain or Twelve O' Clock Knob? I've lived here all my life, and I don't even know the names of the mountains surrounding me. I toast the stars popping up over them and remember a line from one of Giovanni's poems, something about "the stars shivering on the horizon." He was always good for at least one good line every now and then. Funny I can remember that one. "And why do stars shiver?" I had asked him. "Because there's so much space between them." I thought he was being funny at the time, but now I know they *are* shivering, and they are the same color as Janae's lips when she's been in a swimming pool too long. Space has got to be cold. I hope heaven's warmer.

I toast the rainbow of flowers Giovanni and Janae planted for G.J. Over the years I've tolerated those rainbows, but I need me some organization in the garden from now on. I'm going to plant me some hostas. I've heard just one hosta can eventually line a sidewalk if you let it. And day lilies, petunias, marigolds, and any damn thing that *isn't* wild. I might even put down some bulbs this fall. I wish Giovanni was here to dig the holes ... but then I'd have

to listen to his ass complain about the rocks again. I bite my lip. It would be nice to hear him complain again.

I toast the space in the ceiling where Giovanni had promised to put up a ceiling fan, but I knew even as he promised, he would never do it. The man had no skills when it came to wires and electricity. I had to pay someone to put up a simple exhaust fan in the bathroom even though the directions were simple enough: cut out hole, insert fan, connect white to white, black to black, green to ground. Knowing colorblind Giovanni, he'd have hooked black to white and cooked us all.

Yeah, black to white. Heat. As hot as it is, I miss his heat. He was a good cook in the kitchen, a master chef in the bedroom. Damn. Here they come ...

I toast the tears sliding down my face, I toast Giovanni's wedding band, I toast my useless ring, I toast my anniversary band ... and I try to forget the heat.

I hear a tapping and see a dark black man standing at the outside door of the sunroom. I squint. Pooh? No, wrong name. Khalid. Pooh's easier to say. Pooh it is. "Hey Pooh." I try to get up, but I'm sweaty and stuck to the chair.

He opens the door and steps in. I left it unlocked? Geez, I'm slipping. "Just came by to see how you're doin'."

"Pull up a chair, Pooh," I say with difficulty. I should have eaten something today because I am shit-faced now.

He sits across from me, and I can barely see him it's so dark. "We've been calling."

"I know."

"They sent me."

"So you're not here of your own free will."

"No. I wanted to come. We all feel bad about the sentence, Renee."

"Even you? Isn't Troy Pruitt one of *us*? I thought you'd be the *first* in line to give him your liver." Daa-em, that was cold. I look at the amaretto bottle. It's as empty as my head.

"Your husband was a good man."

Oh yeah. Pooh shed some tears at the funeral, too. I shouldn't be so mean to him. "He was only worth eight years though, Pooh."

"White man's justice," he says.

"For an Italian," I say, and I start laughing. It wasn't *that* funny, Renee.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Yeah. Get me another bottle of amaretto. Oh. That's right. You're Muslim. You don't drink. Help me out of this chair, then. I'm stuck." He puts out his hand, and after missing it the first time, I latch on. "You'll have to do most of the work, Pooh."

He pulls me up, and as soon as my feet hit the floor, the floor disappears. Pooh catches me. "I got ya," he says like the old Pooh. "I got ya, girl." He puts my arms around his head and scoops me up. The floor's gone for real now. "Where to?"

"Couch," I say. "Inside." He carries me into the kitchen. "I mean, I *know* you, Pooh, but I really don't *know* you. Know what I'm saying, bro?" I am making a fool of myself, but he doesn't say anything. Muslims sure are quiet when they aren't trying to convert you.

He places me on the couch in the living room. "You want a blanket?"

I shake my head, but when I stop shaking it, my eyes continue to shake. I close them, and the darkness shakes.

"You want me to stick around?"

I nod and point toward the hall bathroom. He goes out and returns with the waste basket. "Thank you."

"You got a nice place."

I don't feel like talking, boy. Just shut up and get ready to catch.

He doesn't have to wait long.

## THIRTY-SIX

I have a Muslim asleep in a chair in my living room, the sour smell of amaretto vomit wafting through the house, and a sledgehammer in my brain.

It's so good to be alive.

"Mama, why's Khalid here?" Janae asks while I try to brush the stench out of my mouth.

"He's leaving," I say, and I spit with a refined "pa-tui."

"But why's he here?"

I wipe my mouth with a towel. "He just is, okay. Brush your teeth."

She picks up her toothbrush. "Did he stay *all* night?"

Oh, this is worse than having Mama interrogate me. "Yes. He stayed all night." She jumps back. "He took care of me, okay? I wasn't feeling well."

"Is that what the smell is?"

"Yes. I threw up."

"Oh." She puts some toothpaste on her toothbrush. "For a minute there, I thought you and Khalid had sex or something."

Muslim, sour smell, sledgehammer ... and a ten-year-old daughter who's interested in her mama's sex life.

It is *great* to be alive.

I hear the rattle of pans and race down the stairs without thinking ... and see Khalid. I sigh. Get a grip, girl. Your man's in heaven making bread sticks for God.

But I'm still mad another man is in my kitchen. "What do you think you're doing, Khalid?"

"Looking for a skillet," Khalid says. "You need some breakfast."

I need you to leave. My daughter thinks we're having sex. "I'm having oatmeal this morning." For the next seven days. Amaretto is the bomb until it explodes, smooth going down but harsh coming back up.

"I can make it for you."

"I'm fine."

"I don't mind."

I do. "Really. I'm fine."

He nods. "Okay. Uh, I changed Giovanni Junior, gave him his formula, and he went back to sleep."

I didn't hear G.J. I didn't hear my own son! Jesus, I can't get drunk ever again. "When was this?"

"Four, four-thirty. I heard the bells. That was a good idea."

"And he went right back to sleep?"

"I had to rock him a while." He smiles. "He's amazing, Renee. Really really amazing." He checks his watch. "I should be going," he says, but then he just stands there.

Well, move then. I sigh. Shit, where are my manners? "Thanks for everything."

"You're welcome." He walks by me to the front door. "Oh, I left Janae a book to read."

"What book?"

He points to a book lying on the coffee table. "*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*."

Figures. I read it once a *long* time ago. "It might be too advanced for her."

He rolls his eyes. "If I can understand it, anyone can."

True. I pick up the book and flip through it, noticing that Khalid has highlighted and starred many passages, most of them near the beginning of the book. "Do you want her to read it all or just the underlined parts?"

He sits on the couch. "I've only highlighted what has had a profound effect on me."

I sit in a chair opposite him. "Let's see what profound things you've marked." I scan the first marked section. "Oh, this will help Janae. Malcolm's mother had a white daddy, and she was ashamed about it, and Malcolm hated his grandfather for raping his grandmother. Very comforting for Janae, don't you think?" He doesn't speak, and I continue flipping. "Oh, being light-skinned is a status symbol, and most black families treat their lighter children better than their darker children."

"It's true," Khalid says.

"In *your* mind." I giggle through the marked section on dancing but get right mad at the section on hair. Janae and I have nice hair, and Khalid knows that, but he has underlined and starred Malcolm's quote about hair which basically says if you pay too

much attention to your hair, your brain will suffer. I frown at him. "Are you saying that Janae and I should be nappy?"

"No."

"I do that child's hair every morning, and it takes a minute at most."

"But don't you agree that our people waste too much time and effort on their hair?"

"No." I look at his hair. "I bet you don't do a thing to that rug of yours."

He has no reply.

I continue reading and find that most of the underlined sections concern Malcolm's feelings on white people. "What are you trying to teach my child about white people?"

"I just underlined a few things, that's all."

"Which she'll pay attention to more than what *isn't* underlined." I paraphrase a famous line: "White men are devils who make chaos?" I stare him down. "That child thinks her daddy was and is an angel."

"There are exceptions, Renee."

