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# *Broken Promises*



*Deatri King-Bey*

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*By*

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## *Acknowledgements*

*I'd like to take a second to thank my readers. It's been a while since my last novel, but you kept writing and asking for more. Thanks for not giving up on me. I hope you enjoy Johnny Ray and Matilda's story.*

*Until the next novel, much joy peace and love.*

*Deatri King-Bey*



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Broken Promises by Deatri King-Bey

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## Chapter One

*Eighteen Years Ago...*

“I cain’t stand you, Johnny Ray!” Matilda King drawled, slammed her sociology textbook closed, snatched her belongings off the desk and stormed out the classroom.

“She loves me,” Johnny Ray Sloan lazily boasted over the laughter of the other students as they readied to leave. Matilda had beaten him, yet again, in a debate, but he’d won in a way his classmates didn’t comprehend and he barely understood. The passion they shared while sparring had become addictive to him.

Three years ago, when they were in seventh grade, he would become enraged when she’d whip his tail in debates or show him up in class. He had always been the smartest, the most popular, the most athletic, the richest, the most everything, then this black chick comes along and steals his glory. Yeah, he was still the richest and most popular, but she wasn’t most popular only because she didn’t want to be. Which left him with being the richest, the least important of the “most” because he had nothing to do with his wealth.

As the students cleared out, he remained behind. Bobby sauntered his long, lanky body past Johnny Ray. “She don’t want your white behind. You’d best leave

my cousin alone.”

“Well, seein’s on how y’all’s the only black anything’s in this here school; I’m guessing she ain’t got much choice but to be with a white boy. Lessin’ y’all’s kissin’ cousins or something.”

Bobby sneered over his shoulder, but kept walking out the door.

After the door closed, Johnny Ray reached into his back Dockers’ pocket, pulled out his wallet and approached his instructor. “Thank you very much, Mr. Wilson.”

“I’m not sure if I should be encouraging your behavior. It’s a new day, but not that new. Your father would—”

“No disrespect, sir,” Johnny Ray interrupted, “but my father doesn’t give a damn about me, and the feelin’ is mutual.” As he counted out a hundred bucks, in his mind he ran through the misunderstanding he’d had with his father just a few days ago. Johnny Ray had made the mistake of coming home from school when he’d only had a half day and caught his father in a compromising position with the maid on the living room floor. His back still stung from where his father had whipped him with an extension cord for intruding on them.

“And he’ll never know you’ve been partnering me with my queen unless you tell him.” He set the money in Mr. Wilson’s chubby, outstretched hand.

“You’re right. I just want you to think about what you’re doing.” He stuffed

the money in his front pants pocket. “That’s a good gal there. You could easily ruin her reputation. And what about those friends of yours?”

Johnny Ray folded his arms over his bony chest. “I can handle them.”

“Oh the arrogance of youth,” Mr. Wilson said dreamily. “You’re only fifteen and believe you know it all. You and Matilda are good people. Someday you two might even get together, but for now, I think you should back off. You both have a lot of growing up to do.”

“No way!” He ran his fingers through his neatly cut blond hair then rested them on his hips. “Did you see how much she’s changed over the summer? She’s got curves in all the right places. If I’d a known she was gonna be so...” he couldn’t find a single word that adequately encompassed her beauty, intelligence, grace and fire, “...so...perfect, I would’ve spent my time giving her gifts instead of grief all of these years.”

Mr. Wilson’s eyes lit up along with his round face. “Oh yes, of course. This is just as I thought.” He held the sides of his belly and chuckled. “You’re hormones have you staking your claim.”

“Hell yeah!” Out of habit, he looked around to see if any adults heard him curse. He’d always felt so free around Mr. Wilson, so he had to remind himself he was in school. “I’ve earned my spot in her heart. But I’m not the only one interested. When school first started, I was the only male in the Spanish club.



Now that the others have seen her..." He shook his head. "Twelve, twelve non-Spanish speakin' jerks are after my queen. And who knows what happens when she goes home? You know the guys in her neighborhood are all over her."

"So that's why you wanted to team up with her instead of against her this go around?"

"Yes, sir." He hurried to his desk to gather his things so he could rush on over to the cafeteria and grab something to eat before geometry class. He and Matilda shared honors classes, and next year they'd be taking their math and humanities at a university in Memphis. "Now I'll get to go to her house so we can 'prepare' for the debate. We're going against seniors, right?" He stacked his books. "We need a real challenge."

"Seniors it is."

"Ya know one thing has been kind of on my mind, Mr. Wilson."

"What's that?"

"Well..." He debated whether he should ask the next question or not. Payments aside, Mr. Wilson had been the only helpful instructor he'd approached.

The teacher snapped his fingers. "I need to prepare for the next class and have my lunch. What did you need?"

"I was just wondering...why...why have you been helping me out? I mean, you do more than just set up my meetings with my queen. You seem to actually

want us together.”

Mr. Wilson sighed and rested his sad brown eyes on Johnny Ray. “When I was your age,” his voice filled with longing, “there was a young lady I was partial to, but times were so different back then. I envy you.” He half smiled. “I’m not the only hungry one. I can hear your stomach growling. You’d best get on to lunch.”

“Thank ya, Mr. Wilson.”

Johnny Ray only had time for a bag of chips and a few sips of soda before he darted off to geometry class. The rest of the day went as usual, but after school, his two best buddies hopped into the limo with him for a ride home.

Lynden and Nick stared at Johnny Ray from across the leather seats. The stretch limo exited the parking lot and merged onto the back road traffic.

“What?” Johnny Ray hunched his shoulders. “Y’all goin’ home with me or do you want dropped off?”

“What we wants ta’ know is what’s goin’ on with you and that black chick,” Lynden, the shorter, more rotund of the boys said.

“Yeah, what’s goin’ on?” Nick repeated.

Johnny Ray knew his friends would bust his balls if he told them his real feelings for Matilda, so he prepared to do what any self-respecting teen in his situation would do—lie. “Nothin’. Wilson teamed us up on a debate against some seniors next month. If we win, we don’t have to do the term paper next semester.”

“What’s this I heard about you proclaiming your love for her?” Lynden narrowed his beady, black eyes on Johnny Ray.

“Yeah, how you gonna proclaim love for a coon?” Nick chimed in.

Johnny Ray fought the urge to slap his cousin for calling his queen a coon. He reminded himself that he’d actually used the term a few times with his buddies, but he never meant it the way his friends did. He’d said the words to fit in. He no longer wanted to fit in, but he wasn’t ready to break away from his friends either.

“What I said was she loves me, not the other way around.”

“Why the hell you gonna say some mess like that anyhow?” Lynden bit out. “You know how these yokels always mixing stuff up. You’d best watch out before folks start thinking you’re a nigger lover.”

“Yeah, a nigger lover,” Nick repeated.

Johnny Ray ground his teeth. “Folks or you two? And I done told you I don’t care what people think. Now If y’all gonna keep interrogating me, I’ll have Tunji drop you off.” He motioned toward the Black chauffer on the other side of the glass patrician. He’d always been close to Tunji and didn’t take kindly to his friends speaking any old way around him.

“Come on, man.” Lynden playfully hit at Johnny Ray’s pant leg. “You know we were kiddin’.”

“Yeah, kiddin’,” Nick echoed.

“Hell, that gal can’t even stand to be in the room with you. I know what you’re up to,” Lynden drawled. “You tryin’ to get her into bed.” He nudged Nick in the side and laughed.

“Yeah, you want a little dark meat!” Nick leaned over in laughter.

“I ain’t mad at you,” Lynden continued. “Hell, when you finish with her, I want a go around myself.”

“Yeah, I want my turn. Hell, I want two!”

Johnny Ray didn’t see anything funny in their categorizing his love for Matilda as lust or in passing her around like a basket of bread, but he remained quiet. For their crew, it was acceptable to sleep with any race of woman, but if you had a relationship outside of lust, you were supposed to have it with a white woman. What his partners didn’t know was he hadn’t had any kind of relationship with any type of woman. He’d lied about all of his conquests and had a sneaking suspicion they’d lied about their sexual escapades also.

“If you’re thinking you’re gonna get her in bed,” Lynden continued, “I believe you need to set your sites somewhere else. That Matilda ain’t like them other black gals. Hell, she ain’t like no gal. She must be gay.”

Nick shook his head vigorously. “Yeah, she has to be gay.”

“Enough of this. Let’s head on over to your place and raid your daddy’s liquor cabinet,” Lynden suggested.

“Yeah, let’s get drunk!”

Johnny Ray watched out the window as the limo moved through the afternoon traffic. If he didn’t think of something quick, in six short minutes he’d be stuck entertaining instead of studying for his geometry test. He’d also wanted to call Matilda and set up times and locations to research for the debate before she left for her date with her mom that she’d told him about after he’d cornered her in English class. He thought it was cute they took out time to bond together.

He barely remembered his mother, who died from breast cancer when he was six. Often times he wondered how his life would have been different if he’d had the continued love of his mother.

“Last time y’all raided his stash, I ended up having my ass beat,” Johnny Ray lied. His father would beat him for just about anything besides drinking. “No thanks. I have studying to do anyway.” He reached for the armrest on the door and pressed the intercom button. “Can you stop by Nick’s first?” Tunji nodded.

“Come on, man. It’s Friday. You’ve got all weekend to study.”

“Yeah, all weekend.

“Y’all know I’m in all honors classes. If I get a C in anything, I’m kicked out of the class and can’t start college next year. I can’t slack.” Johnny Ray wanted to start college and get away from his home life almost as much as he wanted Matilda. He wouldn’t allow anything to hinder his goals.

“Between you chasing after Matilda and school, you don’t have time to do shit no more,” Lynden complained. “What the hell’s happened to you? We used to have fun. Now all you want to do is study and pine for some—”

“Just stop right there. I know you’re not in advance classes, but you still need to be thinking about more than breaking into our parents’ booze cabinets. What about college? And you need to stop with the racial slurs. That is so junior high. Someday you’ll work in the real world. All types of people work out there.”

“I’m not in the real world. I’m in the car with your lame ass. And this may come as a shock to you, but you’re rich! You don’t have to worry about college or anything else for that matter.”

Johnny Ray watched as the car passed a shopping plaza. His father designed planes for a living, but inherited most of his wealth from his family’s oil and real estate holdings. Johnny Ray was rich by birthright, but wanted nothing to do with his family or *their* money.

“Earth to Johnny Ray,” Lynden said. “Look, man, I know how important school is for you, but lately school is all you care about. What about having fun? Just because we’re getting older, doesn’t mean we can’t have fun anymore.”

“Yeah, why can’t we have fun anymore?” Nick asked.

“I hear ya.” Johnny Ray sighed. He’d been avoiding his friends lately because they weren’t headed in the direction he wanted to go in his life. The conflicting

emotions within him for his friends warred constantly. On one hand, he'd outgrown them emotionally, on the other, they were all he knew and he couldn't give them up. Either way, he could stand to blow off a little steam. "How about we hang out tomorrow night? I'll pick you guys up around six at Nick's."



*Present Day...*

Johnny Ray couldn't believe his favorite teacher, Mr. Wilson, was actually gone. The man couldn't have been more than sixty. Oh how he wished he had heeded Mr. Wilson's warnings of years ago. If he had, maybe he wouldn't have lost his queen. So many years had passed, yet the pain remained. He'd been married and divorced twice before he realized he was trying to replace something that couldn't be replaced—his one true love. He watched as mourners filled the pews of the church.

Bobby King nudged him in the side and nodded toward the far left aisle of the church. From their position in the back right corner, they could people watch without being obvious. They hadn't been back home to the Memphis area in over fourteen years and were anxious to see the what, when, where, and who of the area.

"There go Lynden and Nick," Bobby said in his slow as molasses manner. "I see Nick is still playing shadow, and Lynden is as big as two houses."

After all of these years, Johnny Ray was still amazed that anyone could speak or move as slow as Bobby. Matilda also had a slow manner of speaking, but not nearly as slow as Bobby's, and her drawl was the cutest sound Johnny Ray had ever heard. He silently prayed for the impossible—to hear her sweet, slow drawl again.

Bitterness filled him as he watched his former best friends. He'd sacrificed everything to maintain a relationship with Lynden and Nick, but didn't realize the price he would pay until it was too late. Though Nick was half Swanson, he was built like the majority of the Sloans: tall, broad, dark hair, brown eyes. Johnny Ray's blond hair and blue eyes had been another way he'd been set apart from the rest of his clan. The Sloans never liked Johnny Ray's mother. They routinely accused her of being a gold digging cheat and stated they didn't believe Johnny Ray was even Joe's child. After Johnny Ray's mother passed, a DNA test his father had had conducted proved Joe Sloan was Johnny Ray's father and shut the family up on the paternity issue. He lowered his face into his palms. The drive to Memphis from Dallas was still wearing on him.

"You need to get up, man," Bobby whispered. "You won't believe who just walked in."

Back to them, she'd already glided halfway down the aisle, but Johnny Ray recognized the confident stride and regal aura of his queen. And her hair, he knew



she'd wear a natural style. The thin locs that flowed halfway down her back begged for him to tangle his fingers in them. *Matilda*. Eighteen years had passed since he last saw her, but his heart still belonged to her, and his body still ached for her. As teens he'd thought her little bumps and curves here and there were the end all and be all. Now seeing her womanly curves...He shook his head as if that would shake out the erotic thoughts he had of making love with her.

She hugged the widow. A woman wearing a double sized hat moved in the way, so he couldn't see Matilda's face. The people in the pew in front of him stood to let someone in, further blocking his view. He wanted to scream, "Would you please sit your butts down?" By the time everyone was settled, Matilda had disappeared.

"I can't believe my folks still won't tell me where she's been," Bobby said. "We're family, and I'm grown now."

"Humph, as long as you and I are tight, you are out of the loop when it comes to Matilda and your family." He scanned the attendants for his queen and spotted her four rows from the front. The deep indigo of her dress would play well against her cinnamon skin. Oh how he missed her sweet softness. "She's been in New York."

"What!" Bobby said under his breath. "How did you know? And for how long?"

“Tunji told me. You know most of my family is there. One of the cousins works at her law firm.” Johnny Ray no longer considered the Sloans his family. He’d disowned them all when he’d lost his queen. He’d even legally changed his last name to Balewa, which was Tunji’s—the man he considered his father. Explaining his distinctly Nigerian surname had been the topic of many interesting discussions.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I just found out a few days ago. Next thing you know, we had to rush up here for the funeral, so I forgot.” When Tunji called Johnny Ray with news of a Matilda sighting, both men were amazed she’d been so close. Isom, Tunji’s nephew, was a paralegal at her firm. Tunji was looking through the company picnic photos when he noticed someone who looked like an older version of Matilda. After Isom confirmed the young woman was indeed Matilda King, Tunji called his only child to tell him the time had come and this was a sign for him to go after his queen.

The services started and everyone quieted. Johnny Ray debated if he should approach Matilda later. The little report he’d received on her only told where she worked, not if she were involved or had children. He still had difficulty believing she’d actually walked out of his life.

*Princess.* Overcome by sorrow, he excused himself and rushed out.

He'd been sitting in his Lexus for five minutes before Bobby opened the door and plopped onto the passenger seat. A grin touched Johnny Ray's lips. "I was beginning to think you'd never make it."

"Man, you know I don't rush for no one. What happened back there?"

"Ghosts." He watched the doorway of the church as if he expected a certain someone to be out momentarily.

"Maybe it's time for you to exercise your demons. Matilda knew you'd be here. She wants you to find her. This isn't like you."



Matilda followed the funeral procession to the graveyard, and returned to the church for the repast. Mr. Wilson had always been so kind to her, and she couldn't believe he was gone. Several of her former classmates were present, which didn't shock her. At first she'd debated if she should attend the funeral. She'd known Johnny Ray would be there, and though she wanted to see him, she still wasn't ready to see him. *Will I ever be ready?*

An unexpected sense of disappointment filled her. Disappointment in herself and the fact that Johnny Ray hadn't attended. The love hate relationship they'd had as teens was volatile, exiting, and full of life. She missed the happier days, but those days led to the day she died inside—the day she'd lost everything she cared for. Happiness had eluded her ever since.

“Matilda?”

Brows furrowed, Matilda didn’t recognize the beautiful, statuesque blond, but felt she should. They looked around the same age, and the woman was smiling from ear to ear. Matilda didn’t really hang with any of the children from school, but she couldn’t think of anywhere else she could have met her.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” The woman weaved through a few people to get to Matilda.

Recognition was on the tip of Matilda’s tongue. “I’m sorry, but I don’t.”

“Mary, Mary Green. In high school I was two years ahead of you.”

“Oh yeah! You were Homecoming Queen.” When Matilda was a freshman, Mary had approached her to join her clique—the most important clique at the school. Recruitment of a freshman into the “popular girls” clique had been unheard of. Matilda was smart, attractive, personable, and athletic, but she felt the reason they wanted her was because she was one of the only blacks at the school and the only black female. She would have been a showpiece of sorts, and she wanted no parts of that. “So how’s it going?”

The metal folding chair scrapped on the linoleum floor as Mary pulled it from the table and took a seat. “Great! You look fantastic.”

“Why, thank you.” Matilda nodded graciously. “You are as beautiful as ever.” Another reason she hadn’t joined the popular girls’ clique was because those girls

were entirely too chirpy for her. All they cared about was boys, staring into the mirror, boys, talking on the phone, boys, shopping in Memphis and boys.

The cheer in Mary's eyes faded, and her face seemed to drop. "Mr. Wilson was such a good man. I'm not shocked everyone came home for his services." She reached over and took Matilda's hand into hers. "Things changed after you left. Changed for the better, but at your expense, and I apologize for my role."

"It wasn't your fault, Mary." The pain of days gone had taken permanent residence in her heart. Tired of hurting, she wished to evict the pain, find closure, and love again. Johnny Ray came to her mind. She had loved him so completely...still loved him, but couldn't forgive him. She blinked away tears. Forgiveness didn't matter anyway, because he hadn't felt the same for her as she had for him. If he had, he would be with her now.

"Everyone in this town is at fault in one way or another, but enough of that." She tapped Matilda's hands. "What's going on in your life?"

The two talked as if they were best friends catching up. Matilda went on and on about her law firm and how she hated it. She wanted to try something different. Mary gleefully carried on about her three children and her "hubby," the love of her life. Mary said "my hubby" so much, Matilda wondered if the man had a name. Kind of reminded her how Johnny Ray used to always call her "my queen."