"Uh-huh." I read through the code Muslims are supposed to live by. "Jesus, Khalid, this is a long lists of don'ts. Don't eat pork, don't drink alcohol, don't dance, don't gamble, don't date, don't go to movies, don't play sports, don't go on vacation, don't sleep in. Dag."

"It is a disciplined life."

I slap the page with my hand. "This whole section should be titled 'Don't Live.'" I flip some more pages and see fewer and fewer stars and underlines. The last forty pages have no marks on them at all. "You finished this, right?"

"Yes."

"Why isn't anything marked at the end?"

He looks away. "There were some things in those pages I disagreed with."

I scan the page in front of me and read to myself. "Even Malcolm says white folks can be brothers and sisters. Didn't Giovanni fall into that category?"

"Yes."

"And Pops?"

“Yes.”

I march into the kitchen and get a pen, underlining and starring that part. “What are you trying to accomplish here, Khalid?”

“Janae seems ... confused about who she is. I’m trying to help.”

Oh really? “Let’s find out.” I walk to the bottom of the stairs. “Janae! Come here!”

She bounces down the stairs, and she’s still in her pajamas.

“Khalid wants to talk to you.” Let’s see you get out of this, Khalid. “He thinks you’re confused about who you are.”

Janae giggles. “I’m not. I’m Janae Vanni Luchesi.”

Khalid makes prayer hands in front of him, tapping his fingers. “And who is that?”

“Janae Vanni Luchesi.” She looks at me. “Mama, he buggin’.” I don’t correct her, because he *is* buggin’.

Khalid sighs. “Are you black or white?”

“Yes.” Good answer, girl.

“You cannot be both.”

Janae rolls her neck. “I ain’t playin’ that black-white shit.” She looks at me. “Sorry, Mama.”

“It’s okay. Go on.”

“Y’all adults do that enough, and it hasn’t changed a damn thing,” she says with a powerful voice. “I will be known by my name, not by how I’m blended.”

I have to sit down. My girl is *preachin’!* Preach on, little girl, preach on!

Khalid sits up straighter. “Did your mama teach you to talk that way?”

“Yup.” That’s *my* little girl. Except for the “Yup.” That’s *all* Giovanni.

Khalid sighs and laughs. “Janae, Janae.”

“Khalid, Khalid,” she says, mimicking him.

“One day you will learn.”

“Learn what?”

“That white society doesn’t care about you or your name, that whether you live or die doesn’t matter unless it makes the news.”

“Well, my white family loves me,” Janae says. “I don’t care about white society right now.”

He taps those fingers together again. "You will."

"Okay then, why do you work for my daddy and Poppa?"

"I need a job."

"But they're white men. Don't you hate them?"

"No. They've always been fair to me. That's not to say that I won't be disappointed in the future."

Nice attitude, Mr. Man. I have to interrupt. "Didn't Malcolm X change his mind toward white people?" I shake the book in the air.

Khalid stands. "I must go now. Janae, we will talk more."

I step in front of him. "You're not getting out of this that easily. Answer my question."

"Yes, Malcolm X did. But I am not Malcolm X. I am Khalid el-Hassan. Excuse me."

I hand him the book, and I let him walk by.

I watch him walk down the sidewalk to his car, a little Chevy something, and notice something bizarre: Hershey doesn't bark at him. The dog who barks at fireflies, gnats, and dandelions doesn't bark at a strange man. Hershey and me are going to have a little talk about that.

"What was all that about, Mama?" Janae asks.

I shake my throbbing head. "A whole bunch of nothing, girl. Just go on about your business, and get some clothes on."

"Okay." She races upstairs, and every time her foot hits a step, I wince.

My head, my head, where's the aspirin? I tread lightly up the stairs to the bathroom and open the medicine cabinet. After pulling the cotton out of the only bottle of Tylenol, I find one little caplet. I pop it in and swallow. "Oh, I'm going to be the *worst* possible bitch today."

I take a twenty-ounce *mug* of espresso to the computer in the basement, get on the Internet, and run a search using the word "deaf." Whoa. Look at all the sites. I refine my search using "deaf-mute." Still a lot of sites. There's a lot of help out there for me.

Then, I start surfing sites, taking notes, and learning about the little boy upstairs. There are so many acronyms! ASL, MCE, PSE, IEP, TTY, TDD ... I have so much to learn! I learn the closest camps for the deaf are in Maryland, that deaf mentors (deaf

adults) are especially helpful to deaf children, that the nearest clinic for deaf infants is in St. Louis, that I can get a free (Yes!) correspondence course from the John Tracy Clinic in Los Angeles, that author Connie Briscoe (who impressed the hell out of me with *Sisters and Lovers*) is deaf, and that a cochlear implant (like the one Dr. Benton's son Reese got on *ER*) will help G.J. hear medium to loud sounds and speech. Yes! Thank you, Jesus!

Let's see, he can't get an implant until he's eighteen months old, one ear only, the receiver will be implanted, he must wear a headpiece behind his ear and a speech processor (looks like a Walkman) on his belt (how do you keep it on an active toddler?), and it only costs ... thirty to fifty grand.

Or in Star City health insurance terms, six to ten grand of my own money. Damn. Now I'm a depressed bitch.

I log off and push away from the computer, spinning in my swivel chair. My child is going to get that implant. Somehow, some way. He can have it done up at UVA next fall. Giovanni would want this for his son. And the money can come from Giovanni. Fifteen months times Giovanni's measly check ... Not even close. Helpful, but ... what about G.J.'s bills and the house note? Damn!

"Whatcha doin'?"

Janae stands in the doorway to my office wearing ratty jean shorts and a wrinkled tank top. I have to start ironing clothes and dressing that child again. "Thinking."

"About what?"

"Helping G.J. hear." I explain the implant to her. "It costs a lot of money though."

"So sell your car," she says.

Say what? I look good in that car. I earned that car. A manager must drive a car like that. "I ain't selling my car."

"I am *not* selling my car," she corrects.

I growl at the monster I've created. "We'll find a way. How much do you think we'll get for Daddy's car?"

She walks to me and puts her arms around my neck. "Please don't sell it."

"It sucks gas, honey, and gas prices are going up. We have to watch every penny."

She bumps her forehead against my chest. Ow! "Isn't Daddy's car paid for?"

"Yes, but—"

Bump. Ow! "And isn't the insurance lower on Daddy's car?"

I hold her at arm's length. "How do you know about car insurance, girl?"

She rolls her neck like a champ. "I know a few things, Mama. And it isn't like we go anywhere. And you seem to like G.J. sitting next to you. He'd have to sit in the back of your car."

This child is quick! And my chest bone hurts. "Well, it's not like I can sell my car for what it's worth. I still owe money on it, honey."

She runs to the computer and turns it on. "I, um, think I might have already sold it."

"*What?*" I roll the chair up behind her as she logs onto the Internet. "You might have already done what?"

"Um, sold your car, Mama. It was so easy. I went to this site that sells cars and listed yours. For free! The only trouble I had was with the price."

I can't believe she did this. "Hold on. You put *my* car up for sale on the Internet?"

"Uh-huh."

"Who gave you permission to do that?"

Her shoulders sag. "No one." She clicks on "mail," and the screen fills up with letter after letter, many from the same folks over and over again. Holy shit! "But lots of people want your car, Mama."

I slide in front of her and scroll down. "How much did you sell my car for, girl?"

"Um, four thousand."

That explains this incredible list. "It's worth at least three times that, Janae, maybe more."

"I didn't know."

"You should have asked me." I double-click the most recent email and read: "Has your car been in a wreck? Is the damage repairable?" I delete all the letters. Y'all are *not* getting my car.

She starts to walk away. "I'm sorry, Mama. I just saw you at the table with all those bills. I wanted to help."

“By selling *my* car?”

She turns and wrinkles up her face. “Daddy’s car would have only gotten a thousand at the most. I looked it up.”

I spin in the swivel chair again. This is crazy! Selling my beautiful Passat GLX with leather interior ... to drive a hoopdy? Managers don’t drive hoopdies! Managers don’t step out of lime-green pieces of shit in a dress and heels. No way!

Hold up, girl. Hold up. You are going to sell your sports car, your personal status symbol, your “hey-look-at-me-I’m-somebody” car ... so your son can hear. Forget how you’ll look. Think how G.J. will hear!

“It needs a paint job,” I say.

Janae smiles. God, I need her to smile now.

I tick off a list with my fingers. “It’ll need shocks, tires, a tune-up, an oil change, new seat covers, a new ceiling liner, a new battery.”

Janae giggles. I’ve missed your giggle, little girl.

“Hmm. I guess I could get me some fat rims, a real stereo system, a CD-changer, and double twelve-inch subs. The trunk’s big enough.” To house a family of four and a dog.

She throws her arms around me. God, I’ve missed this child’s loving touch.

“Don’t be hugging on me yet, girl. I haven’t talked myself into this yet.”

“Keep on talking then.” She kisses me on the cheek. “You always talked Daddy to death until he said yes.”

Yeah, I did. That man rarely said no to me.

I sell my Passat a few days later for fifteen grand to Brambleton Imports (which they turn around and sell for six thousand more the following week), and a week of Maaco and mechanics later, I have the PHAT-est jet black ‘72 Cadillac Eldorado in Roanoke, Virginia, with a brand new interior and dashboard, Deep Dish Hammers, and a sound system you can hear from space. No one really gave my Passat a second look, but they fall all over themselves looking at me now.

I look *good* in my new car.

But whenever I drive it, I look at my son next to me feeling the vibrations of the thumping bass and say, “One day, boy, you’re going to hear all that.”

Thanks to your sister.

And, once again, in the strangest of ways, to your daddy.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

We do a practice run with Collette before Janae's first day of sixth grade at Addison Middle School and my first day back to work in late August.

I hate every minute of it.

I drop G.J. off at 8:15 with enough diapers and formula to last Collette for a month and drive away to the bakery in what Collette calls my "Pimp-mobile." Janae and I fake the "give-me-a-kiss-have-a-good-day" thing out in front of the bakery and head to Star City though Janae would rather stay and help Pops make cookies.

"We'll go back, girl," I say as we get on 581. "I just want to make sure I can do this without being late."

I'm in the Star City parking lot at 8:45. I can do this. I look at Janae. "To the bakery?"

"Yeah!"

We're halfway there when I start thinking of G.J. He's had colic, hasn't been eating or sleeping well at all, was just lying there moaning with his hands this morning, had to be walked around all night ... "I need to see your brother."

"We just saw him!"

I turn off 581 onto Orange Avenue. "It's a mama-thing, Janae. You wouldn't understand."

Collette and the boys are outside on the front porch. "Why do you have them outside?" I yell.

"Cuz I knew you'd be back, Renee. I didn't want to let the mosquitoes in."

G.J.'s jingling like a Christmas song. I pick him up. He's smiling, showing me his gums. "Why's he so happy?"

"Daa-em," she says. "I never been *accused* of makin' a baby *happy* before. Thanks a lot."

I jingle him up and down. "Is the colic gone?"

"Yes."

"How'd you do it?"

"First I tried the washer. He only peed. Then I tried the dryer. Put his little tail up there and let him ride. Got me a crusty little

chocolate chip. His poops are so cute, girl. Then”—she holds up her pinkie finger—“I got me some Vaseline and ...”

“Gross!” I say.

“Cool!” Janae says. “Can I go make cookies now?”

Collette licks her lips. “Bring me back some chocolate chips, girl.” She winks at me. “Just put it on my tab.”

I may not ever eat chocolate chips again.

The next day, we go through it for real, and I am more worrisome than the day before. “He takes a nap at ten every morning.”

“You already wrote it down for me, girl.” Collette waves a legal pad in front of me.

“And make sure you use lots of A and D ointment. He gets rashes so easily.”

She points to the pad. “I can read, Renee. You’re gonna be late.”

“And keep that outfit on him at all times, unless you go outside. Then you’ll have to—”

“I know, I know,” Collette interrupts. “Put on his ‘outside’ outfit. Shit, girl, we’ll be fine.”

“You have my pager number, right?”

“Yes, Renee.”

“And the main number at Star City, just in case?”

“Yes, Renee. Go. You’re gonna be late!”

“And his pediatrician’s number.”

She turns me around and opens the door. “Get the hell outta here!”

I look at my little man in her big arms. “See you later, G.J.”

He jingles.

I drop off Janae at the bakery without a hitch, and Pops comes to the window with a fresh slab of warm bread wrapped in a paper towel and a Styrofoam cup. “Feta oregano and a little mocha cappuccino,” he says.

“Thank you.” He looks so old today. I mean, he *is* old, but ... today he looks ancient. “How are you doing, Pops?”

“I am doing okay.” He taps my car door. “Tomorrow, bagels and cream cheese.” He kisses my cheek and hands me another bag. “An Italian with extra banana peppers. For your lunch.”

I kiss him back. "Thank you."

"You are welcome. We make this part of your daily ritual, yes?"

I nod, and he smiles. He looks so young when he smiles. "You're going to fatten me up, Pops."

"Winter is coming," he says. "Now go and kick some ass."

I smile. "I'll try."

Because of my absence, Star City has moved me laterally to a different managerial position in cable installation. I don't mind since all I have to do is keep track of the techs, and while I've heard they can be a surly bunch of guys (there are still no women), at least they aren't customers.

I don't sit in my new office for a second before calling Collette.

"He's fine," she says before I can speak.

"How much did he eat?"

"Four ounces, girl. Went right off to sleep afterwards."

"He burp okay?"

"Like a champ."

"Any gas? His poo-poo look normal?"

"Yes and yes. And he's pootin' like a champ, too. Now go back to work."

"How's he breathing?"

I don't hear anything for a moment, then I hear the sweetest little snore. "You satisfied? I mean, if you want me to wake him, I'll let you talk to him."

"He can't talk, Collette."

"Shit, girl. He's Italian. His hands never stay still."

I laugh. "I'll call in to check on him at lunch."

Collette scowls. "How 'bout this. I'll call *you* if anything goes wrong, okay? Damn phone wakes up Junior, girl."

"Okay. Kiss G.J. for me."

"I will."

"Now, heifer."

"Geez, you working mamas are mean as shit." I hear a loud smacking sound. "I've just kissed his entire little head. Now leave us alone!" *Click.*

I squeeze my pager all damn day ... for no reason. I don't get buzzed, but I do get inundated with calls from techs who either ask for directions or ask for their next job.

"Yeah, this is Wally York. Just finished on Carolina."

I look at the master list. "Okay, Wally," I say with a shake of the head—a grown man named "Wally"?—"head to thirty-six seventeen Troutland. Fuzzy reception."

"Isn't that in Wilmont?"

"Yes."

"That's Tony's and Roger's territory."

"Huh?"

"No one explained that to you?"

"Obviously not."

"We each have our own territories. Tony and Roger handle Northwest"—because they're black—"and the rest of us cover everything else. Got anything in Southwest for me?"

No wonder so many customers complain in Northwest, and no wonder the Northwest master list is so damn long. "You will go to thirty-six seventeen Troutland."

"That ain't the way it's done, lady."

Lady? "My name is Mrs. Renee Luchesi, and if you wish to continue working for Star City Cable, you will go to thirty-six seventeen—" *Click*. Oh no, he most certainly did not just hang up on me! I ring his mobile phone and get a busy signal. This is bullshit!

More bullshit walks in the door a minute later. "Hey, Renee. Glad you're back." It's Ted Conway, and I'm "Renee" now. Coming to play nice now, Teddy? He closes the door. "I know you're new to all this, but let me explain a few things to you."

"Did Wally just call you?"

"Uh, yes, as a matter of fact, he did. You see—"

I hold up my hand. "Don't try any bullshit on me." I flip through a few pages of the "Technical Operations" manual. "I've been reading this thing, and this little tradition of yours isn't in here."