"...and did you see Johnny Ray! He's as handsome as ever! His hair has

darkened to a golden honey. And he has this mustache and goatee. Whew, howdy!” She slapped the table. A few of the other funeral guests narrowed their eyes on her. She flushed and apologized. Under her breath, she said, “He’s as tall and broad as the other Sloans.” Mary shivered, giggled and drew her hands to her mouth. “Oh my, not that he’s more handsome than my hubby.”

Heart racing and face flushed, Matilda quickly searched the faces in the gathering room, but no Johnny Ray. Many a night she’d spent fanaticizing about him. As the funeral service started, she’d thought she’d felt him crying out. When she looked around, she caught a glimpse of a large, white man with honey blond hair exiting the building in a hurry. *Johnny Ray.*

A sad, knowing smile crossed Mary’s face. “He left during the service.” Another dose of unexpected disappointment grabbed onto Matilda and refused to let go. “You should look him up. You two were made for each other.”

Disgusted that after all this time every fiber of her being still craved Johnny Ray, she wanted to scream. “Made for each other? No way!” she said forcefully, yet under her breath so others couldn’t hear. “I wouldn’t go near him if he were the last man on earth.”

Mary laughed. “Oh yeah, keep telling yourself that line. You may start believing it.” She opened her purse and took out a pen and small notepad. “I’m giving you my cell number and email address.” She jotted down her information. “I

need to head on home to my babies.” She ripped off the sheet and handed it over. “Don’t be such a stranger.”

Matilda drove to the hotel with Johnny Ray on her mind. She wondered if he’d seen her and if he had, why hadn’t he approached. *I should check the hotel register.* There were only a few hotels in town, so she wouldn’t be surprised if he were a guest at the same hotel as she. Strangely, that idea excited her.

As she passed the hospital, a rush of bad memories and the agony she still suffered overcame her and ripped the excitement from her. Short of breath and dizzy, she could see a panic attack in her near future. She quickly pulled into the parking lot and cut the engine of the car. *What am I doing?* She inhaled and exhaled slowly. *I can’t do this again, can’t go through this again.* She fought to focus on her breathing—not her longings, not her mistakes—but lost the fight.



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Matilda rushed into the apartment and dropped her book bag beside the front door. Since her volleyball game was cancelled, it was barely 3:30 and she’d have more time to spend with her mother. “Mama, Mama!” She ran through the living room into the kitchen. “Mama!”

Georgia May stumbled out of her room. “What’s wrong with you, girl?” She

held her robe closed tightly. Her hair was in a ponytail, which meant she'd most likely just taken a bath. She worked as an in-home care nurse for a private agency. She spent Monday through Friday at her client's and the weekends at home. "You scared me half to death."

"I beat Johnny Ray, again!" She pulled one of the ladder-backed chairs from the kitchen table. "You should have seen it." She gently pushed the chair in as her mother sat. "He turned all red. I love making him turn red. I thought his head was gonna pop clean off."

Georgia May giggled and waved Matilda on. "The way you're always carrying on about that boy, I'm beginning to think you've got a crush on him."

"Ewwwww!" She scrunched her nose and tried to shake off the cooties she may have caught by her mother mentioning such a horrible thing because that was the reaction her mother expected. Something had happened to Johnny Ray over the summer that Matilda couldn't put her thumb on. Something that had her thinking about him in ways she didn't want to think about him. "I wouldn't have anything to do with Johnny Ray if he were the last man on earth!"

Georgia May slapped the table as she laughed. "Oh yeah, you've got it bad. I would have sworn to God I hated your father..." she trailed off and looked away.

"Mama," Matilda said softly, "what happened to my father?"

"I done told you he's dead. That's all you need to know." She pushed away



from the table and returned to her room.

Heart heavy, Matilda settled in the chair her mother had abandoned. Whenever the subject of her father came up, Georgia May, would shut Matilda out. She hadn't seen her mother all week and missed her. The previous weekend they were supposed to go into Memphis for a shopping expedition, but her mother had been asked out by her girlfriends. By the time Georgia May arrived at home early Sunday morning, she was too dead to do anything Sunday afternoon with Matilda.

Matilda increasingly found it hard to stifle her sorrow and loneliness. As of late, her mother seemed to have time for everyone except Matilda, but Georgia May promised this weekend would be theirs to do whatever Matilda's heart desired. Thus Matilda had no plans on ruining their time by forcing her mother to talk about her father.

"Honey, Jerome called."

Matilda looked up and saw her mother standing in her bedroom doorway, which was just off the kitchen. The cool blue of Georgia May's skirt and blouse played well against her dark skin. She narrowed her eyes on her mother. The phone hadn't rung since Matilda had been home.

As if she'd read her daughter's mind, Georgia May added, "He called earlier. I meant to tell you when you came in, but you were going on about that boy."

“Is he going out with us? I’d like to meet him.”

“Actually,” she drawled and knelt next to Matilda, “he asked me to this play over in Memphis.” She smoothed stray hairs into the thick braid Matilda wore that dropped just below her shoulders. “You’re a big girl now and don’t need me around like you used to.”

“But you promised we’d go out.”

“I know, honey.” She took her daughter’s hands into hers. “It’s only Friday. We can spend the rest of the weekend together, I promise.”

Matilda withdrew her hands and pushed away from the table. “If you want to go, go. I won’t make you stay with me.”

Georgia May stood behind her. “Now don’t be like that.”

“Like what?” She crossed her arms over her chest and counted the green and cream ceramic tiles on the wall behind the sink. She’d do anything to keep from focusing on her mother, on her anger, on her disappointment.

“You’re too old to pout.”

“And you’re too old to make promises you have no intentions on keeping.”

Georgia May grabbed Matilda by the arm and spun her around. “Listen here, missy.” She bounced her finger in her face. “I don’t know how those white kids at your school talk to their parents, but don’t get any notions in your head that I’m gonna let you get away with disrespecting me.”

Matilda flopped her hands onto her narrow hips. “Since when was telling the truth considered disrespect? When is the last time you made me a promise and actually kept it?”

Slapped by the hand of truth, Georgia May stumbled back. “You...you don’t understand.”

“What is there to understand? If you say you are going to do something, do it or have a darn good explanation for why you can’t. Isn’t that what you’ve taught me all of these years?” She blew out a long breath. “Look, I don’t want to keep you from your date. Have a great evening.” She turned away from her mother and opened the refrigerator.

“We’ll go out tomorrow afternoon. Anywhere you want.”

“Sure we will.” She snatched the platter of chicken she’d fried the previous day and the bag of raw spinach and set them on the counter. Her eyes stung and her nose burned. She just wished her mother would hurry and leave before she started to cry.

“I promise.”

“Of course you do.” The moisture that built in her eyes made it hard for her to find the tomatoes and red onion.

Her mother hugged her from behind. “I love you, baby.”

*Then why are you leaving me, again.* “Don’t keep Jerome waiting.” She remained

stiff until her mother was out the door. Tears streamed down her face as she returned the food to the refrigerator.

Two hours later, boredom accompanied the disappointment her mother had left her with. She called several of her friends from the neighborhood. They had all invited her to go out with them, but since she wasn't allowed to leave the apartment except with her mother, for school, or with her cousin for shopping, she had to decline their offers. She had asked that they come over and watch DVDs, but they'd said no thanks. She didn't blame them. She didn't want to be stuck in the house on a Friday night either.

She took her book bag into her bedroom and sorted through her books. She didn't know whether to kill or kiss Mr. Wilson for teaming her up with Johnny Ray. Somehow, Johnny Ray had the uncanny ability to rub her the wrong and right way at the same time. This unnerved yet intrigued her.

She sat at her desk and flipped through the pages of the school directory. *I'm never going to hear the end of this.* She dialed his number, and then trapped the phone between her ear and shoulder as she took out a notebook.

"Lynden, I said I have studying to do."

"Hello, is this Johnny Ray?"

"Wha...wha...Wait a second. Is this my queen?"

She hated to admit it, but loved the way he called her his queen. "I don't

know who your queen is, but this is Matilda King, your nemesis and partner for the next debate. We have a few seniors to stomp into the ground. I thought we could set our schedule tonight.”

“I thought you told me you have a date with your mother tonight.”

“I got stood up,” she said with an air of nonchalance she didn’t feel.

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

Her mouth and eyes flew open. “No! What’s wrong with you?” The line went dead.

## Chapter Two

*Present Day...*

Johnny Ray selected Cherry Pepsi from the suite's wet bar and flipped on the television. Channel after channel offered nothing of interest. The only thing that interested him was his queen. According to the clerk at the front desk, she was indeed a guest at the same hotel. The young man had offered to ring her room, but Johnny Ray said no thanks. He didn't want to intrude in her life.

A knock at the door caught his attention. Bobby had a keycard, so Johnny Ray knew it wasn't him. *My queen!* Many years ago, she'd called to him and he'd answered. Bobby had been correct. Matilda knew he'd be at the funeral, and she knew how he was. A small part of her had to know he'd pursue if given the slightest chance—just as he had when they were teens.

He brushed off his dark slacks and black dress shirt. He'd hung his suit coat a while ago. He swung the door open. "Hello..." He frowned. "Lynden, what the hell are you doing here?"

Lynden stepped his wide body into the room as if he'd been invited in. "We need to talk."

Still in shock, Johnny Ray mechanically shut the door and joined Lynden in

the living area. “I have nothing to say.”

“Great, then you won’t interrupt me. I know you’ll never forgive me. Hell, I’ll never forgive myself, but I have to try to make things right. You’ll either accept my help or not.”

Head tilted, Johnny Ray couldn’t imagine what Lynden could possibly help him with. “I don’t need or want your—”

Lynden held up his thick hands. “I saw the way you were watching Matilda today. You two have always had that special...” he hunched his shoulders, “...something. I didn’t fully understand. We were too young.” The sofa creaked as he pushed himself to its edge. “I’m not making excuses. My behavior can’t be excused, but I am truly sorry.”

“We were stupid kids. *Really* stupid.”

Bobby repeatedly told him to exercise his demons. Tunji had hounded him for years, saying forgiveness isn’t for the offender, but the offended. *Maybe it is time.* He’d been working to hold on to the anger. *Why?* He asked himself. The desire to restore their friendship wasn’t within Johnny Ray, but this wasn’t about friendship. “Don’t sweat it, man.” The acceptance of Lynden’s apology somehow lifted some of the burden off Johnny Ray’s shoulders.

“After you guys left town, I grew up. Everyone grew up.”

“You want something to drink?” Johnny Ray took a swig of Cherry Pepsi.

“No thanks.”

“So what’s going on in your life?”

“Well,” Lynden leaned back onto the couch, “I’m a married man now.”

“You married! Man, I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Remember how you used to call Matilda your queen? Well...I found my queen.” He rested his hands on the sides of his belly and chuckled. “Or should I say she finally accepted she was my queen?”

“Do I know her?”

“I’ll say you do. You used to know her as Mary Green.”

Cherry Pepsi burned the lining of Johnny Ray’s nose as he choked. “No way!”

“Oh yeah, buddy. Ten years and three kids.”

“Man, things *have* changed.”

“Mary spent much of the afternoon helping me ease my conscious.” He sighed. “I saw you leave the service before you had a chance to catch up with Matilda.”

“And?” Johnny Ray said defensively.

“And it’s time for you to go after your queen.”

Ever since Tunji told Johnny Ray Matilda’s location, the urge to go after his queen had increased twenty fold. He listened intently while Lynden updated him



on Matilda's life.

"Now what are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do?" Johnny Ray smoothed his hand over his goatee and mustache.

"Come on. Recruiters from all over the world are pursuing her. She wants a change in scenery and vocation. You can't tell me you don't have an in at that company of yours."

"I won't manipulate my queen."

A broad smile spread across Lynden's face. "That's what I'm talking about. *Your queen*. And it's not manipulation. You two were born professionals and don't know how to act differently. She'll have no qualms about moving on to another company if yours isn't to her liking. And as I've said, she's highly sought after. Your company is probably already looking into bringing her on."

"I'm not sure about this." The last time he'd arranged for he and Matilda to have time together, the time spent had been the happiest he'd been in his life, yet had ended tragically. But Lynden was correct; this wasn't like when they were in high school where she didn't have any choice in the matter. And she was in the market for a new position. The company he worked for would be the perfect fit for her skills. Yet, he still wasn't sure.

"If ever two people were made for each other, it's you and Matilda."

Tunji, Bobby, and now Lynden were all on him to do what he wanted to do—stop waiting on his queen to come to him and go after her. He'd had to go after her years ago, but now they were grown. "I'm too old to play games."

"Who's talking about games? I'm talking about making your opportunities in life instead of waiting around hoping one will come your way. What are you afraid of, Johnny Ray?"

"Damn, man. What are you, a motivational speaker or something?" He laughed at the changes in Lynden. He was nothing like the boy he'd known so many years ago. He polished off his Cherry Pepsi.

"I couldn't get a woman like Mary sitting back waiting on a miracle. That's not your style either. Matilda has come out of hiding. She's made the first move. Now the ball's in your court."

"You're right." He drew in a deep breath. "The ball's in my court." Recollections of the first time he'd answered his queen's challenge were still fresh in his mind. They'd thought they knew everything. *The ball's in my court.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

"Can I please use your car?" Johnny Ray asked.

Tunji took his feet off the kitchen table and used the remote control to turn down the volume on the counter television. "What you up to, boy?" Tunji asked

with his wrong side of the tracks accent.

Johnny Ray bit on his bottom lip and debated if he should tell the truth.

“Out with it, or the answer is definitely no. And knock that lie out your mouth before you actually speak it.”

“My queen needs me.”

Tunji *tsked* and slapped his leg. “Are you out your damn mind, boy? Your daddy gonna kill you if he finds out you been chasing after a black gal.”

“That’s why I need your car. Pleeeeeeeease. I can’t have you drop me off at her house in the limo. You know the cops will never stop me for driving without a license. I need your help. She’s expecting me in twenty-five minutes. Don’t make a liar out of me.”

“I’m not making you nothin’. You should’ve thought of that before you said you’d hop your hot tail over there. And I ain’t too sure I want you going after that gal. She’s a good one and should be with a good Muslim boy who can convert her.”

Johnny Ray dropped his head to the table. Tunji’s parents had moved to the community from New York City when Tunji was a baby. His father died a year later, which left his mother to raise their four sons alone.

“Oh Lord please don’t tell me you’re a Muslim version of my dad. Come on, you raised me. You know I’ll treat her right.”

“Boy, don’t you never say I’m like your daddy.” He reached in his pocket and

pulled out the keys. “Have it back by midnight.”

“Thanks.” He snatched the keys to the Buick and was out the back door before Tunji changed his mind. Johnny Ray had always considered Tunji more of a father figure than an employee of his father. He never understood why the Black man took to him so, but was grateful he had. Most of the time, he felt as if Tunji, were the only person who loved him.

The drive to Matilda’s was easy. She lived in the upper middle-class area of town. When Johnny Ray discovered Matilda and Bobby King weren’t at his school on scholarship, but their parents actually paid the tuition, he was taken aback—way back. Like many of his classmates, he’d assumed they’d been given a free ride because of the color of their skin and the school was trying to diversify.

He parallel parked a block from her condominium complex. Tunji lived only a few blocks away from her place, so having his car in the neighborhood wouldn’t draw suspicion. He’d just walk like he belonged and ease in. He looked in the rearview mirror to see if he were presentable. A fresh batch of acne dotted his face, but otherwise he considered himself down right handsome. He put on a baseball cap and pulled the bill down to cover much of his face, brushed off his khaki Dockers and straightened his cream polo shirt. He hadn’t bothered to change out of his school uniform when he’d gotten home and didn’t have time to change after she’d called.

Instead of riding the elevator to her floor, he was sure he could float on the cloud she'd put him on by calling. He took off the baseball cap and raised his hand to knock on her door.

"Hey."

He turned and saw Bobby saunter toward him. Only about fifteen feet separated them, but Johnny Ray was sure it would take a good minute before Bobby caught up to him. Bobby was easily over six foot and had the longest, slowest stride Johnny Ray had ever seen. Everything about Bobby was slow except for his mind.

Johnny Ray nodded. "How's goin'?"

"I'm good. I'm good. Matilda told me you were headed this way, but I didn't believe it." He shook his head. "Said you two was gonna study, and she needed me to come by to make sure you didn't try anything."

"Now would I try something?" he joked.

"Not with me here, for sure. Why are you standing out here anyway?" He knocked twice then opened the door. "What's goin' on in here?" he said as he poked his head in.

"Bobby, you know to just come on in." Johnny Ray heard Matilda say.

"Well, you were right. Your white boy came like he said he would." He stepped fully in and opened the door wider. "Come on in here before someone sees

you and you bring down the property value of the neighborhood.” Even Bobby’s laugh was slow.

“That was just cold.” Johnny Ray entered. Matilda was still dressed in her black Dockers and a red polo shirt. The school didn’t care what color your pants and shirt were as long as they were Dockers and a two or three button polo-type shirt. He didn’t care what she wore either. No matter what her wardrobe, she was his beautiful queen.

“Wow, this is a nice place.” Her unit was much more spacious than he had imagined. Two bedrooms were off the living room, and it looked like a third may be off the kitchen. Instead of walls separating the living room from the kitchen and dining area, the floor went from hardwood to gray ceramic tile.

He set his bag beside the coffee table. “Really nice.” He stroked the dolphins that supported the glass top of the table.

“My mom loves dolphins.”

Her soft voice comforted him and made his body react in a way that had him glad Bobby decided to chaperone. He turned his blue gaze to Bobby for help. He couldn’t stand in his present condition, and prayed Bobby would take sympathy on him and cover for him.

Bobby eased out one of his slow laughs.

“What in tar nation has gotten into you, Bobby King?” Matilda shook her

head and reentered the kitchen area. “You have a serious case of giggles today. Y’all hungry?”

“I’d say your boy is hungry all right.” Bobby knelt next to Johnny Ray and whispered, “You cool for a white boy and all, but there ain’t no way in hell I’ll let you touch my cousin.”

“I’m just here to study.”

“Umm hmm. And I’m just here to make sure the only anatomy and physiology you study is in them books.”



*Present Day...*

Still slightly disoriented, Matilda walked into the hotel lobby. The possibility of seeing Johnny Ray, the funeral, Mary, then seeing the hospital had inundated her with so many memories—good and bad—she’d been overwhelmed.