"Well, uh, no, but the techs prefer it this way, you see, because—"

"It's racist, Ted. We got fifteen techs out in white neighborhoods exclusively and only two black men working the black neighborhoods. No wonder folks are going to satellite dishes."

He sighs. "I can see that you won't listen to reason."

"Who's not listening, Ted? One-fourth of this city can't get decent service done on their cable. Can Star City afford to lose one-fourth of its customers?"

He shrugs. "Actually, we can." I blink. So it's forget the black people? "Since we're now almost completely digital, we're financially secure."

"With twenty-five percent fewer customers?"

He nods. "The fact is, Renee, some of our techs are afraid to go into some of those neighborhoods, and many of our white customers would rather not have a black man in their homes."

I try to stay under control. "The place I just sent Wally to is not one of *those* neighborhoods. It's an old residential neighborhood. It isn't the 'hood. I've lived there, Ted."

"That may be true, but finding and keeping good techs is hard these days. They're all running off to northern Virginia where they can make more money. We have to do everything to keep them around."

I point at the screen. "Ted, more than half of these requests are from Northwest. Tony and Roger are being worked to death. What happens if they leave us?"

He stands. "I hope that doesn't happen, but if it does ..." He shrugs.

Asshole. "What happens when *all* the requests come from Northwest? Do we pay fifteen white guys for doing nothing?"

"It'll never happen. There's always something somewhere for them to do."

Like sitting on their asses. "I don't want to be a part of this, Ted."

"Really? You'd rather go back to customer service?"

Hold on, now. "I'm in management, Ted, or have you forgotten?"

"That's your only other option, Renee. Your position was filled, and there are no other management positions available at the present time ... except this one."

A tech calls in. "Tony Hairston. Just finished the job on Nineteenth. Where to?"

"Tony, this is Renee Luchesi, your new supervisor."

"Hey, how you doin'?"

"Fine. Next job is on Persinger Road near Patrick Henry—"

"Hold up," he interrupts. "Ain't my territory."

"I know. I want you to go there anyway."

"He won't go," Ted whispers.

Fuck you! "It's on the corner of Persinger and Blenheim, and they need—"

"Look, you got anything closer to me? It's hot as shit out here, and my truck don't have AC."

Daa-em. I look at Ted. He's got his arms crossed thinking he's the shit. "I'm sure the residence on Persinger has AC, and they're requesting a line spliced to a room in the basement." That will keep him inside for at least an hour.

"Aww-ite," Tony says. "You're the boss." Damn straight.

I look at Ted. His executive face is bright pink, and me without my sunglasses. "I think I'm going to stay with this job, Ted. I'm getting the hang of it."

He doesn't speak and leaves my office.

After *not* calling Collette at lunch, and it takes *all* my willpower not to, I sit in the cafeteria. I haven't taken two bites of my Italian sandwich when Ted *and* a union rep named Jerry Shivers (what a crummy last name) sit on either side of me.

"Yes?" I say.

"I've told Jerry what you're doing, Renee," Ted says, "and he's not happy about it."

I look each wannabe man in the eye. "You two have agreed on something?" I turn back to Jerry. "Damn, Jerry, the union's gone to shit since I left."

"Renee," Jerry says, "this is serious."

"You don't want your white members working for a living, Jerry? I didn't know racism was part of the union's platform. It wasn't when I was in the union."

"Please, Renee," Jerry says. "Look at it from another point of view."

"I am, Jerry. The black point of view."

"What I mean is, Roger and Tony get more hours, get more overtime, get more pay," Jerry says. "If we spread everybody out, those two will take home less money." He has made a small point. "Tony's the one who called me, not Ted."

Now *I'm* confused. I take another bite of my sandwich to think. Tony called? The brother's just trying to make ends meet, but what about his family? "Does Tony have a family?"

"Yeah. Wife and three kids."

Hmm. That man needs to be with his family more. "Tell you what. You hire three more black techs, and I won't go to Channel Ten."

"Now hold on," Ted says. "There's no need for that."

"Sure there is. I look *good* on TV, Ted."

Jerry sees my point. "That would put five techs in Northwest and five each in the other three quadrants, right?"

"Yup." I take another bite. I can't eat these every day or I won't lose any weight. Shit, I'd fill up a TV screen with just my face. I look at Ted. "Well?"

"We can't afford to hire three more techs," Ted says.

"I thought we were financially secure, Ted," I say with a squint. "And maybe we can hold onto that twenty-five percent, huh? There might even be a nice bonus in there for you. You'll be the man who helped get Northwest Roanoke digitally cabled. Hell, you could maybe even run for mayor!"

"It makes sense, Ted," Jerry says. "And if you don't do it now, I'll bring it up at contract time *and* reveal how you could have remedied this situation earlier." Go Jerry! The union isn't as shitty as I thought.

Ted looks at both of us, his wavy eyebrows knitted together. "I'll bring it up at the next board meeting." He leaves.

I turn to Jerry. "Y'all have anything interesting planned for us at contract time?"

He shrugs. "Business is good, and the union's happy now that Collette's gone." I laugh, and he squeezes my arm. "You and her were hellfire and brimstone back in the bad old days."

"Thanks." I finish my sandwich. "I have one little idea for you, but you didn't hear it from me."

He leans in. "Go ahead."

"Where do the executive assholes park?"

"Right next to main entrance of the building. Why?"

"I always hated walking across that parking lot in the rain and snow or even on a hot day like today."

He smiles. "Swap parking spaces?"

I nod. "I know it's petty, but I'm feeling petty today. Just imagine old man Edwards walking his presidential ass an extra hundred feet to his Benz getting his fancy two-hundred-dollar shoes all slushy. Ooh, it just gives me the shivers."

"Boo."

"Sorry." I bump him with my shoulder. "Hell, do something. Unions are no fun if you aren't messing with someone."

He stands. "I'll keep it in mind." He raps the table with his knuckles. "Glad you're back."

So am I.

After work I race to Collette's to rescue my boy—and he's asleep.

"Girl," Collette says, "he must have eaten twenty ounces today. His belly is tight as a shiny little drum."

"No, uh, problems?"

"Just from his mama." She laughs. "Maybe the bitch will trust me tomorrow, huh?"

I kiss G.J. all over his face. He still doesn't wake up. "Just like your daddy." I smile at Collette. "I'll talk to the bitch."

"Watch out," Collette says from the door. "She bites."

"See you tomorrow."

G.J.'s awake by the time I go through the back entrance of Luchesi's and see a pepperoni and banana peppers pizza sitting on our table. Pops takes G.J., Janae joins me, Ernestine says hello, Khalid waves, and I sit down to eat.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Janae says, and she jumps up after we pray. She drags a chair from the office to the space between us and takes her seat.

Neither one of us says a word. Neither one of us has to. We're eating with Giovanni, just like old times.

## THIRTY-EIGHT

So ... we go on. We survive. That's what my family does. I guess that's what all people do. I used to say "my people" this and "my people" that all the time, but now that I know more—and have finally gotten past all the racial shit that's slowed me down—I won't say that anymore. Folks is folks is folks, and they're all out here trying to survive. My family and I are just another group of survivors.

G.J. gains weight and even gets his fat head in the fiftieth percentile on that chart the doctors rely upon so much. I wonder how they made that chart. Do they get a bunch of babies at a certain age and measure the hell out of them then average the results? My boy isn't average and never will be, thank you very much. He's healthy, happy, and just happens to be as skinny as his daddy.

At his six-month checkup in October, I get this sheet that tells me all the things G.J. *should* be doing, and except for laughing and squealing, he's where he should be: rolling from his tummy to his back, lifting his head, grasping any damn thing you hand him, chewing on any damn thing that he can get to his mouth before I can stop him. He eats cereal, sweet potatoes, squash, apple sauce—and any damn thing he can get to his mouth before I can stop him. He's also sprouting teeth and isn't nearly as fussy as Janae was when she was teething. And every one of the doctors who has looked at G.J. since the day he was born has said the same stupid thing: "Developmentally, he'll be behind until he reaches two years of age."

I love it when they're wrong. The boy has caught up. If only he didn't shit rivers. I don't know how Giovanni put up with the funk. I used to hand Janae to Giovanni when her diaper was "locked and loaded," and Giovanni never complained. Me, I complain, and since G.J. can't hear, I let him know. I have a smile on my face, though.

Janae's grades are slipping at school, but I haven't ragged her about it. "She daydreams," her math teacher, Mrs. Word, says. Big deal, so do I, and so, probably, do you, even while you're

teaching. “She can’t seem to concentrate,” her science teacher, Mrs. Roman says. She lost her daddy, so shut up, wench. “She seems bored,” her history teacher, Mr. Timmons says. Big deal—your class is boring. “She doesn’t want to participate,” her gym teacher, Mr. Harris says. Big deal—she’d rather be shooting baskets with her daddy.

Now if I could only get her to go to her daddy’s grave again. I go as often as I can just to chat, spruce up the headstone, weep, let Giovanni see his son. I’ve asked Janae to go with me, but she won’t go. I won’t force her. G.J. is good company. He likes tracing his daddy’s name on the headstone, the only headstone in the cemetery with a cross *and* a star of David.

We manage to muddle through to Thanksgiving (and there are three empty seats near Pops) and Christmas (we celebrate it at Mama’s to lessen the pain), and I even post an ad on the Internet on New Year’s Eve while drinking a little Chianti:

Professional WBF, 37, with precocious biracial daughter (11) and hearing-impaired son (7 mo), 20 years left on mortgage, and a yappy, pooting 150-pound dog ISO mature professional M (37+) to be a father first and husband second. Kids OK as long as you don’t have an ex. Must like R&B and opera, Italian food and cornbread.

I haven’t gotten any replies yet, and I wonder why. Hmm. Maybe if I delete the reference to Hershey ...

I know, I know. I’m just too damn picky.

And I wish to God my dream house would stop picking on me.

My dream house, which would have been the first cover home of *Better Black Homes and Gardens*, has become a nightmare seemingly overnight.

At first, it was a series of little things. Nothing major, just minor problems to cuss at. And that saying about bad things coming in three’s—that’s bullshit. Bad things never stop coming.

First, a few windows started sagging over the summer, the wind, heat, and humidity whistling through. There was something wrong about the seals and the shitty recycled plastic used for the replacement windows we practically took out a car loan to get.

That is such a scam. The first salesman who came to Giovanni and me said it would cost thirteen grand to do the whole house. Of course we said no. Then he said, "But for the next twenty-four hours, I can offer a fifty percent discount." We still said no and showed the man the door. Outside he said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you about our showcase homes. If you agree to have your home's picture in our catalog, we can do the entire house for four thousand."

Naturally my vanity got the best of me ("My house will be featured in a catalog, Giovanni!"), and for a while, they were wonderful windows. Easy to clean, tightly sealed, secure. But when one fails, the rest follow. They were still under warranty, but when I called the toll-free number for the company in North Carolina, I found out that they went bankrupt and were accepting no further claims. Figures. I ended up wedging folded paper in between the window and the sill on the windows that rattled or leaked the most. It wasn't very attractive, but I kept the drapes closed to hide my ghetto solution.

At least I didn't use duct tape.

Then the floors have started squeaking. I don't mean creaking, like the sound of going up the stairs in Mama's old house. I mean squeaking. It's like stepping on tiny mice whenever anyone walks around the living room and kitchen. I search the basement ceiling daily for clues, find none, and let it be.

Until the real mice show up in October.

I have this feeling that all that squeaking from the floorboards sent a message to every rodent in north Roanoke: "C'mon in, y'all." And they have. I opened the pantry door to get a box of cereal the other morning, and Mickey and Minnie stared at me from the top of a box of Apple Jacks.

We went out for breakfast *a lot* until the exterminator finally shows up a week later charging way too much for a little spraying and a couple traps set here and there.

The exterminator, a sweaty white man with bad teeth, takes the time to give me a free lecture to go with his bill. "It's your dog bringin' the mice to the house," he tells me, his body stank as sour milk. "You shouldn't feed a dog outside."

"But he's an outdoor dog. Where else can I feed him?"

“Inside.”

Not. “Can’t I feed him on the porch and bring his bowl in when he’s through?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it. You been givin’ ‘em a steady source of food. I wouldn’t doubt it if you’ve been raisin’ a couple generations of mice on Alpo.”

Mice on Alpo. Four hundred bucks a year I’m going to pay now to keep mice off Alpo with the added benefit of cleaning up Alpo smears and drips in the kitchen because Hershey eats like Giovanni.

And today ... the septic starts acting up. Throwing up is a more accurate description. I go into the basement this morning with a full load of wash and see a huge puddle of gray-black water around the drain for the washer, like the basement has struck oil or something. Naturally I think it’s the washer.

A fifty-dollar service call later, I learn that my washer is fine. “Probably the septic,” the guy from Sears says.

“Can you fix whatever’s wrong?” I mean, you’re here, right?

“No ma’am.”

So I call Pipe Master, and a short, hunched-over white man—“I’m the master of pipes,” so he claims—comes over to look at my little indoor lake. “It gettin’ bigger or smaller?”

“Bigger.”

“That ain’t good.”

No shit.

“Any trouble with your toilet or shower on this level?”

I haven’t even looked in Giovanni’s bathroom. “Not that I know of.”

Pipe Master raises his eyebrows.

“We don’t use that bathroom that often.” Not at all, as a matter of fact. Janae won’t go near it.

“Let’s check it.”

I lead him down the narrow hall to Giovanni’s bathroom, which I haven’t cleaned since the day after his funeral. I crack open the door and get a whiff of shit so bad that I start coughing. I open the stand-up shower door and see a layer of brown ooze on the tiles, and the toilet is filled to the brim with black water.

“But no one uses this bathroom,” I say.

And I immediately feel bad for ragging on Giovanni for years to get the funk out of his bathroom.

"It's all connected," Pipe Master says. "I'll duct tape that shower door for you."

"Why?"

"Just in case it fills up again." He points to a sludge line on the shower door. "Looks like it got up to four feet at one time. Surprised the seal held."

I now have a new definition for "nasty": shit four feet deep in a shower stall.

He whips out a roll of duct tape and seals the door. "How old's this house?"

"I don't know, fifteen, twenty years old."

"Shouldn't have no iron pipes then. They went out in the seventies. Might be terra cotta. Never can tell till you get a camera down there."

Skip the shit and just fix it.

"Now you might have Orangeburg pipes. You know if you got them?"

Orangeburg pipes? How the hell should I know? I didn't build the damn house! "No."

"Better hope not. They're basically laminated tar paper, and they're failin' all over the place nowadays."

Great. I may have tar paper pipes. Whose brilliant idea was that? Even a child knows you can't use paper cups for very long.

"You got kids, right?"

The mounds of toys you had to step over since you've arrived didn't give you a clue? "Yes."

"They flush the toilet every time?"

The nerve! "Yes." Or they get their butts beat. I cannot abide the stench of urine, especially if it's bright yellow.

"They take lots of showers and baths?"

What do you think I'm running here? *Your* house? "Of course."

"Well, um, you might want to cut back on all that and go easy on the laundry for a while till this is fixed."

Say what? "How long will this take?"

"Can't say for sure. You see, you might got you a root growin' down into the main water line, so you'll need you a rooter, and I ain't got one."

What the hell good are you then? What, you just duct tape shit and call for reinforcements? "Um, who has a rooter?" Country folks had to have started that Roto-Rooter company.

"Master Rootter."

Of course. And this is another scam. What one "Master" can't fix, the other can, but you still have to pay the first "Master" for his trouble. I bet they all work for one "Master" company and share the profits from my MasterCard.