*Pull yourself together.*

Here she was a high powered attorney at a top New York law firm, yet couldn’t face events that happened some eighteen years ago. In a way, she’d been running from them. *I’m not a coward.* Her attendance at the funeral proved she wasn’t afraid to face anything or anyone, including Johnny Ray. Maybe her grandfather was right, and her unwillingness to forgive Johnny Ray was what held her in the pain from the past. *Well, no more!*

To further prove she wasn't afraid to move on, she stopped at the front desk.

"Excuse me."

The clerk set down a pamphlet and took off his glasses. "I'm sorry. How may I help you?"

"Umm, do you have a guest here by the name of Johnny Ray Sloan?"

"One second please." He checked his terminal. "I'm afraid not, ma'am."

Embarrassed for even asking, she thanked the young man and rushed to her suite. *What did I expect, for him to come running to my door, pleading for me to take him back after all of these years? And what would I do?* She giggled as her mind played the soap opera of Johnny Ray begging her forgiveness and her yelling, "Never!"

Asking if he were a guest in the hotel was almost as bad as when she'd called Johnny Ray years ago to "set study dates." *This is worse. I'm not a teen anymore.* She dropped her purse and keycard on the entry table on the way to the sleeping quarters of her suite. Though tall for a woman, she usually wore high heels. After she stripped down to her slip and wrapped her locs with a satin scarf, she laid down and hugged her pillow.

*What was I thinking?* She took the remote off the extra pillow and flipped to a baseball game. The conflicting feelings she had for Johnny Ray now were worse than when she was a teen. *It doesn't matter anyway. He's obviously moved on with his life.* She sighed. *As I should have.* Before the funeral, she was sure she didn't want to see



him and had prayed to miss him. Now that she had indeed missed him, she wished she hadn't. And now she had a bruised ego to go along with the rest of her pain. He had to know she would have attended the funeral. Since she towered over the women and many of the men, she was hard to miss, yet he hadn't sought her out. *This is ridiculous. He's always made me crazy.*

Her stomach growled. She hadn't eaten all day, and it was almost seven. She reached in the nightstand and took out the room service menu. *Umm, spinach-artichoke dip.* She'd always loved spinach. She smiled as she recalled Johnny Ray's introduction to the goodness of spinach. *Why Johnny Ray? Why is it so hard for me to forgive you?* She dropped the menu. *You promised never to hurt me. Promised.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Matilda quickly diced the garlic, red onion, Portobello mushrooms and garden ripe tomatoes, then sautéed them in a small sauce pan with a touch of butter. "Dinner will be done in a minute," she drawled, grabbed a handful of spinach out of the colander, dropped it in with the rest of the ingredients and stirred with a wooden spoon. "Two tops." She added another handful of spinach and a touch of salt.

"Something sure smells good." Johnny Ray washed his hands in the sink and

spied on what she was cooking. “Ewww, I know that isn’t spinach. What kind of kid actually eats spinach when they don’t have to?”

She glanced over her shoulder into the deep blue pools of his eyes and wanted to dive in. “We have a food snob in our midst.” She added more spinach. “Feel free to skip the spinach. That leaves more for us.”

“Shoot, man, you’d best sit down and act like you got some since. Don’t pass up good food. Baby girl can cook her tail off.” Bobby dried his hands with a paper towel and began setting the table. “This time we’ll treat you like a guest, but the next time, you’re on your own.”

They sat around the table and held hands for grace. Matilda didn’t like the attraction she felt for Johnny Ray one bit but didn’t know what to do about it. She snuck a peek at him. He winked. She flushed. *He’s the bane of my existence. What’s wrong with me?* She chalked it up to crazy teenaged hormones.

“...Amen,” Bobby said. “I said *amen*. You two can turn loose of each other any day now. I’m hungry.”

Matilda snatched her hand from Johnny Ray as if he’d pinched her. “I’m glad that’s over with. Just take a taste of spinach. If you don’t like it, that’s fine.”

He filled his plate with fried chicken and corn, but only took a spoonful of spinach. “I guess it won’t hurt to try. Now I hate spinach, so don’t let your feelings be hurt when I don’t like this.”

“I don’t care if you like my cooking or not,” she said in a huff.

“Y’all ain’t planning on playing this silly game all night are you?” Bobby asked and was answered with a snarl from Johnny Ray and Matilda. “Never mind.”

Matilda waited anxiously as Johnny Ray tasted a forkful of the spinach. Her heart sang a happy tune when he closed his eyes and moaned in pleasure.

“I can’t believe this is spinach.” He scooped the rest out of the serving bowl onto his plate. “This is delicious!”

“Sprinkle a little feta, parmesan, or Romano cheese on it.” She tapped the three separate bowls of cheese.

“Why did you have to feed him?” Bobby reached for the hot sauce. “Now we’ll never get rid of him.”

Dinner finished, Johnny Ray and Bobby cleaned the kitchen while Matilda went to her room to freshen up. After she changed out of her uniform into a blue sweat suit, she slipped on her house shoes, then took a few additional minutes to gather herself and figure out what had possessed her to call Johnny Ray.

She’d always enjoyed debating him. He was her only real competition, but, otherwise, she couldn’t stand to be around him. He was way too arrogant for her taste. Before this school year, she’d never conceived she could actually be attracted to him. *Of all people, why Johnny Ray?*

Though she didn’t think they’d get much studying done, she grabbed her

book bag and headed out. Johnny Ray and Bobby were in the living room watching a baseball game.

“Come on in and join us.” Johnny Ray motioned from the couch.

“No thanks. Y’all have your male bonding time.” She set the bag on the dining room table. “I hate baseball.”

“What?” Johnny Ray jumped up from the couch and approached. “How can you hate America’s pastime?”

“I wasn’t allowed to vote.”

“Let her keep her nose stuck in them books, Johnny Ray.”

“But you love history and math.” He gently took her hand into his and led her toward the living room couch. She knew she should have jerked her hand away, but she didn’t want to. His grip was stronger than she’d expected, and she liked it. As of late, the arrogance he’d always exuded had changed to a confidence she admired.

“Baseball is more than a game. It’s history and statistics.” He spent the next few hours wowing her with the many intricacies of baseball. By the end of the game, she was ready to watch another.

The phone rang and interrupted the three’s evening. “Bobby, Auntie said to make sure your butt is home by ten.” She hung up the phone.

Bobby eased his arm around and checked his watch. “Well, I guess I’m

gonna have to leave you two alone. I've only got fifteen minutes until I need to be in."

Johnny Ray's brows furrowed. "Don't you live in this complex?"

"Yeah, but I'm all the way on the other end of the hallway."

Matilda laughed. "I've seen turtles that move faster than you, Bobby."

"Well, you know the tortoise beat that hare in the race." He hugged Matilda and knocked Johnny Ray on the leg. "I'll catch y'all later. Don't do anything I'll have to kick your ass over," he said to Johnny Ray.

Before Johnny Ray could open his mouth, Matilda said, "Oh you sure don't have to worry on that front."

As soon as the door closed behind Bobby, the bravado Matilda had behind her voice just a few seconds ago was nowhere to be found. "It...It's getting late. Do you have to be home soon?"

"You don't have to be afraid of me, my queen. I'd never hurt you. And that's a promise."

His voice was too soft and too sweet to her ears. She even believed his promise. She backed into the dining room. "I'm not afraid of you, Johnny Ray. I just don't want my mama coming home and getting the wrong impression is all." She fumbled through her books. "You ready for the geometry test."

He set his books beside hers. "This is scaring the hell out of me, too."

No other words of their mutual fear or attraction were spoken. Instead, the two studied until eleven-thirty when Johnny Ray readied to leave.

“I don’t like leaving you home alone like this. When do you think your mother will be back?”

“You don’t need to worry about me. I’ve been staying home alone since I was thirteen. My auntie and uncle are right down the hall.” She giggled. “It may take Bobby fifteen minutes, but it’s only a few seconds away for me.”

“Are you serious? Where’s your mom?”

He didn’t look in a hurry to leave, so she handed him his book bag. “She stays at her client’s house during the week and is home on the weekend.” She slowly led him toward the door.

“What type of work does she do?”

“She’s a registered nurse. Her patients are terminal and need around the clock care. She makes really good money at it.” She opened the door.

“But don’t you get lonely?”

Yes. Tired of her mother’s broken promises, she prayed he’d never break his promise not to hurt her. She was afraid to give him the chance to break his word because she knew this broken promise would break her heart. She hunched her shoulders. “I don’t know. I guess sometimes.”

He checked his watch. “I have to be home in a little bit, but how about I

drop by tomorrow for another study session?”

“Mama is taking me out tomorrow.”

“She’ll be sleeping late won’t she? I can come by tomorrow morning.”

She chewed on her inner jaw. “I reckon that’ll work.”

## Chapter Three

*Present Day...*

*Home free.* Johnny Ray breathed a sigh of relief. They'd just driven through Texarkana, and Bobby hadn't mentioned the Lynden visit. Bobby had been on his way out to find something to eat and had dropped by Johnny Ray's suite to see if he wanted to join him. Johnny Ray never thought he'd see the day when Lynden and Bobby agreed on anything. By the time Bobby and Lynden left, the two had ganged up on him about pursuing Matilda.

Johnny Ray sped his Lexus up to eighty-five miles per hour. Dallas was only a few hours away. He glanced over at Bobby. He had let the seat back as far as it would go and stretched his legs out as far as he could. Closer to seven foot than six, Bobby was the tallest, lankiest, nicest person Johnny Ray knew.

"Instead of looking at me, you need to be looking into a way to get Matilda back." Bobby slowly stretched his arms back, and then reset the seat into the sitting position. "I miss my cousin. I miss..." He turned and watched the traffic through the passenger side window. "Remember how we all used to sit around and watch games. The three of us were inseparable." He hunched his shoulders. "I just miss my family."



“I’m sorry about—”

“I told you to stop blaming yourself for the rift in my family.” Bobby faced Johnny Ray. “Auntie Georgia May is the one to blame. She always distanced herself from the family. I think the only reason she stuck around as long as she did was because of Granddaddy. He knew how she was and made her stay put so Matilda would have someone near.”

No matter how many times Bobby insisted Johnny Ray wasn’t at fault, Johnny Ray knew differently in his heart. After Matilda and Johnny Ray broke up, the family treated Bobby like an outsider because he refused to condemn Johnny Ray. A rebellious teen at the time, Bobby left home and started college early, never to regain the closeness with his family he once had. Johnny Ray knew Bobby missed his family and tried to convince him to make amends, but Bobby was as stubborn as he was tall. Bobby believed that since his family had been the ones to push him away, they should be the ones to pull him back in. His grandfather was the only one he remained close with.

The speedometer indicated Johnny Ray was pushing past ninety. He lightened up on the gas. “Miss Georgia May was hurting, Bobby.”

“And we weren’t?” he said bitterly. “We were kids and our world was...was...” He shook his head. “We thought we were grown, but we weren’t. Why were we expected to act like adults when the adults didn’t even act like

adults?”

“Man, you sure couldn’t tell me I wasn’t grown back then.” Johnny Ray chuckled. “Thanks for sticking it out with me.”

“I’d like to say I was doing it for you, but...there was this *fine* sistah who was a freshman at the University of Memphis...”

“You are such a liar! What was her name?”

“I don’t kiss and tell. Now back to Matilda. What’s the plan?”

Johnny Ray weaved the Lexus through the traffic. “I have to find a way for us to work together.”

Bobby slapped his slender leg with his bony hand. “Aw hell naw! Not that again.” He laughed. “Remember when you kept arranging to be on school assignments with Matilda?”

Tickled, Johnny Ray asked, “So you actually noticed that?”

“You’d have to be blind not to. Your allowance must have been humongous.”

“Everything is different now. I just need more time to sort things out in my mind.”



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Bag slung over his shoulder, Johnny Ray skipped steps as he rushed for the front door to go see his queen. He’d barley slept a wink last night from worrying

about her being home alone.

“Where you headed to in such a hurry, boy?”

The rumble of his father’s voice almost made Johnny Ray trip down the final two steps. He’d thought he had another two weeks of freedom before Joe’s return. Energy drained, he walked over to the den where his father stood in the doorway. “I’m in a debate next month against some seniors. If we win, we don’t have to do a term paper next semester. So I was headed over to my partner’s house to get this ball rolling.”

“Don’t you care about anything besides school?” Joe Sloan was a large man, with an even larger voice, whose dark persona intimidated many. “It’s Saturday, you should be out with your friends.

Unsure how to compute his father actually being civil to him, Johnny Ray went along until he could figure out what his father was up to. “Well, I’m supposed to be hanging out with Lynden and Nick tonight.”

“How will you get there?

The question threw him. He wanted to say, “The same way I get everywhere else.” But said, “Tunji.”

His dad chuckled and pat him on the back. “I fired Tunji this morning.”

“What?” he said with more force than he intended. Tunji was more than a chauffeur. He was his true father figure and his only protection against Joe. “How

am I supposed to get to school?" he said with a calmness he didn't feel. When Tunji was around, Joe didn't beat Johnny Ray. In a way, he thought his father feared Tunji. He was also worried about how Tunji would support himself, but knew his father didn't want to hear that.

"Drive!" Joe said. The marble floor sounded as if it would crack under the weight of Joe's heavy steps. He opened the front door and motioned toward a new red BMW with a personalized license plate that read JONY RAY.

"Dad, you didn't!" He ran down the steps to the car. "But I'm only fifteen."

"Boy, do you know who I am?" Joe boasted and whipped Johnny Ray's illegal, yet authentic, driver's license out of his inner suit pocket. "With money, anything is possible. Just don't go flaunting, and you should be fine."

"No way!" He reached for the license. The date of birth was off a year, but everything else was correct.

Johnny Ray's birthday was in June, and his father, as usual, had forgotten. Christmas was still three months away. Not that his father gave him gifts for that either. He raked his mind to find some reasonable explanation for such an extravagant gift. The last time they'd seen each other, his father had beat him for walking in on...*That's it. This is a guilt gift.*

Tunji had dropped Johnny Ray off at home and gone to a doctor's appointment in Memphis. After the beating, Johnny Ray had walked three miles to

the nearest payphone, called a taxi, gone to Tunji's and crashed until he came home. Johnny Ray had a key to Tunji's place and often stayed there when his father was home.

"Here ya go." Joe dropped the keys and license into Johnny Ray's outstretched hand. "Take it for a spin."

"Thanks, Dad." He ran back indoors for his book bag. "Oh, Dad."

"Yeah." Joe stepped fully into the house.

"My partner for the debate is black, so if you hear I've been hanging around blacks, it's because I have to. I know you don't want blacks in the house who don't work for you, so I'll just go over there."

"What!" His face contorted with rage.

Johnny Ray backed away and raised his arms to protect his head as his father approached.

"You go to an all white school. How the hell could this happen?"

"There are two blacks there." He slowly lowered his arms but kept his voice soft. "They pay tuition, so the school can't keep them out."

"How the hell did you end up having to partner up with one?"

"The teacher assigns partners. I didn't fight it because I'd rather do my time and get it over with than worry about when the time will come."

"That makes sense." He stepped down into the den. "What the hell is the

world coming to when niggers can afford to go to school with good white folk?”

At one point in time the word “nigger” didn’t affect Johnny Ray any more than the word “shoes” or “socks” would, but now he cringed internally whether it came from his father, friends, or even blacks calling each other any form of the term. His mother had taught him that name calling didn’t hurt anyone and to just ignore the ignorant people who do it. He’d even dipped into ignorance himself a few times and called names to fit in. But Johnny Ray no longer agreed with his mother’s view. “We’ll I’m gonna head on out, so I can get this over with.”

“I still expect you to win this debate. Hell, this will be good practice for you. When you grow up there won’t be no getting away from them.”



*Present Day...*

Lunch break just about over, Matilda hung up the phone and situated herself in her executive chair. Only twenty-two years old when she graduated from law school and passed the bar, she went to work for Hoskins, White, Barlow and Associates. When she first started working at the law firm, she shared a tiny, windowless closet of an office with another associate, but now she had an opulent office with a view of the Hudson and Lady Liberty waving her torch just for Matilda. As she looked at the leather bound law books that dominated the built-in bookshelf, she wondered what possessed her to become a lawyer. Yes her

grandfather and uncles were lawyers, and her mother always said Matilda argues better than any lawyer, but...Matilda sighed. Though she was an excellent attorney, Matilda just didn't have the passion to practice law.

*My life is passionless.*

The weeks since the funeral had been hectic, yet thoughts of Johnny Ray still occupied much of her day and night. The man Mary had described partnered with the glimpse Matilda had caught of Johnny Ray, fit into Matilda's erotic fantasies too perfectly. She and Johnny Ray had shared passion. A passion that still scared her and that she still longed for. A passion that had led to recklessness she couldn't afford to give in to again. She slowly sunk into the soft leather of her chair. Yes she could forgive him—wanted to forgive him—but her unwillingness to forgive was her only protection against the passion she knew would consume them both.

*This is ridiculous. There is no 'us' to be consumed by passion.*

"Hey, Matilda." Isom Balewa poked his head into her office. He'd been a paralegal at the firm for the past three years and her lunchtime kicking-it buddy the past few months. Though his great-great-grandparents had migrated from Nigeria to New York in the late eighteen hundreds, Matilda marveled at the way his family had held onto much of its Nigerian culture.

"How did the interview go?" He settled in the armchair in front of her desk.

“You sound a little too excited,” she teased. “You trying to get rid of me?”

He rested his stubby, dark hands on his suit-clad legs. “You? I’d never. Now Alexis best watch her back.” He winked. His Bronx accent was a testimony to how long his family had been in this country.

*Tunji.* She hadn’t thought of him in years. He was the first Nigerian she’d met. Johnny Ray had insisted that once they lost their Nigerian accent, they couldn’t claim to be Nigerian anymore. A smile stroked her heart. Tunji sounded just as “Tennessee country” as the rest of them.

“You complain an awful lot about Alexis. I think you have a thing for her.”

“Only in her dreams. Now stop diverting the conversation, and tell me when to schedule the going away party.”

“They offered me the position, but I’m not sure if I’ll take it. What do I know about marketing?” Over their lunchtime discussions, Matilda had often told Isom how she was ready for a change. One of his cousins worked for the largest marketing firm in the country, thus he used his connections to get her the interview. Everyone in the firm knew she was looking elsewhere and wished her no ill will. She’d even gone as far as telling the other partners she wouldn’t be returning after the new year whether she found a new position or not.

He crossed his short legs and leaned back in the chair with the most indignant smirk she’d seen in a long time. It took all she had not to laugh.



“I know you aren’t going there.” He *tsked*. “Your undergrad is in marketing. You’d intended on going into marketing until your mother convinced you to attend law school. And since when did you shy away from a challenge.”

“But Texas? Do you realize how hot it gets down there?”

“Ummm, you’re from Tennessee. Texas-Tennessee, same thing. Hell pardnah, that’s yer peoples down thar,” he said with the worse Texas twang she’d ever heard. “Plus, you need to meet my cousin, Jonathan. You two would be perfect for each other.”

“Oh Lawd, he’s trying to match-make y’all,” she drawled. “Run for the hills. Humph, I surely don’t want to go down there if this is just your way of finding your cousin a date.” She giggled. “That’s kind of extreme, don’t you think? And I’m not even Muslim.”

“He’s not Muslim, and you need to take this position because you are ready for a change. I’ll miss you, we all will, but you aren’t happy here.” He nodded toward the frames on her desk. “The only reason you’re sticking around Manhattan is for your mother.”

Sadness overcame her as she took in the photos of her mother, Georgia May. Isom was correct. She stayed in New York in hopes of a relationship her mother didn’t want. After they’d initially left Tennessee, Georgia May had promised things would be different and had been very attentive to Matilda, but as the

months went by, Georgia May's life became her own. *Too many broken promises.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Matilda glanced from her economics book to the rooster clock above the stove. She and Johnny Ray had discussed everything from starting a marketing firm together after they completed college to why literature was the most boring subject ever. “It’s almost two. I think we should start cleaning up. Mama will probably be waking soon.” Well over a month had passed since her last bit of quality time with her mother, and she felt overdue for a “mommy” fix. Georgia May had never been a real hands-on mother, but the past year Matilda felt like her mother just didn’t want to be bothered with her anymore.

Georgia May would often say, “Mommy’s little girl is all grown up and doesn’t need her mommy anymore.” Matilda couldn’t disagree more. She wanted—needed—her mommy more now than she could ever remember needing her. She had so many crazy emotions and thoughts going through her mind that she needed help sorting through. But she couldn’t tell her mother because she knew what her mother actually meant was, “You’re old enough to take care of yourself now. I’m done playing ‘mommy.’ I’m ready to have my own life.”

Johnny Ray neatly stacked their note cards. “What time did she come in last night?”

“I was so tired I didn’t even hear her come in. You’re mixing the Spanish cards with the chemistry cards.”

“Sorry.” He quickly unmixed the stacks.

“We studied through lunch. You want me to fix you a sandwich for the road?”

“That would be nice. I’ll finish cleaning this up.” He began sorting through their notebooks.

She opened the refrigerator door. “Turkey, ham, beef, or a combo?”

“A turkey, ham combo. So what are your plans for today?”

“I want to go to the movies, skating, and bowling.” The thought of the things she’d get into with her mother excited her. “Oh! Did I forget swimming?” She couldn’t swim a stroke, but wanted to learn. Since she could remember, she’d had dreams of drowning. She figured if she learned to swim, the dream wouldn’t come true.

He laughed. “That’s an awful lot for one afternoon.”

“Well we can do the rest tomorrow.” She took out a skillet, butter and bread. “I’ll grill it for you. White or wheat bread, provolone or cheddar cheese?”

“Wheat and provolone. Do you need me to help?”

“All I need is for you to clean up our mess. I can’t believe I lost track of time.” She took out the sandwich spread and mustard, then quickly sliced a tomato. “Do

you want lettuce on this?”

“No thanks.” He stuffed his books into his bag. “Well, it sounds like you will be too busy tomorrow, so I guess we can’t meet again until Monday.”

“I have volleyball practice after school on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday.” She flipped his sandwich onto a heated skillet for browning. “How about we meet in the library for study hall on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday?” They shared the same schedule, so her suggestion was doable.

“And on Tuesday and Friday I can drop by here.”

She wanted to see him every day of the week, which scared her as much as her calling him in the first place. “We don’t need to meet up that much. I don’t have any volleyball games this week, but I’m babysitting. Three hours a week should be plenty. Closer to the debate, we can meet all week.”

“Sure, you’re right.” The disappointment in his voice matched what she felt.

She turned off the stove and set his sandwich on a plate. The front door opened and startled them both.

Still dressed in the cool blue skirt and blouse she’d worn the previous night, Georgia May walked in.

“Mama?” Totally confused, Matilda rushed across the room. “I thought you were in your room asleep. Where have you been?”

Georgia May’s eyes had serious bags under them, her clothes were slightly

wrinkled and her hair was disheveled, but her smile lit up the room. “I saw my first Broadway play!” she squealed and hugged Matilda.

“Broadway as in New York City?”

“Of course New York City. Any other Broadway is a pale imitation. After I get some sleep, I’ll tell you all about it.” She stepped back. “I have a great day planned for us tomorrow. I thought we’d have our nails done and do a little shopping. Something smells good.” She looked toward the kitchen. “Ummm, who’s that?” She pointed at Johnny Ray.

He stepped forward with his hand held out. “Johnny Ray, ma’am.”

“Oh! You’re the infamous Johnny Ray.”

It took a few moments for Georgia May’s words to register fully, but once they did, Matilda was enraged. “Hold up,” she drawled out. “You left the state?”

Georgia May and Johnny Ray stared at Matilda.

“I know you didn’t just raise your voice at me.” Matilda was tall for a female, but Georgia May had her beat by five inches and at least seventy pounds.

“I know you didn’t leave the state without telling me. And I know you didn’t just ditch me again. Today was supposed to be our day. You promised.”

Georgia May glanced over her shoulder at Johnny Ray, then faced her daughter. “We aren’t going to discuss this now,” she said between clenched teeth. “Stop being so argumentative all the time.”

“Why not now? Didn’t you teach me that if I show my tail in public, you’d snatch it straight in public?”

“Don’t you throw my words back in my face! You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Well as not to have another misunderstanding, please tell me what you meant yesterday when you cancelled our date so you could go to a play with Jerome and *promised* we’d go out today.” She crossed her arms over her chest. Johnny Ray looked uncomfortable, and she guessed she was giving him a lot of ammo to use against her in the future, but she was too angry to care.

“That’s not fair. Sometimes plans change. Jerome surprised me with these tickets. I couldn’t just say no.”

“Why not? And you told me you were going to Memphis, which is only a few miles away, not New York City.” Tears blurred her vision. She turned away from her mother in hopes that Johnny Ray wouldn’t see her cry.

“Baby, please.” Georgia May hugged her from behind. “I’m sorry, but try to see this from my side.”

“Why haven’t I met this man you’re gallivanting all over the country with? Why do you drop everything for him when he calls? What’s going on, Mama?”

She rubbed Matilda’s back. “You’re blowing this out of proportion. I’ve always wanted to see a Broadway play. I’m sorry I ruined your plans, but we have

so many weekends ahead of us.”

“That’s always your excuse. He doesn’t know about me, does he?”

“Next weekend, let’s go on a trip. Anywhere you want. How about Disneyland?”

She spun around on her mother. “Answer the question. Does the man you’ve been dating for over a year know about me?”

Georgia May blinked rapidly as tears streamed down her face. “No.” She lowered her gaze to the hardwood floor.

Matilda would have sworn someone sucker punched her in the gut and stabbed her in the back.

“Baby, try to understand,” Georgia May said softly.

“I’m tired of being the understanding one.” She brushed past her mother and headed for her bedroom.

“After I catch a nap, we can do whatever you want.”

Matilda stopped and turned slowly toward her mother. “You mean we’ll do whatever I want unless Jerome summons you. I’m sorry. I’m being rude. Johnny Ray, this is my mother Miss Georgia May King. Did you marry? Are you still a King?”

“Stop it!” Georgia May demanded.

“Or what, you’ll act like you don’t have any children?”

Georgia May reeled back as if the same invisible force who had punched Matilda in the gut had claimed another victim. She drew in several deep breaths. “I know you’re angry. We’re both angry, but I’m only willing to take so much.”

“Well I’ve all ready had more than I can take, so I reckon I need to keep going so we can at least be even.” She bowed slightly. “I’m sorry, Johnny Ray. This is not how we usually conduct ourselves. I’ll see you at school on Monday.” She turned, stalked into her room, closed the door, fell onto the bed and cried.

A few minutes later, her door opened slowly. Face still in her pillow, she said, “Go away, Mama. I don’t want to fight anymore, and I don’t want you to make more promises. I can’t take any more broken promises.”

“Since I’m not your mother, can I stay?”

“Johnny Ray, what are you doing in my room?” She quickly wiped her eyes and threw one of her pillows at him.

“Well,” he caught the pillow and sat on the edge of her bed, “Miss King and I just had a conversation, and she said I could take you to the movies, skating and bowling, but I had to have you home by midnight.”

She pursed her lips. “You’re lying. Georgia May never allows me to leave this house unless I’m with her, Bobby, my auntie or uncle. I think she’s crazy. She doesn’t actually associate with the family, yet we live right down the hall. She doesn’t want to spend time with me, yet she keeps me trapped in this condo. Nah,



there's no way she said we could go out."

"You have a lot to learn, my queen. I'm what is called a guilt gift. Your mom knows she was wrong and feels guilty. Her pride won't allow her to apologize, so to help relieve the guilt, parents often give the offended child some outlandish gift." He kicked off his loafers and stepped on her bed to get to the window. "Check this out." He held back the shade and pointed at the street below.

She saw nothing special. "What?"

"Do you recognize the red BMW?"

"Nope."

"Well, my dad gave it to me this morning."

"No way!" She flopped onto the bed and crossed her jean-clad legs. "But you're only fifteen."

"Like I said, outlandish."

"I'm scared to ask what he did to get that much guilt going."

He massaged his lower back. "Let's just say I earned every penny he paid for the car, and then some. So are we on? My treat."

Oh how she wanted to say yes. "Thanks, but I have a reputation to protect. I can't be seen with you in public."

"If I didn't know you love me, I'd be offended." He leaned against the headboard. "Does that TV work?"

“Yep.” She handed him the remote.

“Then I say it looks like a great afternoon to watch baseball and order a pizza. I put the sandwich you made in the refrigerator.” He patted the spot beside him. “Have a seat.”

“I’ll watch the game with you, but I don’t love you.”

“Of course you do.”

## Chapter Four

*Present Day...*

“I’m just not sure about the way I’m doing this?” Johnny Ray propped the cordless phone between his ear and shoulder as he chose his suit, dress shirt and tie for the next day. Though he’d denied it in his heart, Bobby was right. He was repeating a mistake from his past. “I should have just hopped my butt on a plane for New York and dragged her back home to me where she belongs.”

Lynden’s robust laugh filled the line. “Oh yeah, that would have worked.”

Johnny Ray joined Lynden in laughter. He’d missed Lynden more than he cared to admit. His old friend had grown into the great man. Now that he was pursuing Matilda, he knew he’d have to give their renewed friendship up. She’d never believe Lynden had changed. He exited the closet and hooked his clothes on the rack just outside the closet door.

“I’ll bet Matilda could still kick your butt.”

*Bet...* Mood completely darkened, he slouched onto his recliner and grabbed the remote. “That stupid bet was the beginning of my downfall.”

“You’ve got to stop beating yourself up about the past. Hell, I did some really awful stuff, and you forgave me. All you did was fall in love. Why can’t you forgive

yourself?”

“Because I hurt my queen.” Not even a baseball game seemed appealing to Johnny Ray. He dropped the remote onto the end table beside the recliner. “I promised never to hurt her. I promised!”

“I’m not making excuses, but we were only kids. You made a promise that was impossible to keep. We’re older now, more mature.”

“You sure you aren’t a motivational speaker?” He grinned sarcastically at the lunacy of it all. As teens, he’d arranged for his queen to work on class projects with him so he’d be near her. Now, as an adult, he’d basically done the same thing. By the time the ball got rolling and he acknowledged he was repeating the same mistake, the ball was so large it ran him over and took on a life of its own. “I can’t go through this again, Lynden. I can’t.”

“She’s all ready accepted the position. What are you going to do?”

“I’ve found two comparable positions for Matilda in the company if she doesn’t want to work with me. One of them is here in Dallas. The other is in our Chicago office.” He wanted to call her and tell her everything, but couldn’t bring himself to do it. They’d corresponded through email since she accepted the position, business of course. But after two days of emails, he couldn’t resist any longer and called her. Their conversations quickly turned from business to a mix of banter and business. The next thing he knew, they were speaking nightly about

everything except what they should have been talking about.

“It’ll all work out, you’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right.” He again wished he’d heeded Mr. Wilson’s warnings about pursuing Matilda. As a teen he’d felt invincible. Now he knew better. “I hope you’re right.”

“I hate to put more of a damper on things, but Nick said Joe was in town around the time of the funeral.”

“I don’t give a damn where he is as long as it isn’t near me or my queen.” Unlike Lynden who he’d had to work at being angry with, the anger he felt for Joe resonated from a place deep within Johnny Ray. A dark place that reminded him of how much like his father he truly was. And Nick. After forgiving Lynden, he performed a much needed internal scanning. He forgave Nick and even sent him a letter saying as much, but also told him he didn’t want to be a part of Nick’s life.

A beep over the line indicated Johnny Ray had another call. He checked the caller ID. “I need to take this call, Lynden. Go make love to that beautiful wife of yours.” He switched calls. “Hey, Isom!”

“How’s my favorite cousin?”

“Oh please. Just last month you were threatening to kick my white ass.” They both laughed.

“You’re the one who came up here talking mess. Everyone and their dog

knows the Rangers can't beat the Yankees." He paused and stammered a bit before saying, "So...It's almost the big day. Are you ready?"

"Nope. But I have to try. Is Miss Georgia May still in the picture?" He'd found it odd that Matilda never mentioned her family in her calls, but he was grateful because this kept him from having to reveal his identity. Guilt and shame played tug of war with his conscience, and no matter which won, he lost.

"Is she! I'll bet you heard her going off down there. Matilda wanted to tell her mom face to face, but Miss Georgia May stood her up twice, so Matilda ended up leaving her a voice mail about the job offer. Within the hour—and I know because we'd just started eating our lunch when she called—Georgia May stormed into Matilda's office, talking about she was ruining her life."

He cringed. "Don't tell Bobby, but I used to be afraid of Georgia May. But Matilda...Shoot, my queen was fearless. She'd take her mom on, and Georgia May always backed down."

"Well, not this time. Georgia May kept at Matilda until Matilda finally told her mother to leave her office or she'd call security and have her escorted out."

Johnny Ray lurched forward. "No way! You lyin'."

"Yes way. I have to give it to Matilda. She remained calm and kept a level voice, though her mother was acting a stone cold fool. Georgia May left without the aid of security, but I know there was hell to pay when Matilda next saw her

mother.”

“Man, that’s crazy. I never really understood Georgia May.” He ran his hand over his goatee. “I know she loved and was proud of Matilda. In a way, she treated her like a trophy. When she needed an ego boost or a little extra attention, she’d pull out her trophy. Otherwise, back to the box for safe keeping.”

“That’s heavy. Wait until Georgia May finds out you’re back in the picture.”

“It’ll be ugly.” The two caught up on family business and joked a bit before ending their conversation. He’d only answered the call because he didn’t want to talk about Joe. But now he had an added worry of Georgia May.

After his nightly call to Matilda, sleep eluded Johnny Ray. Worry of his past, present and future refused to give him peace. He rolled over and stared out the balcony window into the darkness of the night. He hadn’t seen the man who impregnated his mother since he was a teen and had no desire to see him anytime in the future. He also hadn’t seen Georgia May. He’d always resented her treatment of Matilda. From what Isom had told him, not much had changed. His mind ventured to the bet he’d made with Lynden and Nick. *Yep, that was a serious mistake.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Johnny Ray pulled into his garage a little before midnight. Bobby had come

over to Matilda's, and the three of them watched baseball and had a great time for the rest of the day. Georgia May received a call around eight from Jerome and was out the door by eight-thirty showered and looking fresh again. Of course, she promised Matilda they'd spend Sunday together before she ran out.

Johnny Ray barely stepped one foot into the door when he heard the stereo blaring rock music. This could only mean his father had left, but not before allowing Lynden and Nick in. *I am not in the mood for them tonight.*

He crept past the den to the stairwell.

"Hey, man, where the hell have you been?" Lynden stepped out of the den.

"Yeah, where have you been?" Nick parroted.

"Your dad told us about the car. Where's it at? We were supposed to go out tonight."

"Yeah, we were supposed to go out."

Johnny Ray leaned on the banister but wanted to break off one of the wood spokes and smack himself in the head for forgetting. "I went cruising and lost track of time. I'm sorry. I'm dead tired, so heading on to bed. We can go wherever you guys want tomorrow."

"Are you kidding?" Lynden dragged him into the den. "You have wheels, man. Do you know what that means?"

"Yeah, do you know what that means?"



“Girls are going to hop out of their panties when they see us coming!” Lynden rubbed his grubby hands together.

“Yeah, girls, girls, girls and more girls.” Nick jumped up and down.

“Y’all are out of your minds.” Johnny Ray laughed as he sunk onto the leather sofa. The only girl, female, woman on his mind was Matilda King. “But you’re right. My car is a chick magnet!”

“And with homecoming coming up...” Lynden trailed off. “You’ll have to beat them off with a stick.”

“Yeah, beating and loving every minute of it.” Nick pretended to be beating women away from them.

“I have my eyes on Mary Green.” Lynden tossed the throw pillow off the armchair and situated himself.

“No way!” Johnny Ray and Nick gasped in unison. Not only was Mary a senior, but her boyfriend was a sophomore in college.

“I guess you think you’re going with Matilda?”

“Yeah, like she’d actually say yes.” Nick chose to sit on the floor and lean his back against the couch.

“I’ll bet I could get Matilda to go with me before you could get Mary Green.”

“Bet, bet,” Nick thumped his fists on the coffee table, “bet, bet, bet...”

“Okay, a hundred bucks says you can’t get Matilda to go to homecoming

with you.”

“And what do I get when you can’t get Mary?”

Lynden’s double chin wobbled as he shook his head. “I was just talking shit. Mary’s boyfriend will kick my ass if I go anywhere near her, but Matilda doesn’t have anyone, and she’s black. You have nothing to lose.”