My kids are stank, I am ripe, and the house smells like sewage though I have lit every candle I have, even ones without a scent. I go through three boxes of wooden kitchen matches and four packs of incense sticks, and the house still stinks. This has to be the only time in my life where my shit really does stink. Even Hershey stays away from the house, lying near the fence.

But when Masters Rootter and Tooter show up three hours late the next day ... the lake in the basement has vanished.

Rootter (real name Billy) and Tooter (shit-smudged name tag, maybe Willie) stare at me as we look at where the lake used to be.

"It was here for the last two days," I insist.

"I don't doubt it, ma'am," Rootter says. "We can see the dirt rings." He nods at the washer. "Gotta run the washer a bit, get the water to come back up."

"Pipe Master said not to run the washer."

"You coulda done you some loads," Tooter says as he turns on the washer. "Right 'bout now we have to fill 'er up agin 'fore we kin git rid of it."

Make a fresh lake of shit to get rid of a lake of shit? Oh, that makes sense, and please don't speak again you country-ass, shit-stained, sludge-for-brains redneck.

So Tooter runs the washer until a pond seeps from the drain in the floor, while Rootter, who is mildly cute for a man who basically played in other people's shit, wheels this contraption down the basement stairs. It look like a metal garden hose wrapped around a wheel.

"This snake," Rootter says, "is a hundred feet long."

Is that supposed to mean something to me? “Really?” The man is proud of his snake ... but aren’t all men?

“Yep.” He fastens what looks like a metal claw to the end. “This baby’ll knock out whatever’s causin’ the blockage.”

“And then it will be fixed?”

“We’ll see.”

Rooter’s snake, though loud, is especially limp, however. Rooter has to use three different claw attachments before the pond sucks itself back to wherever ponds of shit go. Yes! I can do laundry, I can shower, I can bathe my children—but mainly I can flush all the damn toilets! I mean, when you have to light two wooden kitchen matches just for urine, you know it’s bad.

“What’s the damage?” I ask, and I whip out my checkbook. Hell, they were only here, what, half an hour? Fifty bucks tops.

“Two hundred,” Rooter says.

I hesitate. “Two hundred ... dollars?” All Rooter did was feed the snake down a pipe. What, am I paying for the snake? And they used my damn electricity and my shit! I ought to get a discount! If it weren’t for what I supplied, they couldn’t do their damn jobs!

“Yes, ma’am. But if you join our lifetime warranty plan, it’ll only cost you one-seventy.”

I smell another scam coming. “How much is the lifetime warranty plan?”

“Seventy.”

Gee. That makes two-forty. What a bargain. “How long do you guarantee what you’ve just done?”

“Sixty days.”

Daa-em. I hope none of us gets diarrhea for the next two months. “And how long is the lifetime warranty plan?”

“Six months.”

“Excuse me?”

Rooter smiles. “The lifetime warranty plan gets you extensions on our regular warranties.”

“Why’s it called a lifetime plan then?”

Rooter looks at Tooter. Tooter looks at Rooter. I look at the basement ceiling. “Just is,” Tooter finally says.

“I’ll have to think about it,” I say.

“Oh,” Rooter says, “we’re gonna have to come back tomorrow.”

Why? The water’s gone. “Tomorrow?”

“Yep. Gotta shoot a camera in there, find out what was so hard to poke through. Right muddy, which usually means a breakage. I’m hopin’ it was just a root, but you never know.”

“You can’t put the camera in now?” I do not want you two stank men in my house again.

“Too much water in the line,” Rooter says.

“Oh. So you think it might be a breakage?”

Rooter nods. “Hope not, but it’s a possibility. We’ll know for sure once we check out the video.”

“So it’s not completely fixed?”

“No, ma’am.”

I bite hard on the pen. “What are we talking, here? A couple hundred more?”

“Oh, no charge for what we gotta do tomorrow.”

“I meant”—I start tasting ink—“in a worst-case scenario, what will the damage be?”

Rooter shrugs. “Hard to say.”

If it’s hard for him to say, then it will be hard for me to pay. “Five hundred?”

“Could run ya a thousand,” Tooter drawls. “But if you have the lifetime warranty plan, it’ll only run you about seven hunert.”

I told you not to speak again. “A thousand dollars for one pipe?” It had better be plated in twenty-four-carat gold and carry my shit gift-wrapped into the county sewage system.

“Most of the cost is for the backhoe.”

Oh shit. There’d be a tractor in my yard.

“Y’all got gas heat, right?”

They’re going to dig up my yard with a John Deere. They’re going to mess up my grass, my flowers, my rose bushes, my tree ... “Uh, yeah.”

“That could get complicated, but don’t worry.”

Easy for you to say. “So can I at least do laundry now?”

“I wouldn’t advise it just yet,” Rooter says. “Can you wait one more day?”

I had been wearing Giovanni's old draws for the past two days and not because I'm into that sort of kinky shit. They didn't quite fit my ass, but it was nice to have a little ventilation through that little flap for my coochie. Why don't women have ventilation flaps like that? "I guess I'll have to wait."

The next day, I watch a video snake zip through my sewage line, Rooter pointing out all the pipe's faults. "Got you a bend there ... nothin' major ... might be a root there ... root-killer will get it ... another bend ..." The camera splashes into some water. "Whoa."

"What?"

He cranks the camera forward until it shoots out of the water. "You got you a belly there."

"A what?"

"A belly. A stretch of pipe that's sagged and full of water. And it's a long belly, longest I seen in a while."

"Is that bad?"

He nods. "Paper and solids collect in a belly over time, and that's probably what backed up the whole shebang."

"Shebang" is definitely a country word ... and that means the "mud" Rooter hit the previous day wasn't mud.

My definition of "nasty" has risen to a new level.

There is something almost ... gynecological about the whole ordeal. Long, moist pipe. Sperm-like snake. I wonder when the sperm is going to hit the egg.

The snake stops. "There's the county line," Rooter says. "Your line ain't broke."

Thank You, Jesus! "Is it Orangeburg pipe?"

"Nope. Terra-cotta. You'll be fine with that kind of pipe. Terra-cotta pipes are made to last."

Thank you for Italian-sounding pipe! "Um, how do I keep this from happening again?"

"Well, you could replace the line entirely."

That isn't going to happen, at least not for sixty days.

"Or you could flush the toilets more and do more laundry, keep the water moving."

"Modern terlits"—Tooter actually says "terlits"!—"don't push enough water to get rid of the waste. You might could have your

kids hold the lever down longer.” He smiles, three green teeth visible. “Least now we won’t have to jackhammer your basement or dig up your lawn.”

I have since instituted the following rule: “Be nice and flush twice.” Mama even did two needlepoint signs with that phrase, and I hung them above each toilet. I also do smaller loads of laundry in a full washer.

That belly under my yard is never going to get any rest.

## THIRTY-NINE

Now I just wish I could get some rest. I'm still not sleeping more than a few hours during the night. And when I see January 21 on the calendar, I get more depressed than I have ever gotten in my life because eleven years ago that day I met this boy who turned out to be a man, a Mr. Man for this Mrs. Man, a white boy who turned out to be my soul mate. I drag for weeks, crying at the slightest thing, weeping through the night.

Mama notices right away during a surprise visit the week before. "Girl, you can't go on like this. You have to say good-bye to that man."

"I already have, Mama."

"No you haven't."

She's right. I see him everywhere. I know white men don't all look alike, but I see Giovanni at Food Lion squeezing tomatoes, at the bakery everywhere I look, at the mall carrying a baby ... I sometimes even see him in the yard running around with Janae and Hershey.

"How ... how do I say good-bye to him?"

"When your daddy died, I went to the last place I saw him alive, said my piece, made my peace, and left."

"Where'd you see him last?"

She laughs. "On the sidewalk out in front of my old house on Allison. My neighbors thought I was strange before, and now when they see me, they avoid me entirely." She squeezes my hand. "Say good-bye and move on."