“Except his pride when she says no!” Nick doubled over in laughter. “That black girl is always showing you up!”

Johnny Ray raised a brow. “Not only will Matilda go to homecoming with me, but someday I’ll be the one she gives her virginity to.”

Now Lynden also buckled over in laughter. “Dream on! She has her shit on serious lock down. Never. It will never happen.”

“Bet, bet, bet,” Nick thumped his fists on the coffee table, “bet, bet, bet...”

Lynden crossed his arms over his thick chest. “Two hundred if she goes to homecoming with you and an additional five hundred if you bang her.”

“I’m not betting on when we make love. It’s inevitable, but I won’t rush things.”

“Baww, baww, baww.” Lynden flapped his arms like a chicken.

“Yeah, baww, baww, baww.”

“I’m not afraid. That’s just the stupidest bet I’ve ever heard. I wouldn’t even be able to prove it, and there’s no way in hell I’m letting anyone watch.”

“You’re a man of your word. We trust you. This is easy money. The only reason you’d pass it up is if you’re scared.”

“Yeah, scared. Bawk, bawk, bawk.”

“Bet!” Johnny Ray slapped his hand on the marble tabletop. “But I’ll need more time to get her into bed.” He stroked his hand along the heavy wood frame of the table.

“How much?”

“Yeah, how much?”

“Let’s say by prom. That should give me plenty of time to ease my way in, but y’all can’t submarine me. If I find out y’all are messing in my game, I win by default and I’m paid double.” He smiled at his brilliance. Now they couldn’t say a thing about the time he intended on spending with Matilda.

Lynden and Nick high-fived each other.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about us. She’ll never sleep with you.”

“Yeah, never!”



*Eighteen years ago...*

“You sure you don’t want one of these burgers, boy?” Tunji tossed a patty on the skillet.

“I’m good,” Johnny Ray said. Tunji’s accent always brought comforting

memories of Johnny Ray's mother with it. Just about everyone from the "wrong side of the tracks" sounded similar—including his mother. Yet another reason she was not accepted by the Sloan clan. "Can I use your phone? I'll bet my queen fixed something that'll make you convert to Judaism."

Tunji, a born and raised Muslim, grumbled over his shoulder, "Don't come in here talking that mess. Ain't you supposed to be out with your boys?"

"The one good thing about having a heathen for a father is I don't ever have to worry about church services. Their mothers pulled a sneak attack, so they're in church," he said from the counter where he picked up the phone. "It's only two. She may not even be home yet."

"Your daddy find out about Matilda, he gonna kill you both."

"I'm only studying." He dialed the number.

"Yeah, right." Tunji opened the bun package.

"Hello. May I speak to Matilda?" He listened with a big smile on his face. "Of course I recognize my queen's voice. I was just being careful."

Tunji rolled his eyes and shook his head as he took out the cheese and mustard.

"My buddies ditched me, so I was hoping I could come over there for a little bit. Our geometry test is tomorrow. I was thinking we could quiz each other with the flash cards..." He leaned his lanky body on the counter. "Oh yeah, I forgot.

Well, I can help babysit. Are you cooking dinner?" He rubbed his belly and licked his lips. "Smothered pork chops, mashed potatoes and broccoli. Oh yeah, baby! I'm there. I'll be there at five. Bye." He hung up.

"Boy, you'd best stop eating that swine." He flipped his burger.

"You've never even tasted pork. You have no idea what you're missing." He fidgeted with the end of his T-shirt.

"What's wrong with you, boy?"

"I don't know." Johnny Ray hunched his shoulders. "I guess...well I'm worried about you. I can't believe my dad fired you. You can have all of my allowance."

"Johnny Ray, I done told you a thousand times I worked for your daddy to keep an eye on you, not for his money." He ran his dark hands over his slightly graying hair. "I'm getting too old to be foolin' around with him anyway. You 'bout grown. You'll be fine. You just come here when he starts acting out of pocket."

"I am grown."

"Umm hmm." He flipped the burger. "You'd betta eat one of these here burgers. You gone starve before that gal cook."

"How will you support yourself?" He opened the refrigerator and stared at the contents for something light.

"Instead of cooling the kitchen, look on the door there."

Johnny Ray closed the refrigerator door. "A calendar?" The black woman on the hood of the car was not as attractive as his queen, but still quite attractive. Johnny Ray didn't see the connection. "Do you have any apples?"

"On the other side of the sink." He motioned to the calendar. "That one's from my auto repair shop over in Memphis. My brother does the day to day, and I do the books."

"What? I had no idea!" He grabbed a red apple out of the bag and washed it off in the sink.

"I don't tell you all my business. I tell you what you need to know. Now don't be worrying 'bout me. I'm fine."

"You really have been looking after me."

"That's what I been tellin' you for years. You can hear, but don't listen worth a damn." He drained the extra grease out of the skillet into a chipped coffee cup.

"But you wouldn't tell me more. What was the real story between you and Mama. I'm old enough to know." He took a bite of apple.

After a long hesitation, Tunji said, "You know your mama and I grew up together. We was best friends until your daddy come along." He put a slice of cheese on the patty.

"I have the album she used to hide under her bed." The album was filled with pictures from her childhood. She lived in the poor black area on the outskirts

of town and was Tunji's next-door neighbor. Their mothers cleaned house for the prominent Sloan family. That's how Joe Sloan met her. "Did he ever know about you two?"

"Of course not, boy. There's no way in hell he would have allowed me to care for you had he known."

"Yeah, you're right."

"His family called her poor white trash. Yeah, she was poor and white, but not trash. Your daddy recognized that. Only smart thang he ever did was marry your mama." He plopped his plate on the table. "But them Sloan's is a drunken, unhappy lot. You lucky you took after your mama."

"I always wondered why she married him." He took another bite of the apple.

"He swept her off her feet and showed her things she'd never seen before. After they got married, he became freer 'bout showing his dark side. I was in Memphis starting my business with my brother at the time. The first time your daddy beat your mama, she was pregnant with you. She ran to my mama's cause hers had passed years before."

"Why is he so mean? I just don't understand."

"I don't know, but my mama called her brothers and told them what happened. Your mama was part of the family. My uncles sent their sons over from

New York to deal with your daddy. They whipped him good.”

Johnny Ray cheered.

“Now hold up, boy. They whipped him too good. We’d thought he quit hittin’ on your mama, but she just stopped telling us. She loved your daddy...” he trailed off and pushed his plate away. “Anyway, when she got sick with the cancer, she knew she was gonna die. She called me up and asked me to care for you. She told me how your daddy had kept beating her. You was only five, and she was scared for you.”

“So you left your business to raise me?”

“I always been good at figurin’ and my brothers finished they education and sound like it. I do the accounting for the business. I don’t need to be at the shop, I don’t have to be bothered with customers, and I was making extra money we needed at the time, but mainly,” he tapped his heart with his fist, “we take care of our own.”

“You two loved each other. Why didn’t you marry her?”

Tunji laughed. “Wrong kind of love, boy. That would be like marrying my sister.” He shook his head. “And she wasn’t even a Muslim. She would have had to convert. But when she found out she had that breast cancer, she made me promise to keep an eye on you if anything happened to her. So I hired on to be your chauffeur and caretaker of sorts.”



“Why are you telling me the whole story now?”

“Cause it’s time you knew. You my family just like your mama was. We take care of our own. Now let’s talk about Matilda.”

“I know what I’m doing.” He took another bite of apple.

“She’s a good gal. Don’t you go soilin’ that gal. What she has is to give to her husband.”

“If I could figure out a way, I’d marry her tomorrow. I know she’s the one for me.”



*Present Day...*

“I said I’m sorry about the way I acted at your office.” Georgia May squatted down on the cool green ceramic tiled floor. “You can’t do this.”

“Mama, please. I don’t want to argue.” Matilda rearranged her herbs in boxes on her kitchen floor. She was taking her precious garden with her on the flight to Texas. She’d even paid for an extra seat on the plane. Everything she planned to ship was boxed and ready to go. The movers had already packed the truck and were on their way.

“Then stop all this foolishness about moving to Texas.” Georgia May hunched her shoulders. “I just don’t know what’s gotten into you lately. First you give up your partnership, and now this.”

“I’m just ready for a change is all.”

“A change would be cutting those dreadful locs out of your hair or buying clothes to accentuate your assets, not quitting your job and moving to redneck country.”

Lips pursed, Matilda used her fingers to comb her thin locs over her shoulder. Her mother never approved of her hair, manner of dress or anything Matilda did, besides go to law school. “I’m not going to argue. I want to move to Texas, so I’m moving to Texas. End of discussion.”

Georgia May raised a brow. “I knew you’d be as stubborn as ever about moving to Texas, so I spoke with Daddy. He has a connection in the Dallas area who would love to bring you into his firm.”

“Mama,” Matilda drawled, “I gave up my partnership because I don’t want to practice law anymore.”

She waved her daughter off. “You just need a break. Daddy say’s you wouldn’t have to start until after the holidays.” Georgia May reached behind herself, grabbed her purse off the floor and riffled through it. “I have all of the information you need.”

“I *have* all the information I need.”

Georgia May narrowed her eyes on Matilda. “You know I hate it when you play with my words. Stop being so difficult all the time. I’m keeping you from

making a mistake.”

“Please explain how my taking a position at the leading marketing firm in the country is a mistake. People would kill to have this opportunity.”

“Only people who haven’t achieved as much as you have. For Christ’s sakes, you’re giving up your partnership. Someday you could be the Attorney General of the country or even a Supreme Court justice, but you’re throwing it all away to hock wares. This doesn’t make sense. And why Texas?”

“I went to law school because that’s what you wanted, not what I wanted.”

Mouth wide open, Georgia May drew her hands to her chest. “You’ve got to be kidding. You’ve always wanted to be a lawyer. You could hardly wait to tell me about the debates and mock trials you participated in.”

“No, you always wanted me to be a lawyer. I wanted to be a marketing consultant. I got my undergraduate in marketing and wanted to go to grad school for business, but you pitched such a fit I gave in.” Matilda held her hands up slightly. “None of this matters anyway. I’m moving to Texas, with or without your blessing. It’s time for me to live the life I want instead of trying to appease you.” Pots securely in place, she debated if she should tape the box closed now or in the morning before she left. “Who knows, I may change my mind again and become a chef—”

“A cook!” Georgia May screeched. “You have gotten out of hand, young

lady.” She bobbed her right index finger at Matilda. “You are not throwing your life away to become a cook.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you on drugs?”

Laughter gripped Matilda and knocked her to the floor. “Whew howdy!”

The doorbell rang. Unable to stand, she crawled into the living room. Her locs tumbled over her shoulders as she hurried toward the door. At the door, she fanned her face just in case she’d teared up from laughing so hard. Still tickled, she opened the door.

“Granddaddy!” She wrapped her arms around him and soaked in his loving embrace. “What are you doing here?” After they moved to New York, he was the only family, outside of her mother, that she saw regularly. Georgia May had tried to cut them off from everyone, but her grandfather wouldn’t have it.

He bent slightly and kissed her on the forehead, then entered the condo. As with the other Kings, her grandfather was tall. His mocha coloring matched Georgia May’s. “I was in town and figured I’d drop by. Why is my only daughter on the floor?”

“She’s just having a temper tantrum because I’m moving to Texas,” Matilda teased. “Let’s all go out to dinner.” The months leading up to their move from Tennessee, Matilda had entered into the stage of teenage rebellion. Out of guilt, Georgia May often gave Matilda her way. After they left Tennessee, the tide had

changed and Matilda was the one who felt guilty. Out of guilt, Matilda often gave Georgia May her way, but no more. Matilda wanted to live her life as she wanted. If she had continued to fight against Georgia May's wishes instead of going along with them, they wouldn't have had to move away from everyone she loved, excluding her mother. It was time to take her life back.

Georgia May *tsked*, and approached her father. "Hello, Daddy. Don't pay any never mind to this disrespectful child I've raised." She kissed him on the cheek.

Any other day Matilda would have debated Georgia May on the "who raised her" issue. Today she'd had more than her fill of her mother. "I'm in the mood for Italian, my treat."

"Daddy, talk some sense into this girl. She's about to throw her life away to become a cook. A cook!"

Henry King's brows drew in. "I thought you were going to work for a marketing firm?"

Georgia May sucked air through her teeth and flopped her hands on her hips. "She was until you got her the position at that law firm, but now she's decided to become a cook."

Matilda shook her head and stifled the laugh that bubbled below the surface. The day her mother actually started listening to her, would be the day...Matilda couldn't even finish the thought because she knew she'd never see

the day her mother would truly hear her.

“Well, darling,” Henry hugged his grandbaby, “whatever you decide to be, you’ll be the best.”

“How could you encourage this, Daddy? Has everyone gone mad? This is ridiculous.” She shook her favorite index finger in Matilda’s face. “You know what happened last time you got too big for your britches. You have such great potential, Matilda.”

“I was only fifteen. I’m thirty-three now. Totally different situation.”

“No. You’re still being stubborn and reckless.”

“This is my life to wreck. I’m sorry. I tried doing things your way. Lawd knows I tried.” Her grandfather offered a supportive nod. “I can’t do this any longer. I feel trapped.”

“So you’re running away to Texas! Why are you doing this to me?”

“When you’re my age, it’s no longer called running away from home.” She held her mother’s trembling hands. “Mama, please try to understand. I’m not doing anything to you. I’m finding me.”

Georgia May sniffed and wiped the tears from her eyes. “You don’t have to move so far away to find yourself. New York has everything the world has to offer.”

“I’ll only be a plane flight away. I love you, but it’s time for my decisions to be *my decisions*.”

“Daddy.”

“Yes, baby girl.” He stood beside the two.

“You’ve always been better with her than me. Make her see what a mistake this is.” She turned and kissed Matilda on the cheek. “Take the position at the law firm, baby.” She kissed her father. “I’ll call you tonight, Daddy.” She left the two alone.

“Why doesn’t she ever listen to me, Granddaddy?” She sighed. “She has never truly heard me.”



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Matilda smoothed the material of her mini skirt. “This thing is too short, Mama,” she drawled and hung up the phone from speaking with Johnny Ray. “It shows all my business.” She turned tipped tap water on the frozen pork chops, and went into the living room with Georgia May. Matilda had wanted to go to the movies and skating, but Georgia May took her to have her hair and nails done, then they went shopping for clothes.

They’d argued a half hour over relaxing Matilda’s hair. Matilda liked her natural hair and didn’t want anything done to it. Her mother said she was too old to go around with nappy braids. Of course, Matilda took offense to having her hair called nappy. She took great care to keep it combed out. In the end, Matilda

allowed the hairdresser to press her hair. Four burns with the hot comb later, Matilda hated the stringy, oily, mess that used to be beautiful, bouncy hair.

“That’s how girls are wearing their skirts now-a-days, Matilda. You need to dress with the times. You have long, beautiful legs. Show them off.” She patted on the sofa beside her.

“I don’t need to show nothin’ off, Mama. As long as I like how I look, that’s all that matters. These clothes were a waste of money,” she grumbled, still upset Georgia May wouldn’t let her have any of the outfits she’d chosen.

“I don’t understand you, child. All you think about is them books of yours.” She stroked Matilda’s hair behind her ear. “You’re a pretty young lady. You’ll never attract boys if you hide yourself.”

“I’m not interested in attracting boys. And even if I were, I go to an all white school, and you never allow me to leave the house. Please explain to me how I’m supposed to attract these *boys* under those circumstances?”

Georgia May momentarily turned away. “You go to one of the best schools in the country. I won’t apologize for ensuring you obtain the best education I can afford.”

“And I’m not apologizing for not being attracted to people who only tolerate me instead of accepts me.” Johnny Ray came to her mind. Even though he fought her tooth and nail about every issue, he did accept her. The other kids were always



up in her face because they wanted something—either for her to be on their team or to help them with their homework, yet they never asked her to social functions. “I’ve basically been living alone for three years now. You haven’t even called to check up on me in over a year. For all you know, I could be running the streets every night.” She slouched back on the couch. “But you don’t trust me to leave this apartment without a chaperone.”

The pain etched on Georgia May’s face angered Matilda. *What does she have to be upset about? She doesn’t want me, not the other way around.* Matilda knocked imaginary wrinkles off her pink cotton blouse. She hated pink with a passion, but Georgia May insisted on her having the putrid shirt.

“It’s not that simple,” Georgia May said softly. “I’m protecting you.”

“You’re contradicting yourself. No disrespect, but I’m not in the mood to fight about the mixed messages you send.”

“You’ve been vying for a fight all day.”

“Me?” Matilda couldn’t believe her ears. “You’re the one who said we could do anything I wanted. I wanted to see a movie, not have my hair burned out of my head, not have my finger nails poked, prodded and painted, and not buy a bunch of clothes no one will ever see and I hate.”

“You’re not a prisoner. Bobby is willing to take you to the movies.”

“Mama, Bobby has a life and a girlfriend. Do you honestly think he wants me

tagging along? Plus, if I'm old enough to live alone, I think I should be able to leave the house."

Georgia May fidgeted her hands in her lap. "I didn't realize he has a girlfriend."

"You're missing the point. I'm mature and responsible enough to leave the house on my own." Tired of her mother's presence, she headed for the kitchen. Georgia May barely had anything to do with any of the family. Matilda could see her mother had put her in the same category as the rest. This was all so crazy to Matilda. Her mother wasn't angry with her family; she just never made time for them. Yet she expected them to be there ready and waiting whenever she wanted. Funny thing was, the family actually came running whenever Georgia May called. *Not me*, Matilda vowed. "Johnny Ray is coming over for dinner."

"What's going on with you and that boy?"

"We're study partners." She took the potato peeler out of the drawer and a pot out of the cabinet.

Georgia May pursed her lips. "You need to get your head out of them books for a few minutes. That boy is interested in a lot more than being your study partner."

"Well I'm not. And why are you encouraging it anyway? You're my mom. You're supposed to be telling me that teen boys are nothing but sex hormones

with legs.”

Her mother laughed. “You are too logical, darling.”

“I like logic.”

“But everything isn’t black or white, right or wrong.”

Georgia May’s private line rang, and she rushed into her bedroom. A year ago when she had the additional line installed, Matilda couldn’t figure out why. Georgia May was hardly ever home, and Matilda took excellent messages. After a few weeks, Matilda noticed that whenever her mother answered her line, she’d leave to see Jerome soon after. Her mother had also started locking her door whenever she left once the line was installed. Matilda wouldn’t have even known the room was locked if she hadn’t of tried to go in for a DVD her mother had barrowed.

Six peeled potatoes later, Georgia May came out of her room with her bag. “I’m heading on to work.”

Matilda stifled the urge to scream. She wanted her mother to stay and have dinner with her, to give her the full day she’d promised. But, as usual, Georgia May was breaking the promise. “It’s only two-thirty.” She ran water over the potatoes. “You don’t even need to leave until seven-thirty.” Matilda swiped at the tears forming in her eyes. “Johnny Ray is coming over to study.” She cleared her throat in hopes of getting rid of the shake behind her words. “Don’t you want to stick

around to ensure no funny business is going on?”

“If he were a biology book, I’d be worried.” She giggled. “No, darling, I’m not worried about any funny business. Come, give me a hug.”

Matilda drew in a deep breath and turned toward her mother.

Georgia May’s eyes narrowed. “Have you been crying?”

“The onion for the gravy is still in the air.”

“That must have been one of those good red ones.” She hugged her daughter. “I love you, Matilda. I’m sorry I messed up your weekend. Next weekend we’ll actually do whatever you want.” She stepped back. “And you were correct. Your weekday curfew is ten and the weekend is midnight.”

“Really!” The term “guilt gift” rang loudly in Matilda’s mind.

“Of course,” she squealed and hugged Matilda again. “I love you so much.”

Matilda heard her mother’s words, but she’d learned her mother’s words meant less than the pile of potato peels, and Georgia May’s actions definitely didn’t show love. At least not the love Matilda craved.

“Matilda, what’s wrong?”

“I’m fine.” She turned away and took a knife out of the drawer. “Have a nice week.” She could practically feel her mother’s eyes on the back of her neck. “You want to leave, just go. Please.” She wiped fresh tears.



*Eighteen years ago...*

Matilda held Tom close to her chest, rocked him and hummed softly. His mother worked the eleven to seven shifts at the nursing home down the street, and his father worked the swing shift at a factory in Memphis. On the weeks when they both worked the same shift, Matilda cared for the baby. Tom was usually dropped off for dinner and evening wind down on those days with Matilda so as not to disturb his rest and to give his parents a break before they went to work.

Johnny Ray had arrived a little before Tom and kept the eighteen-month-old entertained while Matilda cooked dinner. They sat at the table and ate like a family. Later Johnny Ray chased Tom around the apartment until Matilda finished cleaning their supper dishes. The home was filled with laughter and love, something she missed dearly.

After she and Johnny Ray gave Tom his bath, Johnny Ray went to put the dishes away while she readied the baby for bed. Tom's body became heavy as sleep overtook him. She laid him in the crib she kept in the spare bedroom and watched him sleep. On the weeks she didn't care for Tom, her loneliness increased tenfold. He was such a sweet, loving child. Often times she wished she had a baby of her own, someone to love and be loved by unconditionally. Why her mother had stopped wanting to be her mother was beyond Matilda's understanding. She knew if she had a child, she'd never stop wanting to be a mother.

“He’s a great kid,” Johnny Ray whispered. He wrapped his arms around her and watched over her shoulder as Tom slept.

She hadn’t even heard him enter the room, which shocked her. What shocked her more was she didn’t want to rush out of his embrace. Within it was a security she hadn’t felt in a long time—maybe ever. She rested her back against his chest and closed her eyes.

“We’re having a girl first,” he said softly. “And her name will be Princess.”

A smile tipped her lips, and she playfully hit his hand. “What are you talking about?”

“Our baby girl, Princess.”

She turned in his arms. A touch of moonlight reflected off the sincerity in his blue eyes. After seeing him with Tom, she knew he wanted the same as her, but logic took over. “We’re not having a baby, and even if we did, her name wouldn’t be Princess. That’s a nickname or the name of a pet, not a child.”

“But you’re my queen.”

Man how she loved it when he called her his queen. She rested her head on his shoulder. She’d never noticed before, but he had a scent to him; a heady, yet pleasant scent. A week ago if someone had told her she’d be sharing an embrace with Johnny Ray and enjoying it, she would have called them delusional.

“Look at how we cared for Tom. We could raise a baby the right way. You

know you want a baby as bad as I do.”

“I can’t believe I’m actually having a baby discussion with my arch enemy.”

“You’re not my enemy, you’re my queen, and I’m your king. You just won’t admit it, yet.”

The truth in his words tickled her. She stifled her giggles and walked out of the guest room into the living room. “You are entirely too arrogant.”

He approached her from behind and wrapped his arms around her again. “Not arrogant, confident I know my queen.” He combed his fingers through her hair. “Like I know you had nothing to do with this new hairstyle of yours. This has Georgia May written all over it.”

This time she let out a full-fledged laugh. “You know me well.” She stepped back and spun. “She said this is what attracts boys as if there is something wrong with the way I dress and look.”

He stroked her hair behind her ears. “You’re still beautiful.”

Her cheeks heated. She quickly scanned the room for something to do besides stand there and be embarrassed. He grabbed her by the hand before she could make the great escape.

“But I liked your hair better the old way. I always wanted to touch it. Now that skirt...All I can say is...Daaaayummm, look at them legs!”

“Johnny Ray, watch your mouth.” She tried to sound stern, but was too

tickled. “And stop being mannish.”

“I can’t help it, baby. I’m a leg man, and don’t get me started on your a—”

“Don’t even think about saying it.”

He pulled her close. “Seriously though, why can’t we have a baby?”

On her list of unbelievable events that could happen in her life, this one was so unbelievable she didn’t even have it on her list.

“I’m talking marriage and everything.” He flashed his winning smile, but he still hadn’t won her over. “And before you shoot down my argument,” he winked, “hear me out. Since we start taking math and humanities at the university next year anyway, we can go ahead and get our GED’s this summer and start college full time in the fall. I could get a job, and we could get a little place.”

“And when would you see the baby if you’re in school and working all the time?” She backed away. “That’s what we’re trying to get away from. I’d never submit my child to that. We’re not ready.” She shook her head. “This is crazy talk anyway. We aren’t even going together, and here we are discussing when we’ll have children.” She headed over to the sofa. “Just last week we were at each other’s throat.”

He settled beside her with a sheepish grin. “I’d like to be at your throat right now, but we have more important things to discuss. Last week you were still fighting what we feel for each other, but I’m tired of fighting. Why can’t we be



together?”

“You know why I beat you in debates? Because you think two or three steps ahead.”

He frowned. “That’s a good thing.”

“Yep, it is. You learn heaps of information and are ready to pull out arguments for and against the topic. But I try to play out and prepare for scenarios to the conclusion of the debate.”

“You anticipate all of my moves! But how?”

“I’ve never been a hundred percent with my scenarios, but since I know you, I get pretty close with most of my scenarios, thus I’m usually prepared for whatever you plan on throwing at me. You with this baby thing.” The more passionate she became as she spoke, the more she used her hands. “Yes we both want a baby. And I hate to admit this because I will never hear the end of it, but you are my king.”

“Oh yeah baby!” He jumped up, did a little jig and sat back down. “You know I love you, right. We can do this. People used to get married at twelve years old and have a pretty good family going by the time they were our age,” he said in his debate voice. “They were no more mature or prepared than we are, and they made it just fine. Just as we will.”

She wanted to join in his enthusiasm, but someone had to be the logical one.

Another reason she'd beat him in debates was because he allowed emotion to get in his way. Even though it had become harder as of late, she prided herself in being able to distance herself emotionally enough to think straight.

"Technically we could, but should we." She shrugged.

"Hell yeah!"

"I don't think so. You have a great life, money, prestige, a beautiful home, family, friends, everything. Don't throw your blessings away. After we graduate and have good jobs, we can marry and have as many babies as we can produce. Your father will already be angry enough. I don't want to be the reason you two stop speaking."

"My life sucks except when I'm with you. I can't stand my dad, and the feeling is mutual."

"We're teens. We're not supposed to be able to stand our folks, but he provides a good home for you. You're a spoiled, rich kid who is used to getting his way, but not this time, Johnny Ray. I'd kill to know anything about my father. I'd never interfere with your relationship."

"My life isn't..." He looked away, then took her hands into his. The sorrow in his eyes tried to tell her something, but she didn't comprehend. "My dad doesn't give a damn about me. I don't want him or the life he has to give. When I'm eighteen, I can cash in the trust my mom left for me. So we'd only have to make it a

few years.”

“Your father gave you a car.” She couldn’t believe he was sitting before her trying to convince her that his life was so horrible. She’d heard his father was a racist, but he obviously couldn’t be too bad or he wouldn’t have allowed Johnny Ray to hang out with her so much.

“Because he felt guilty.”

“In order to feel guilty about something he did to you, he must at least give a damn. I’m angry with my mom, but I know she cares. I know she loves me. She just doesn’t want to be...” she trailed off. It hurt so much to say, “She doesn’t want to be a mother anymore.”

“Fine!” He dropped back onto the couch. “But let’s still start college full time next year.”

“That sounds like a reasonable compromise, Johnny Ray Sloan,” she cooed.

“Are you flirting with me?” he teased and moved to her side of the couch.

“Of course not.”

“Have you ever kissed a boy before?”

She nibbled her bottom lip. “No, not really.”

“I’ve kissed a few girls. I think I’m pretty good at it now.”

She stifled a giggle. “Do tell.”

“How about I show?”

Her cheeks warmed. “I umm...I don’t think that’s such a good idea.” Though she wanted to loosen her clothing to let out some of the heat, she checked the buttons on her shirt to ensure they were fastened.

“I’ve never done more than kissing. I’m saving the rest for my queen.”

“Why you big, fat liar. What about Ester Wilkins? She said you two did it in the gym equipment room.”

“We both lied. And the others I brag about are fictional.”

His soft hand caressed her cheek. “I’m saving myself for my queen, and she’s saving herself for her king.”

She pinched her forearm. Too much was happening too quickly for this to be real.

“We’re awake, Matilda. I know because I’ve pinched myself at least fifty times to make sure.”

Her gaze traveled from his blond hair to his eyes. She’d never thought eyes could actually smolder, yet there she sat a real life witness to smoldering eyes. His lips...she quickly lowered her gaze. She didn’t want to think about how good of a kisser he’d become.

“Are you curious?” he asked.

“About what?” She was curious about so much; he could say just about anything and be correct.

“You’ve never seen a man before have you?”

“Of course not!”

He laughed. “Good. Give me your hands.”

Brows furrowed, she pursed her lips. “What for?”

He took her hands and placed them on his chest. “Okay, feel wherever you want.” She jerked her hands away, but he replaced them on his narrow, adolescent chest. “I’d never hurt you.”

“I know that. And I could kick your butt anyway.”

“Umm that’s my queen.” He moved her hands along his chest. “What are you afraid of? You’re curious. We can do something about your curiosity.”

She lowered her face into her palms. “This is so embarrassing.”

“You want embarrassing? The state you leave me in after a debate is embarrassing.”

Her eyes flew open. “No way!”

“Humph, feel me right now.”

She looked down at the area in question and saw a definite bulge. She’d read literature about sex and had sex education in class, but that raised more questions than were answered.

“You’re biting your lip,” he whispered. “What do you want to know?”

Sometimes she wished she could rip off her dang blamed lip. “I was just

wondering...Well, I don't want to lead you on or anything."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes, but..."

"Stop analyzing everything for a few minutes and trust me completely. We aren't going to make love until you're ready."

Trusting a fifteen-year-old boy in this situation sounded like an oxymoron to her, but she'd wanted to experiment, to take a ride on the wild side. Eyes closed, she rested her hands on his chest. She heard him unzip his pants, and she almost pulled her hands away, but her curiosity got the best of her. She'd read about a man's aroused state and wanted to see how accurate the books were. Plus, the thought of holding him trapped an excitement in the pit of her stomach she wanted to free.

"Take your hands lower and feel what you've done to me," he said softly and guided her hands.

Sure enough, he was hard under his boxers. She rubbed him with the palm of her hand up and down, then gripped and continued to stroke. The feel of his hardness throbbing in her hand and his satisfied moan agitated the excitement in the pit of her belly and sent a rush along her inner thighs. Soon, she found her breathing to be as ragged as his, and her own body ached for release.

He leaned forward and gently nibbled on her bottom lip. She'd bitten her lip

many a time, but they never tingled like this. He pressed his lips against hers, and she could feel him opening, thus she opened to him also. Kissing looked sloppy to her, but actually doing it was amazing. The textures and taste of his mouth...“Ummm,” she moaned, inhibitions lost.

He pressed her against the sofa and deepened the kiss. Now lying fully on top of her, he gyrated slowly. She allowed him to settle between her legs and joined him in back and forth movement. The skirt lifted easily as they continued exploring the goodness of each other.

Her hands roamed from his back to his butt as she deepened the grind.

“That’s it, baby,” he whispered and took her mouth again.

The energy that had been dwelling in the pit of her belly worked its way through her body and gathered at the apex of her passion.

“Oh shi....” He drew in a deep breath and thrust his hips between her legs.

The gathered energy shot through her and pushed her over an edge she didn’t realize she was on. Everything fell apart and snapped together at the same time as she cried out in pleasure.

A few minutes later, after they’d both calmed, Johnny Ray brushed his lips over hers. “I love you, Matilda.” He laid against the couch backing and pulled her into his body. “I’m a mess, but don’t want to move. Umm, wait until we actually make love.”

When she'd cried out, she lost her voice and still hadn't found it yet. She'd never imagined anything could be that...that...she couldn't even put what happened into words. *And what happens when we actually...actually?* Heat rushed to her face.



## Chapter Five

*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Johnny Ray woke with Matilda still in his arms. The clock on the DVD player read 1:37 A.M. He didn't want to leave, but he didn't have any clothes for school. If he missed a day of class, his father would return home just to beat him. He'd wanted to tell Matilda what his home life was actually like, but his ego couldn't admit to having his tail kicked, not even by his father. Especially after the way he'd seen Matilda stand up to her mother. Both women were tall, but Matilda was quite a bit slimmer than her mother. With one good whack, he was sure Georgia May could have put his queen through the floor.

Though he was scared as hell, he'd eased his way closer to the two. There was no way he would let anyone hurt his queen. If he had to, he'd planned on stepping between them and taking Matilda's beating. Georgia May was large, but nowhere near as large as his father. If he could take a beating from Joe, one from Georgia May would be a breeze.

He wanted Matilda to see him as her king, her protector, her lover. If she knew he cowered before his father...he shook his head. He could never let her know what a coward he really was. He'd just have to keep her away from Joe,

which he figured wouldn't be too difficult since the man was rarely in town. And once they married, he was sure Joe would disown him, thus the problem would be solved.

Deep in thought, he absently caressed Matilda's waist. She'd been correct when she'd said he didn't think further than a few steps ahead. This suited him well dealing with his peers; however, if they were to marry, he'd have to plan carefully for every possible scenario to the end. The hardest part he could foresee was he would need Joe to sign permission for him to marry Matilda. *Unless I can get him to sign custody of me over to Tunji.* He gently kneaded her waist. *He'd vote for a black president first.*

For now, he needed to solve the immediate problem—Matilda being left home alone. He didn't like it one bit. With the new freedom Georgia May had given her, soon others would realize she was alone the majority of the time. Beautiful, young woman left home alone had *DISASTER* written all over it. He set the alarm on his watch for 5 a.m. That would give him time to go home, shower and change before school. He drew her closer to his body. *At least she'll be safe tonight.* What he'd do to keep his queen safe until they married was another issue he'd need to tackle soon.



*Present Day...*

Johnny Ray woke with a moist, sticky surprise in his briefs. *Shit!* He flung the comforter off the bed and rushed to the restroom. He hadn't had a wet dream since his teen years when he would dream of making love with Matilda. He turned on the shower, yanked off his briefs and dropped them in the sink to hand wash.

Matilda's flight was due in town this afternoon, and she'd be at the office tomorrow morning. They'd spoken again last night, and, again, talked about everything except what they should have. The last sound he had heard before he fell asleep was her soft, sensual voice. His manhood began to awaken again.

Disgusted with himself, he held his hand under the shower water to test the temperature. *I should have told her who I am.* The closer to his queen's arrival, the more he saw parallels between his actions now and those in his teenage years. *I didn't think this out fully. I want my queen, but not this way.*

He stepped into the shower and allowed the chilly water to punish his body and wake his mind. *I've arranged for alternatives, but...* He lathered a bar of soap and pushed doubts out of his mind. It was too late to go back and change course. He'd just have to deal with the repercussions of his actions.



Matilda folded her copies of emails between her and Jonathan Balewa and

stuffed them into her jeans pocket. He was as easy to speak with as Isom, actually easier. Many of his inflections and the mannerism in which he spoke reminded her of Johnny Ray. *Of course they do.* Sick of all roads leading back to Johnny Ray, she glanced out the plane window. *We were kids. Let it go.*

She watched the patchwork of farmland pass far below. Georgia May's outbursts since Matilda told her she was moving to Dallas were over the top, even for Georgia May. After her mother left last night, her grandfather gave her further insight into the possible cause. Bobby King lived in Dallas, so Georgia May was most likely afraid Johnny Ray was there somewhere also. The thought of running into Johnny Ray excited and scared Matilda to death. The passion they shared had been too much for either of them. Then their lives spun out of control, and they lost everything. *I can't go through that again.*

Bobby's broad smile and molasses slow ways came to Matilda's mind. She missed her favorite cousin. She'd intended on looking him up, but kept putting it off. The next thing she knew, eighteen years had passed. Eighteen miserably lonely years of following her mother's will instead of her own. She glanced down at her purse, which was under the seat in front of her. She'd obtained Bobby's contact information from her grandfather before she'd left New York. No more hiding and if she ran into Johnny Ray...well...she'd cross that bridge when she came to it. Though she hated to admit it, the main reason she hadn't sought Bobby out sooner

was because she knew Johnny Ray would be somewhere close by.

She glanced at her watch—two hours until the plane touched down in Dallas. She jokingly wondered how long before Georgia May decided she wanted to live in Dallas also. The majority of the time Georgia May was emotionally distant, yet she never wanted to turn loose her hold on Matilda. *She's so complicated.* One time Isom asked why Georgia May loved nursing so much. He didn't think Georgia May had the correct emotional makeup. Matilda pointed out that Georgia May's patients were all terminally ill and in their last stage when she was assigned to them. She could love and care for them for a month or so, and then they'd be gone.