I drive immediately to Luchesi's. "Pops," I say, my voice shaky, "can you close early on the twenty-first?"

He nods. "I can close all day if you like."

"No. Just from eight o'clock on."

He doesn't ask for explanations. He knows. "I will close at seven, clean up, be gone by eight."

So here I am, alone in Luchesi's, while Mama minds G.J. and Janae, on a cold, blustery night in January. I turn the lights down so folks walking by don't call the police on me. That would be embarrassing. I drink in the yeasty aroma of the bread, the shiny

tables and spotless counter, the blue and white décor that I hated so much eleven years ago—and I cherish it all, even the cows chewing their cud in the pictures. I even hum along with the opera music Pops left on for me as I wander between table after table to—

Pops put our table back.

Oh, geez. My nose is tingling. I've brought lots of tissues, but if I start crying now I'll run out. A new candle sits next to the puddle of wax, a small box of wooden matches and a bright red rose in a slim vase nearby. Thanks, Pops. We're just two romantics in search of your son. I light the match, light the candle, feel the warmth with my hands, hum some more.

I sit and look at the rings on my fingers. Why am I still married to that man? I can't seem to take these rings off. I want to. I really do. *I should*, I mean, I'm young, I don't look *fo-ine* yet, but I will, and I'm ... lonely. I'm sitting alone at an empty table in an empty dining room feeling empty when I could have ... someone. I look up briefly at the chair across from me then back at my hands.

"But not just anyone," I say aloud. "You know how picky I am."

I close my eyes and try to imagine Giovanni there. It isn't hard. His hair is, well, less than perfect, shooting out here and there, and he needs an edge-up in the worst way. His nose! What a beak! I rarely needed an umbrella when he was around. And that beard-shadow on his face. Very sexy. I try not to look in his eyes in my mind, but I see them, soft and brown, eyes that would never hurt me. Neck. Chest. Arms. Hands—

I open my eyes. Tears fall.

"I miss your hands, boy. Isn't that funny? All the times I ragged your ass about how rough they were, how dirty they were, how ashy they were—and I miss them."

The music changes, gets ... softer. Soft opera? Strange. I never thought opera could be considered soft, tender almost. And definitely sad. Infinitely sad.

"Excuse me," I say to the empty chair, and I walk down the dark hall to Pops's office where I turn off the music. I hear nothing but the tick-ticking of the ovens cooling down, the wind

moaning through the window over the double sink, the sound of my own breathing.

I close the door to the office, and as I do, the back door blows open with such force that I shout, "Jesus!" and get the worst goose bumps I've ever had. It was only the wind, Renee. Get a grip. I push myself off Pops's door and walk through the wind to the back door, shutting and latching the banging screen door, slamming and locking the back door securely, willing my heart to slow down.

"Jesus," I say again, and I walk through the dark hallway to the table—

The candle's out.

My heart stops for a second, then I remember the wind. "Sorry," I say to the empty chair, light a match, and light the candle once more. "Y'all need a new back door."

I sit, spinning my wedding ring around and around. "Janae and I looked through all the old pictures the other night, Giovanni. All ten *thousand* of them." I roll my eyes. "You took too many pictures, Mr. Man, but why aren't you in any of them? Janae wanted a picture of you for her room, and I had to give her one of our wedding pictures. You looked nice, don't get me wrong, but a child's room shouldn't have a wedding picture in it."

I find myself spinning his wedding band on the thumb of my right hand. "That was one of the happiest days of my life." I look at the empty chair. "Okay, it was *the* happiest day of my life." I sigh. "The day we met, this day, today was a close second, boy." I turn to the left. "You were kneeling right here reading that poem to me. That's when I first knew I could ... love you forever." I turn to the empty chair. "And as cliché as this sounds, I will always love you ... Giovanni."

I put my head on the table and weep. I said his name. All I did was say his funny name. Gee-oh-VAH-nee. I hadn't said it since the day he died, and I said it, and I'm weeping and he's not here and the candle's out again and I want him and I need him and—

The candle's out.

Again.

I *am* a goose bump.

I lean to my left and look at the back door. Closed. Front door—closed. My hands tremble, I can barely hold the match box, the match falling through my fingers again and again until I light the match and then the candle, oh Jesus, dear Jesus, sweet Jesus ...

*... is he here?*

I push back clumsily in my chair and stand, leaning my hands heavily on the table. "You can't be here," I say. "You're in heaven with my daddy and your mama, and this is a drafty old bakery on a windy freaking night, and I don't believe in ghosts!"

The candle's out again.

"Oh, Lord Jesus, please help me!" I weep, crumbling to the floor. This isn't happening, this isn't happening, this isn't happening—

The bells wrapped around the front door jingle.

This isn't happening, this isn't happening, this isn't happening—

The bells that I put on the front door almost eleven years ago to keep customers from sneaking in ... are jingling. Someone's here? I look.

And see no one on the sidewalk outside.

"Oh, Lord Jesus, please, please—" The jingling stops. I struggle to my feet. I look at the candle. "I'm not lighting it again," I whisper. "I am not ... lighting ... it ... again."

The bells jingle.

I'm another goose bump. Don't look. "You're here," I say. "You're here, and you're an angel."

The bells jingle.

Don't look, Renee, don't look. "And you answer with bells." The tears fall again. "You must have seen your son, huh?"

The bells jingle.

God, I feel so warm. I wipe my eyes and nose on my sleeve. "He's quite a kid, your son. I've been calling him G.J., but from now on I'll call him Giovanni, okay?"

The bells jingle.

Here come the tears, can't stop them, don't want to, would know how. I turn to the door ... and see snow.

Snow!

Big flakes of snow, flakes so thick, thick like cotton, a wall of snow, like the world outside is one of those glass toys that God shook up and it's so beautiful I forget to cry because Giovanni is in that snow, he's in that picture, he's finally in a picture!

I drift to the front door and put my hands on the silent bells. "You were just trying to get me to look, Mr. Man." At one last picture of you. "Thank you," I whisper. "Thank you, Giovanni." I feel a chill that takes my breath away, but I don't shiver because I'm glowing inside. "Good-bye. Good-bye, Mr. Man. Good-bye, Giovanni."

And after joyfully sliding and giggling all over Roanoke in Giovanni's car, I get home, throw open the front door with the loudest bang, and run past Mama to Giovanni's room.

"Have you lost your damn mind!" she yells after me.

"Yes!" I open his door.

Giovanni's jingling, too!

I snatch that boy and hold him close. "You're jingling, too, Giovanni!" I shout.

Mama's leaning in the doorway. "He been jingling like crazy the last twenty minutes. I come in, and there's nothing wrong with him."

"Daddy kissed you good night," I whisper to Giovanni.

"What's that?" Mama asks.

She won't believe me. No one will ever believe me.

"Nothing!" I shout.

I bust into Janae's room where I find her staring out her window at the snow, tears streaming down her face, a smile as wide as Giovanni's on her face.

"Did you see him, Janae?" I whisper.

She nods. "Yeah." She slips her hand into my right hand.

"He was smiling."

Giovanni puts his tiny hand in my left. "He was always smiling, girl."

"Yeah."

I look at their golden hands in my brown hands, smile ... and rejoice.

## FORTY

I haven't cried for Giovanni since that magical night. I still think about him, but the memories are enough for now. Some of my dreams with me and him are *hot*, as hot as when he was alive. They don't happen often, but when they do, I wake in the morning feeling like such a ho, the covers all twisted, sweat on my pillow, my mouth dry. The man still puts the hubba in my bubba.

I just wish it was the real thing.

I've made a few necessary changes over the past few years to help us heal. I don't know if I've done the right things, but so far, so good. Giovanni's ring is on a chain around Janae's neck, my wedding ring is in my jewelry box, and the anniversary band is on the *middle* finger of my right hand since I've lost so much weight. I had Pops present Janae with "our table" for her twelfth birthday, and it now sits in her room. The wax puddle is only a memory, but we still sit and eat there occasionally. I've made several collages of pictures that Giovanni took and have them spaced around the house. He's not in any of them, yet he's in all of them. He had a good eye. Hell, he chose me, didn't he?