"Mama is a very loving, compassionate person," she'd told him. "But for some reason she's afraid of long term attachments."

She rested her eyes as the flight entered a cloudbank. Though she understood her mother's detachment, it didn't hurt any less than when she was a child. Thoughts of Johnny Ray, Bobby and Georgia May skittered about the outer edges of her consciousness; everything had happened so fast. *Johnny Ray.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

The soft *beep, beep, beep* of Johnny Ray's watch gradually grew louder. Matilda

stretched and slowly opened her eyes. “What the...?” It took a few seconds for her to remember why she was in Johnny Ray’s arms instead of her bed. Her body warmed with the memories.

He released his hold on her and fiddled with his watch until it quit beeping. “Good morning.” He kissed her behind the ear.

She rolled over and faced the reality of what had transpired the night before. Johnny Ray, the one she’d secretly longed for, was actually as much in love with her as she was with him. She felt a smirk contort her face.

“What?” he asked.

“Mama said she didn’t worry about any funny business going on between us because you weren’t a biology book.” The sting of Georgia May’s jibe still hurt.

“I guess she doesn’t know the power of the king.” He took her bottom lip into his mouth, and they had a repeat of last night’s performance.

“I’m gonna get in trouble messin’ with you, Johnny Ray.” Matilda rested her head on the throw pillow beside his head.

“That’s the idea.” He turned his face toward hers. “Do you think Bobby would mind spending nights here or could you start spending nights there?”

“Why?”

“I don’t like you being home alone at night. There are too many crazies out there. I don’t know what your mother was thinking.”

A part of her loved that he actually worried about her—more than her own mother who seemed to want her as a showpiece. Another part resented him for thinking she couldn't handle being alone. She pulled out of his arms and sat up. "Don't get over protective on me. I've managed well so far. I finally have a little freedom. There's no way I'm about to start hiding from my own shadow."

"I know, but I didn't know I had a reason to worry about you before. You're mine to protect." He pulled his briefs from his body, sat up and grimaced. "I really need to clean myself. This is just plain ol' nasty." He smiled at her and added bouncing eyebrows. "Wanna shower with me?"

She playfully pushed at him. "Get away from me." She giggled and headed for her room. Since her mother's room was most likely locked, she'd just wait on Johnny Ray before she took her shower. She selected a fresh uniform for school and straightened up her room while she waited.

About fifteen minutes later, Johnny Ray poked his head in. "There's my queen." He entered fully and sat on bed with her. "I need to head on home, but first I need to talk to you about something serious."

"I'm not having any babies with you." She grabbed her brush and a ponytail holder off the nightstand. Her hair was a mess. Her mom had said her hair was "nappy" before. She tangled her fingers in her hair. *Humph, I thought they burned me to keep me from having naps. Excuse me—tangles.* She glanced over at Johnny Ray.

He'd obviously found the new toothbrushes that were stored under the sink. His smile was as bright and cheerful as his eyes. "Not today, but yes you will. This is something more immediate." If she had brushed her teeth, she would have kissed him.

She smoothed back her hair. "I'm not asking Bobby to stay with me at night." She pulled her hair through the ponytail holder.

"This is one move you'll never anticipate." He took her hands into his. "I want you to go to homecoming with me Saturday."

She was opening her mouth to say, "No way," when he held up a finger. "Before you say no, here me out. I don't want for people to know we are a couple yet either—"

"Helloooooooooo! Earth to Johnny Ray. Homecoming is the second biggest event of the year and the first major event of the year. Are you crazy? We can't be seen out together."

"I have it covered. Lynden and Nick made a bet I couldn't get you to go to homecoming with me."

Brows furrowed, she pursed her lips and folded her arms over her chest. "I know you didn't make that stupid bet."

"Of course I did. Now I can take my queen out, and no one will know the real reason why."



“There you go again!” She stalked the three short steps from her bed to her desk and back again.

“What?” He stood. “This will work perfectly.”

“You didn’t think this all the way through. If I say yes, I’ll be the laughing stock of the school. The only way I could get a date was by a bet. I already have enough to deal with. I’m not going.”

He blew out a belabored breath and ran his fingers through his neatly trimmed hair. “You’re right. I didn’t think this out fully.” He sat on the edge of the bed with his head in his palms. “Give me a few minutes.”

“I didn’t want to go to that stupid dance anyway.” She brushed the end of her ponytail. Oh she wanted to go all right. Had dreamt of going with none other than Johnny Ray Sloan. At the time, she knew it was impossible for two reasons: Johnny Ray despised her, and even if he didn’t, the students and many of the faculty wouldn’t allow them to date openly.

He turned her to face him. “I’m sorry.” He ran his knuckles along her cheek and sent a warm tingly feeling throughout her. “You’ll be my date Saturday, and I’ll figure out a way to keep you from looking bad. Do you believe in me?”

“Yes,” she said hesitantly, yet truthfully.

“I have to get on home. Today we do battle, but I’ll meet you tonight for dinner and chasing Tom around.” He kissed her lightly. “Then I’ll chase you

around. Do we have a date?”

“Date.”



*Eighteen years ago...*

“Mama, Johnny Ray’s coming by to help me with Tom.” The week went by pretty much as usual. Matilda and Johnny Ray debated through economics and social studies classes and tried to outdo each other during their other classes. They hadn’t told anyone they were going to the homecoming dance together, but the big dance was tomorrow, so time was running out.

“Now I know you’re not gonna stand there and tell me a teen boy *wants* to help babysit.” Georgia May sat at the dining table with Matilda and her stack of schoolbooks. “Open your eyes, girl. That boy is interested in you.”

“All Johnny Ray is interested in is making a few hundred bucks.”

“What?” Georgia May’s brows drew in.

“He made a bet with his lackeys that I would go with him to the homecoming dance.” She sucked air through her teeth. *Tsked*. “I saw through his being nice to me, so he had no choice but to fess up,” she lied per according to Johnny Ray’s plan. At first, she was worried about lying to her mother. She’d never lied to her before, but Johnny Ray was right. If the “grown folk” knew what they were up to, they’d try to stop them.

“Why that low down swine!” Georgia May bit out. “Why are you letting him over here at all?”

“Because he’s splitting the money with me. All I have to do is suffer through a dance or two, and I’ll be a hundred dollars richer.”

Georgia May gasped. “A hundred dollars! Where did they get that kind of money?”

“Actually, it’s two hundred total. We’re splitting fifty-fifty, and they are rich brats.”

“This is ridiculous. And when is the homecoming dance.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow!” Georgia May jumped up from the table. “Tomorrow! What, what are you going to wear?” she asked excitedly. Her sudden change from anger to enthusiasm confused Matilda. “You can’t go to homecoming in just anything.” Georgia May combed her fingers through her daughter’s hair. “And you need another press job.”

Matilda motioned over her shoulder toward her room. “You just bought me a whole closet of stuff I’ll never wear. I distinctly remember a few dresses and skirts in the mix.” Truth be told, Matilda wasn’t sure how to dress for the dance and would love her mother to give her some advice, but was angry with Georgia May for leaving her alone so often, thus wouldn’t ask. “And I’ll wash my hair and

fix it myself. I'm not into being burned."

"I know you don't care one iota about this shin-dig, but I won't have my daughter going out looking any kind of way." She tipped Matilda's chin up. "You're going to homecoming with the richest and smartest boy in the school. The other girls will be so jealous." The giddiness in Georgia May's voice tickled Matilda.

"Man, Mama, it's just a stupid bet."

Georgia May rested her hands on her hips. "Girl, you need to take your head out of them books. I done told you that boy is interested in more than studying with you. That bet is his way of covering his real feelings. I can see. He's a keeper, girl. Wake up."

"Well I'm not interested in more with him."

"Of course you aren't," she said with laughter behind her voice that Matilda didn't take too kindly to. "I'm calling Sarah right now to schedule you for an afternoon pressing. We'll shop for your dress in the morning."

Matilda allowed her head to fall forward. "Oh man!" Since her mother apparently didn't hear her the first time, she rephrased, "Why do we have to go shopping again? And there's no way I'm letting her burn me again. I know how to wash and fix my own hair."

"No matter how much you claim you don't want to go to homecoming and you can't stand Johnny Ray, a small part of you likes that boy. You wouldn't fight

with him so much if you didn't. You're mature in so many ways, but a little behind when it comes to the opposite sex."

Completely insulted, Matilda pushed away from the table and stalked toward her room. "Just because I'm not some fast tailed hussy doesn't mean I'm slow in the opposite sex department."

"That's not what I meant." She rushed to her daughter and took her hands into hers. "Listen to me, honey. You're just a late bloomer. I blame myself." She walked across the hardwood floor to the sofa. "Come sit with me."

Matilda made the trip across the room. She knew she was making a big deal out of her mother's comment, but for some reason beyond Matilda's understanding, she lashed out against her mother. "Tom and Johnny Ray will be here soon."

"You were right," Georgia May said softly. "I send you to a school where I knew you couldn't easily make friends and basically kept you a prisoner in this condo." She sighed. "I'm so sorry, baby, but this is your chance to get out. All you know is this condo. I'm not saying I want you to run the streets." She smiled. "I know that isn't you. But I do want you to see more than these walls." She motioned around.

The sincerity and sadness in her mother's voice calmed Matilda's anger. "I don't want to go to Holy Cross next year. I want to go to—"

“Listen, honey, I understand how you feel about going to an all white school, but it’s one of the best schools in the country, and you only have a few more years.”

“Mama, would you please listen to me for ten seconds?” She hated how her mother never truly heard what she had to say. “I want to take my GED this summer and start going to college full time in the fall at the University of Memphis.”

Georgia May stared at her daughter a long while, then plastered a smile on her face. “Yes you have grown into a fine young woman.” She hunched her shoulders. “Wow...college...are you sure?”

“Yes, Mama.”

Georgia May strummed her fingers on her lap and began blinking quickly. “College?”

“The University of Memphis. I would have been going half time anyway. I figured I might as well go full time.”

“Umm, honey, I’m not feeling well. Don’t stay up too late. We have to go shopping in the morning for your gown.” She kissed Matilda on the forehead. “You’ve really grown into a fine young woman. Good night.”

“But aren’t you eating dinner with us. I have corned beef in the oven. All I need to do is fix the cabbage. It’s your favorite.” Matilda stared at her mother’s retreating back.

“No thank you,” Georgia May answered shakily, entered her room and closed the door.

“What just happened?” Matilda mumbled.

Georgia May didn’t appear for the rest of the evening. Johnny Ray helped Matilda with Tom, and all three had a good time. After they laid the baby down for the night, they sat on Matilda’s bed and talked about their plan for homecoming and Georgia May’s reaction to Matilda wanting to start college early.

“She just seemed so upset to me.” She rested her head on Johnny Ray’s shoulder. “She’s tired of playing ‘mommy.’ I thought she’d be elated.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, baby. Well, besides I love you.”

The comforting heat that accompanied his sentiment rushed to her face. “I love you, too.”

“Do you have any idea what color your dress will be? I need to buy you a corsage.”

“I like pale green or yellow, but my mom has a mind of her own. I won’t go if she tries to make me wear pink.”

“Then I guess I’ll be making a trip into Memphis tomorrow to buy a few corsages. I want to make sure it matches.”

She chewed on her inner jaw.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m worried about my mother. I wonder if she and Jerome are fighting. Her private line hasn’t rung since she’s been home.”

“I’m just glad she’s leaving her butt here tonight. I can’t sleep easily when you’re home alone.”

She giggled.

“What?”

“Now I know why you keep me on the phone all night,” she teased.

“Okay, okay.” He chuckled. “You got me.”

“I don’t mean to rush you off, but...well it’s not very often she’s home. Maybe I can get her to watch a DVD or something.”

He swung his long legs over the side of the bed. “I understand, my queen. I’ll be by tomorrow around five.” He leaned forward and kissed her until she knocked him off the bed.

“What was that for?” He stood and wiped himself off.

“I want you to make me feel like you made me feel last night.” Johnny Ray had visited her every evening, and they would partake in their special version of making love. “Figured I’d best do something to break the mood.”

“You are too much, my queen.” He pulled her off the bed. “Can I at least take a plate with me for lunch tomorrow?”

After Matilda prepared Johnny Ray a plate and he left, she made a pitcher of



mixed lime and grape Kool-Aid—her mother’s favorite— and warmed her up a plate of corned beef, cabbage and potatoes. The food smelled so delicious, Matilda was tempted to eat a little more herself.

“Mama, it’s almost eight and you haven’t eaten.” She balanced the food tray on her right hand and tapped at Georgia May’s door with her left. “I know you’re not gonna let this good food go to waste.”

“Thanks, baby, but I’m not hungry.”

“Then I want to come in and visit. We don’t get to see each other very often.”

The silence from the opposite side of the door lasted so long, Matilda thought Georgia May wouldn’t open the door for her. Disheartened, she set the serving tray on the kitchen counter. She had cleaned up the tiny mess she’d made while preparing dinner.

*I’ve gotta give it one more try.* She returned to her mother’s door and leaned her head on it. “Mama, I’m worried about you. Please tell me what’s wrong.” No answer. She pressed her ear against the door and strained to hear what, if anything was happening on the other side of the door.

*Sniffing? Is she crying?* “I love you, Mama.” Only one thing annoyed Matilda more than people not taking her suggestions into consideration, and that was people forcing themselves on her when she wanted—needed—to be left alone to

gather herself. “I’ll be in my room.”

“I love you, too, Matilda. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Matilda lay in her bed and stared out the window into the night. The week had gone so nicely, then bam! Her mother became even more distant than she was before. *What am I doing wrong?* It hurt Matilda to her core that her mother was tired of being her “mommy,” but she loved Georgia May and was doing her best to give her the life she wanted—they all wanted.

In the fall when she started college, she planned to investigate housing in the dorms. That way her mother would truly be free to be with Jerome, and she and Johnny Ray could date the way they wanted. If all went according to plan, they’d marry when they were eighteen and could start a family.

The baby monitor in her room sounded from Tom fretting in his crib. She hugged herself and rose. Someday she’d be checking on her and Johnny Ray’s babies and she could hardly wait. There was no way Johnny Ray could know how hard it was for her to stick to her guns, but she had to do what was right. She strolled toward the guest room. By the time they were eighteen, Johnny Ray’s father would be used to her, though she doubted Joe Sloan would ever accept her. By giving the man time to adjust instead of surprising him with little black grandbabies, she prayed the rift that would come between him and Johnny Ray wouldn’t be so large they would never come together again.



*Eighteen years ago...*

“Oh my God!” Georgia May’s hands trembled over her mouth. “You’re...you’re so beautiful.” She wiped a tear from her eye, crossed the living room to her daughter and took Matilda by the hands. The pale yellow of the simple satin gown played well against Matilda’s cinnamon skin. “So elegant.” The slits on either side of the gown from her ankles to right below her knees showed just enough of her long legs.

Matilda bowed slightly. “Why thank you.” Her dark, blow dried hair was in a French roll with tiny daisy hairclips in the crevice of the roll. Small diamond studs adorned her ears.

Johnny Ray, clad in a white tuxedo with a pale yellow cummerbund, stood and stared. The way his light eyes darkened with passion was more than enough to show Matilda he loved her gown selection.

He crossed the room to her. With her three-inch heels on, she was almost as tall as he was. She’d stumbled twice since putting them on and prayed she didn’t fall and break her neck in front of everyone.

“I’ll be the envy of all tonight,” he barely said over a whisper.

Matilda watched her mother for a reaction. There was no way she could have missed the sincerity in Johnny Ray’s voice.

A soft smile tipped Georgia May's lips. "Yes you will." She turned from the couple and retrieved her camera. "Now you two act like you're in love."

Johnny Ray drew Matilda into his arms and rested his forehead on hers. As Georgia May clicked to her heart's content, Matilda was also content to be in Johnny Ray's arms. So content she didn't notice her mother had stopped taking pictures and was staring at the two.

"I...I guess you two need to get a move on." The nervousness of Georgia May's voice brought Matilda and Johnny Ray out of their trance. They separated and hit at each other as if they were glad the torture was over.

"I'm giving you a little pocket money, Matilda. Never leave the house without at least taxi fair."

Panic suddenly overcame Matilda, and she rushed to her mother's side. "You'll be here when we return, won't you?" Hating the desperation in her voice, she cleared her throat and steadied her nerves.

"I'll be waiting anxiously right there on that couch to hear the tale of my big girls first date!" She laughed lightly, took a twenty out of her back pocket and handed it over to Matilda. "Enjoy yourself." She looked over Matilda's shoulder at Johnny Ray. "Drive carefully."

"I will, Miss King." He slipped an orchid wrist corsage onto Matilda, then looped his arm around hers. "Let's get this over with."

## Chapter Six

*Present Day...*

“Come on, man!” Johnny Ray pleaded. “You have to get her address for me. I can’t let her walk in there totally unprepared and her cell phone isn’t on.” He ran his hands over his hair. “I can’t email something like this to her. You’re supposed to have my back. How could you let me do something so stupid?”

Brow raised, Bobby glanced from the flat screen to his friend back to the game. “I told you it was stupid,” he said slowly, “but you weren’t listening to anything I had to say. Kind of like you’re not listening now. I’m not calling my family.”

“You’re still close with your grandfather. He’ll tell you if you asked.”

“I’m not asking. It’s too late to back out now. Just sit your butt down and let things play out. She’ll be angry, but she’ll get over it.”

“I can’t believe how stupid I’ve been.” He hit at the sofa, stalked over to the window and back to the wet bar.

“Wearing a hole in my carpet won’t change things. What happened with my new favorite wireless company? You know I bought boo-coo stock in it.”

Johnny Ray forced himself to settle on the barstool. “What were you

thinking? I told you it looked like I wouldn't get that account."

"Humph, that was before you said you were siccing Matilda on them."

Johnny Ray's chest puffed up with pride. "You know my queen, don't you! Sheeet, they didn't stand a chance. We'd been discussing the situation over the past week. The other day she just up and said, 'Let's call them.' Within a half hour, they were singing a different song. I got the call today that they want us."

"See, now that's what I'm talking about! When you two are together, you're unstoppable. Now stop interrupting my game."

"All right, all right, I hear you. I'm heading on home and try to call her before it gets too late. I can't let her walk in there without knowing who I am."