He also wrote some damn good poetry. On a whim, I sent his entire "collected works," as he called them, to *A Gathering of Tribes*, a multicultural poetry magazine in New York City with a short note:

My husband, Giovanni Anthony Luchesi, wrote these poems throughout our ten-year courtship and marriage. I've enclosed a family picture. As a tribute to him, would you consider publishing a few?

A few weeks later, I received a nice note from the editor:

We would like to use the following poems in upcoming issues of *A Gathering of Tribes* ...

They wanted to use *seven*! A few months later, “Golden” was published, and I framed the page for Janae. It’s right next to the mirror in her room where I sometimes hear her reading it before going to school. Giovanni is *still* talking to her in the morning.

And I finally got Janae to go visit Giovanni’s grave the day after she turned fourteen.

“I want you to trace his name,” I told her at Evergreen that morning as we stood in front of Giovanni’s headstone.

She drew her hands back to her chest and started crying. “I don’t want to touch it, Mama.”

“It’s just stone, girl.”

“I don’t want to.”

I took her right hand and guided it to the stone. “Put out your finger.”

“Mama, I don’t—”

“I know you don’t want to.” I pressed it to the top loop of the G. “That’s why you have to do it. Your daddy isn’t here, Janae. You know he’s too busy to be lying around here when there’s work to do. He’s watching over us. Trace his name, Janae.”

I let go of her hand, and she didn’t pull back her finger. Then I watched her trace Giovanni’s impossibly long name, all the loops, all those vowels. There was something almost peaceful about the tracing, and Janae’s sobs vanished by the time she got to the final “I.”

“We can go now, if you want,” I said.

She didn’t move. “The flowers are nice.”

“Yep. Good thing your brother has a green thumb. He helped me plant most of those.”

She traced the letters and numbers for the day Giovanni died, something I have not yet been able to do. I don’t know why. I can trace his name—just not his passing.

I tried to return my wedding dress to Pops since it had originally belonged to his wife, Ruth, but he wouldn’t take it.

“Janae can use it,” he said, and I agreed. “I only hope I am still around when that blessed day happens.”

“You’ll be there,” I said.

He looked in the air. “Yes,” he said with that twinkle in his eye. “I will be there.”

After over twenty years, Luchesi's finally got a write-up in *Roanoke* magazine, mainly because Pops had allowed Ernestine and Khalid, who are now full partners, to add soul food to the menu. Italian soul food is the bomb! In addition to its regular Italian fare, Luchesi's now offers all non-pork (as a concession to Khalid) soul food with Italian seasonings and is standing-room-only most nights. The poetry nights are back once a month, and Luchesi's even hosts wedding receptions, birthday parties, and engagement parties.

Ernestine told me that they have party reservations for the next ten months. "We are a happenin' place," she told me. "You ought to quit that stuffy old job and get in on this, girl!"

Janae would love for me to be more involved at Luchesi's, but I need my benefits for Giovanni. He's an expensive boy. From the first time I said "ba ba ba" to that boy, his hand on my vocal cords feeling the vibrations, he has been listening to me with his eyes and hands. He learned to mimic my mouth at eleven months and "said" "OH!" all the time. The first time he mouthed "Mama" I cried and cried.

Because he wasn't developmentally (there's that shitty word again) ready at eighteen months, we had the cochlear implant done at the UVA Medical Center when he was twenty-two months old. Since then, that child "listens" to everything, his "Walkman" hooked, taped, Velcro-ed, or belted to his waist. You wouldn't believe all the batteries we go through. Though the implant doesn't provide normal hearing for him, he can hear the phone ring, the doorbell chime, Hershey bark, and me yell. He's an expert lip-reader, and he's picked up American Sign Language (ASL) faster than I can teach it to him. He's even taught ASL to Clyde Junior. They are so cute together now that they're approximately the same size, and they use signs neither Janae nor I have ever seen. Aside from leaving appliances on all over the house and turning the sound up way too high on his TV, Giovanni is the perfect child: quiet, respectful, and helpful. As soon as he can write (he's taking English as a *Second* Language in kindergarten), we'll get him a TTY, a teletypewriter for the phone.

Reverend Noel noticed Janae and me using signs with Giovanni during a service, and now Janae and I “tag-team interpret” the Reverend’s sermons for hearing-impaired folks, and there are quite a few in the church. Janae does the service until the sermon, and I do the sermon. I’m lucky Reverend Noel is Southern. I probably couldn’t keep up if he was from the North. I am worn out by the end of every service, and folks even shake *my* hands like I gave the sermon.

I’ve also found something to do with my hands when I’m really feeling lonely. I’ve started a journal about Giovanni using his old laptop, mainly so his son can get to know him once he can read well, but also so I can keep talking to my soul mate. At first, I was afraid to write down all the feelings that I *still* had for that man, like those feelings would lose their power if I saw them on the screen. Not anymore. Putting our life into words is like ... feeling my bones. My memories of Giovanni are my bones. No matter what I cover myself with, my bones are still there. He’s still the bone of my bone, the flesh of my flesh.

So, no, I haven’t let go of my soul mate yet. I know I should, but he was my husband, my lover, *and* my friend. He never said good-bye to me, so I’m never saying good-bye to him.

Giovanni Anthony Luchesi. Just whispering his name gives me chills, brings him back for a moment. I still feel that last soft kiss he gave me that day, the day I became a blur next to Janae in that swing, weightless, free, climbing higher. Janae told him that he’d never grow old that day, and he hasn’t. He was the most amazing man I’ve ever known. I know he was a simple man, a predictable man who only thought of his family, but I don’t ever want to let go of him. I barely believed in that “love of a lifetime” stuff before I met Giovanni, but now I do.

And my soul mate is waiting for me, just out of reach beyond the clouds. And when I see him again—and I *will*—a whole bunch of doves will fly out of my heart over the rest of heaven, and I’m going to take his crusty, ashy hands in mine, put them around me, and whisper, “Hubba hubba, Mr. Man.” He’ll say, “I have missed you, *bella* Renee,” and then we’ll walk hand in hand through the streets of gold.

And I bet God fills the skies with rainbows.



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote about the “birth” of G.J. six months before my son Jontae was to be born, and Jontae decided to arrive two months early. My research on NICU’s and the developmental problems premature babies can have helped us through the ordeal with Jontae, who lived in a “bubble” for many weeks before coming home to us with *no* developmental problems. God is good, y’all, because He had me write out the future so I wouldn’t be afraid when it finally arrived.

I’m also not afraid of the criticism I’ve received for being a white male author who primarily uses an African-American female narrator. Renee Howard Luchesi is a strong woman who is not a victim, who is not a slave to her passions (well, most of them), and who is not unsure of herself. I never meant for her to be representative of an entire sex or race. Renee just *is*, flaws and all, consistent and true to herself. And it takes a strong man to handle her. Yes, Giovanni is silent more than vocal, and he gives in more than he sticks up for himself, but he picks his battles carefully because he *respects his wife*. To me, Giovanni is like water dripping on a rock, gradually softening Renee’s chip-filled shoulders. When critics brand him a “wimp” or a “pantywaist,” I shake my head. Here’s a man who respects a woman. Since when does giving respect to a woman reduce a man to a “pantywaist”? A reader wrote it best: “We need more men in this world like Giovanni.”

I know what you’re thinking. How could I take Renee’s man away from her? *Renee and Jay* and *Renee and Jay*<sup>2</sup> are *not* about Giovanni. These two books have been the story of one incredible lady, *her* triumphs and tribulations, *her* growth as a human being, and *her* stubborn will to survive. She is a survivor, a symbol of hope for me, and, hopefully, Renee is a symbol of hope for my readers as well.

Will Renee be back? I’m sure she will. Her voice is never far from me.