The two old friends nodded their farewells. Johnny Ray had always been proud of his queen—even when she would show him up in class. He could hardly wait to see her in action again.



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Johnny Ray rested his hand in the small of Matilda's back, and strutted like the proudest peacock ever as they were escorted to a secluded corner table of the elegant restaurant. After Tunji had lectured him about the evils of pork, he recommended Johnny Ray take Matilda to Bianca's for dinner before the homecoming dance. Bianca's was far enough from town that they wouldn't have to

worry about running into any of their classmates, yet close enough that they would make it back in plenty of time for the dance.

Matilda's eyes bugged out after she glanced at the appetizer portion of the menu. "Johnny Ray!" she said under her breath once the waiter left to get their sparkling white grape juice. "Did you see the prices? We can't eat here."

"Price doesn't matter, my queen." He loved the way her warm eyes lit up and nose flared when she was trying to hold her outrage at bay. "You've been feeding me all week. Let me do this, please." From what he could tell, Matilda and her mother weren't in the least bit poor, but paying seventeen bucks for a sautéed portabella mushroom was out of their league.

Her brows furrowed and she twisted her face, then rested her hands on her chest. "I'm sorry. I'm grateful. Really I am. I just..." She hunched her lovely shoulders. "I can't enjoy my meal knowing how much it will cost you." She nervously set her hands in her lap. "I can pay for my half when you take me home tonight."

"No way."

A few of the patrons glanced toward their table, but Johnny Ray didn't care. This was their first night out as a couple, and he wanted it to be something she'd remember for two lifetimes. "I'm the man. I pay." He took her menu. "I'll read the menu to you—minus the prices, of course." He winked at her. "I want to splurge

on my queen. Don't begrudge me this."

Chewing on her inner jaw, she looked around at the other dinners who had settled back into their own conversations. "I guess..." She faced him and slowly smiled. "Thank you, my king."

Heart in the heavens singing with the angels, he read the menu to her. To his delight, she ordered the Chilean sea bass with grilled zucchini and a spinach salad—one of the more expensive meals. He stuck with the more traditional steak, potatoes and garden salad.

"This bass has given me a real appreciation of the word delectable," she sighed more than said.

The way her eyes slowly closed and she practically purred with each bite was purely erotic to him. Johnny Ray could barely eat his meal from enjoying watching her. Even a few of the other male diners snuck peeks every so often.

As her eyes opened and locked on his, he gripped the sides of the chair to keep from dragging her out of the restaurant and checking into a hotel. He wanted to make love with his queen so bad he literally ached.

"Is something wrong?" her soft, concerned voice caressed. "You've barely touched your meal." She forked a piece of her bass and brushed his lips with the succulent morsel. "Taste."

He took the bite from her, all the while wanting to take a bite of her.



“Umm...You’re right. This sure ain’t the fish we catch around here.”

She picked up her knife. “You don’t like your meal. Eat half of mine.”

“Oh no.” He rested his hand on hers so she’d lower the knife. “I want to eat this steak. It’s not as good as your meal, but it’s still excellent. Can I interest you in some?”

“No thanks.” She took a sip of sparking grape juice. “You know everything about me and my mom, but I don’t know anything about you and your dad.” She grinned. “Well, except that you say you can’t stand him.”

“I can’t.” He picked the croutons out of his garden salad. He knew she’d eventually ask these questions. He’d prepared, yet still found himself unprepared.

“He designs planes, right?”

“He has actually started customizing more lately.”

Her brows rose and eyes opened wide. “Wow. That sounds neat. What’s the craziest thing a customer has asked him to do?”

Since he barely spoke to his father, he had no idea, but there was no way he’d let her know that. He often saw schematics of Joe’s work on the computer. Though Johnny Ray hated to admit it, his father was a brilliant mechanical engineer and had too many patents to count. He ate at his steak while he thought of which schematic seemed the oddest.

“I don’t rightly know of his craziest, but he’s done everything from have you

thinking you are stepping into a house to the bridge of the starship Enterprise from *Star Trek*. This is our night. We only talk about us. Okay?”

“Us and baseball.” She winked.

“Yeah, us and baseball.”

The woman from two tables over was staring at them, again. Her face was pinched and eyes beady. He’d caught her several times. She sneered, then leaned forward and whispered to her tablemate. The man glanced over at Johnny Ray and Matilda’s table, hunched his shoulders and continued eating his dinner.

There were quite a few other patrons who didn’t seem too enthused to see Johnny Ray and his queen enjoying themselves, but he didn’t care. He wanted to show the world his most valuable possession. He smiled internally—she’d kill him if she knew he had categorized her as a possession. Especially, since she meant so much more to him. He didn’t have the flowery, poetic words females liked to hear, so he kept his mouth shut on that matter.

From what he could tell, she either hadn’t noticed the eyes trained on their table or was ignoring them. For his queen, the latter was the most likely choice, but he worried about how she would ignore their classmates. They were sure to make a fuss or even cause a scene. He had absolutely no problem with setting anyone straight who dared step to him incorrectly about Matilda, but he didn’t want her feelings hurt by the often times cruel things he knew their classmates

could say and do.

“You know...I’ve been thinking.” He tapped his fork on his plate. “I should have never made that stupid bet with Lynden and Nick. If you want to go somewhere else instead of the homecoming dance, I won’t mind. I just want to be with you. There’s even a game playing. My dad’s out of town. We can go to my place and have our own party.”

She studied him closely. “You’re worried about what those knuckleheads at school will say, aren’t you?”

“You can’t tell me you haven’t seen how people are staring at us. They can look all they want, but if even *one* person says or does anything out of line, the cops will be busy tonight, cause I’m gonna act a complete fool.”

“Johnny Ray Sloan,” she placed one hand on her hip and pointed at him with the other and teasingly chastised, “I don’t date jailbirds, so you’d best contain that temper of yours.”

A laugh almost as hearty as the steak shook him. “What am I going to do with you, my queen?” He calmed. “Tonight is yours. If you want to go to the dance, we’ll go. I just don’t want you feeling like you have to go because of that stupid bet.”

“How about we make an appearance? We could always leave if we aren’t enjoying ourselves. Either way Bobby is going to collect his fifty bucks, so we

might as well not make his work go to waste.” They’d agreed to pay Bobby fifty bucks if he told several key people—the school gossips—that he’d bet Matilda she couldn’t get Johnny Ray to go to the dance with her.



*Present Day...*

Matilda brushed off her jeans and shifted her weight from one sneaker to the other. Bobby had always been one of her favorite people, yet she was nervous as all get out about seeing him after so long. She rang the bell again. She would have phoned first, but decided to make this trip on the spur of the moment and didn’t want to give herself any excuse for backing out.

The door opened slowly. “Yeah.” An incredibly tall man looked down at Matilda. A smile eased across his face and his eyes lit up. “Matilda!” He scooped her up and pulled her into the apartment.

“Put me down, silly.” She giggled as he hugged her. She’d never seen Bobby move so fast.

“Granddaddy said you were moving to town, but I...I...I just can’t believe you’re here.” He set her down, but she didn’t release him.

“I’ve missed you, too.” She stepped back and took him into view. “Man you’ve gotten tall. You look more and more like Granddaddy every day.”

“Well, you’re not looking too shabby or short yourself.” He motioned

toward the sofa. He'd obviously had his furniture specially made because everything was larger than standard. "Grab a sit down. You want something to drink?"

"Nah, I'm good." She glanced around for signs of Johnny Ray.

"We haven't shared a place since college."

"We who?"

"Me and Johnny Ray."

She *tsked*. "I don't care where Johnny Ray lives."

His brow crept upward. "Sure you don't."

"You make me sick." She winked. "Now, tell me about yourself. What have you been up to? Do I have any little cousins running around?"

Within minutes, the two were talking and laughing as if they had never separated. Matilda internally kicked herself for denying herself Bobby so long.

"So do you think you'll like your new gig?" he asked.

"Oh yeah! I all ready love it. Jonathan and I make a great team." The playful devilment in Bobby's eyes threw her. "What are you up to?" she asked.

"Nothing. You sure you don't want something to drink? Are you hungry?"

"Nah. I need to get going. I have an early day tomorrow. I just wanted to drop by and apologize for staying away so long."

He pulled her to her feet and embraced her. "Hell, I could have just as easily

looked you up. You try to disappear on me again, I will. You need a ride home?”

She laughed. “Not unless you’re riding me four doors down.”

“What!”

“All I can say is Granddaddy is a hot mess. I know nothing about Dallas, so he *volunteered* to help me find a place. I didn’t realize we were in the same complex until I was on the plane. Which reminds me...” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a house key. “Here is my spare key and cell phone number.”

“I’ll have a copy of mine made tomorrow for you.” Devilment returned to his eyes as he smiled. “Make sure you call me when you get home from work tomorrow. I want to know everything.”

Eyes narrowed, she scrunched her face. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing. Dang! I just miss my cousin and want to make sure they’re treating you right is all.” He pushed her toward the door. “I’m usually home by six. Drop on by when you can.” He kissed her on the forehead and gently put her out.

*He’s up to something.* She strolled along the walkway toward the town home four doors down. She, Bobby and Johnny Ray would finally be reunited. She grinned. No telling what would happen when the three were together. *What about Jonathan?* When thinking of Johnny Ray, she felt as if she were cheating on Jonathan and vice-versa. *Man am I trippin’. I don’t have a relationship with either.*

Instead of going inside, she sat on her stoop. Seeing Bobby after all of these

years had done her heart well. *After all of these years, he still hasn't changed.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

All eyes were on Johnny Ray as he escorted Matilda into the school gymnasium. The couple politely nodded at gape mouthed Bobby and his lovely date.

*Excellent performance*, thought Matilda.

Lynden and Nick abandoned their dates, pushed their way through the crowd and grabbed onto Johnny Ray, each taking an arm.

“Hey, Matilda, we gotta steal your date for a second.”

“Yeah, gotta steal your date,” Nick repeated as they drug him off.

Mrs. Birch, one of the English teachers, tapped Matilda on the shoulder.

“May I speak with you a second, Matilda.”

Matilda followed Mrs. Birch to the equipment room, just off the gymnasium. The aroma of smelly roller skates and jock straps assaulted Matilda’s senses. “Whew howdy, they need some Lysol in here.”

Mrs. Birch giggled and sat daintily on the edge of the desk. “It could use a little airing out. Have a seat, darling.”

Matilda glanced from the rickety wooden chair behind the desk to the dusty metal folding chairs that were propped in a corner. Everything in the room was

filthy, including the desk Mrs. Birch was sitting on. “No thanks, I’ll stand. Is something wrong?”

“Yes, and no...” She strummed her fingers on her lap. “You see, darling...I heard about the bet.” She held her tiny hands up slightly and accidentally knocked the paperclip holder over. “I understand fifty dollars is a lot of money to a child, but...” She stopped fidgeting long enough to look at Matilda. “But this is about more than money.”

Head tilted to the side, Matilda lowered her brows. “I don’t understand,” she lied. “Bobby has to give me *fifty* dollars, and all I have to do is be civil to Johnny Ray for a few minutes. What more could there be?”

Mrs. Birch twiddled her fingers as an anguished smile worked its way onto her face. “The *more* has nothing to do with money. It’s...It’s...Darling, Johnny Ray is white and you’re black.”

Matilda knew she shouldn’t enjoy watching Mrs. Birch squirm, but she did. “We are also both students at this school and were discouraged from bringing dates from other schools to the dance. Since the only other black in this school is my cousin, are you saying I shouldn’t have had a date?”

“Of course not! I’m just saying...Well, Bobby has a beautiful, young black girl with him.”

“She’s also our cousin.” Matilda’s eyes opened wide, and she covered her



mouth. "Don't tell anyone. He wants to pretend he has a girlfriend." Bobby had actually brought his girlfriend. Matilda just said the young woman was their cousin to make Mrs. Birch feel even more uncomfortable. This lying thing was becoming too easy, she thought. She'd told Johnny Ray that one lie led to another, but didn't really believe her own words until now.

"You're still young and carefree." Mrs. Birch sighed. "To you it is only money, but to others it is a threat to their way of life. The way things have always been and should always stay."

"How can a bet between cousins change these folks way of life? I'm sorry, Mrs. Birch, but I just don't understand what you're trying to tell me." *Yet another lie. Man, I'm gonna burn in hell for this one night.* "I need to get on back out there. I won't get my money if I don't dance with Johnny Ray at least once."

## Chapter Seven

*Present Day...*

Disgusted with himself, Johnny Ray placed the phone on its base and looked out his office window. Matilda still wasn't answering her cell phone. D-day had arrived, and he was anything but ready.

*What was I thinking!* He ran his hand over his goatee. *We're not kids anymore, and this was stupid back then.* The shrill ring of the phone startled him. He checked the caller ID. *Madison?* The man had called him several times over the past few days, but Johnny Ray hadn't returned the calls.

That night so many years ago still haunted him. *I failed my queen.* He couldn't pick up the phone and wake whatever demons slept on the other side of the line. The call switched to voice mail. He'd thought he could protect her. *I'm so sorry for everything, my queen. Now and then.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

"We're not giving you a dime!" Lynden's voice echoed off the bathroom walls.

“Yeah, not a dime, nickel or penny.” Nick crossed his arms over his chest.

“The hell you aren’t. A bet is a bet.” Johnny Ray wanted to laugh at the outrage in both Lynden and Nick’s voices, but continued feigning his own outrage.

“But she bet her lame cousin the same thing.”

“Yeah, the same thing.”

“Not my problem.” He watched his reflection in the mirror and straightened his vest. Choosing an all white suit had been a good idea. He’d only seen two other males who had decided to wear all white.

Lynden’s chubby cheeks turned red. “I’ll bet you two are in cahoots. You swindled us!”

“Yeah, swindled. I ain’t payin’ shit.”

Johnny Ray turned toward his friend and cousin and gave it all he had. “The hell you’re not. It’s my ass who’s been humiliated. I have to go out there knowing everyone’s laughing behind my back. I can hear it now, ‘The only way Johnny Ray could get a date was being the butt of a bet.’ And that a black girl had to be bet to go out with me...” he trailed off and stalked toward the window. “I’ll never hear the end of it. Oh yeah, your asses are paying up.”

First Lynden, then Nick, started to chuckle. The next thing Johnny Ray knew, the two were falling on each other laughing.

“Damn, man! I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Yeah, hadn’t thought of that!” Nick pointed at Johnny Ray. “You are one ssssoorry sack of shit!”

“Well, the two hundred dollars y’all are paying me will go a long way in easing my suffering.” The room became silent, then all three burst out in laughter.

“She wouldn’t have even taken fifty dollars if she couldn’t stand me.” Johnny Ray headed for the door.

“If I were you, I’d make sure Bobby didn’t bet her she couldn’t get you in bed before you’re made a fool of, again.”

“Yeah, a reee-peat ‘O’-ffending foooooool.” Nick’s shoulders bounced as he buckled over in laughter.

“Oh, be quiet you parrot.” Johnny Ray exited the bathroom in search of Matilda. He had seen Mrs. Birch approach her. He knew his queen could handle herself, yet he still wanted to be the one to protect her. Especially since this was his fault.

Several students openly chastised or teased him for his choice in dates and the faculty wasn’t much better. Though he wasn’t sure if he believed in God or not, he thanked him just in case he did exist. He was thankful Matilda had the foresight to know how their classmates would react. After the remarks some of the more outspoken students had made to him, he knew it would have been a hundred times worse on Matilda had they thought she was actually interested in him

outside of a bet and beating him down in class. It amazed and angered him how these same kids who were ribbing her today would be all in her face come Monday to help with projects and this or that, acting as if nothing had happened. *Two-faced asses.*

He spotted her hanging out with the science geeks. They were a weird lot, but one of the more accepting. He approached her and held out his hand. “May I have this dance?”

Instead of following the script and pretending she wanted to get the dance over with, she curtsied and smiled sweetly. Too sweetly. He wanted to hold her closely and remind her how much he loved her. He laughed internally at himself for being lovesick. *Yeah, there must be a god.* The way he saw things, only God could have brought such brightness into his dark life.

His heart warmed, yet he worried someone would see the genuine love in her eyes when she gazed at him. The probability of pulling off this charade was looking more doubtful every second. *And we have to make it the rest of the school year.*

He bowed and led her onto the dance floor. Though he held her at a respectable distance while they slow danced, many of their classmates whispered, pointed and generally acted like jerks.

“Don’t pay them any never mind, Johnny Ray,” Matilda said so hushed the neighboring couples couldn’t hear. “We’re not doing anything wrong.”

“If even one person says something to you, I swear I’ll—”

Her light giggle tickled him. “What did I tell you about me and jailbirds?”

To ensure no one heard him, he whispered directly into her ear. “I’m in love with you. I’d tell the world how honored I am to be your king if it wouldn’t bring you harm. This school year is going to be pure torture, but worth it because I get to spend the rest of my life with you.”

He gazed into her teary eyes. “Let’s get out of here.”



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Johnny Ray took Matilda on a tour of the Sloan estate from the horse stable where he wasn’t allowed to ride any of the horses, to the airplane hangar where he wasn’t supposed to step foot inside, through the guesthouse where Tunji had stayed when he was keeping an eye on Johnny Ray, finally to the main house. Of course, he didn’t tell Matilda he was taking her places he wasn’t allowed, and he most certainly didn’t tell her about his father’s rule—the only blacks allowed on the property had better be Joe Sloan employees and on their shift.

“I’ve always wanted to learn how to ride a horse.”

“Someday I’ll buy you a horse.” He placed his hand on the small of her back and led her down into the den. “But first I think we need to concentrate on your driving a car. You drive like a granny!” He’d started teaching her how to drive on

the way home from the dance. She was actually quite good, he was just teasing.

She hit at him playfully. “Just because I don’t go a kajillion miles over the limit doesn’t mean I can’t drive.” She glanced around the opulent room. “Wow, this place is huge.”

“Grab a seat.” He motioned toward the couch. “You’ll love this.” He snatched the remote off the table. He rarely entered the den but wanted to show her the entertainment system. The wood paneling across from the couch slid open and revealed a large screen television.

“Neat!” She moved to the edge of her seat.

He played with the buttons until a menu with a list of channels and programs was displayed. “I have a better idea.” He turned off the television in exchange for the stereo. A rock station blared. He quickly switched to an oldies doo-wap station.

“That’s nice.” She held her hands to her ears. “But waaaaaay too loud. I can’t even hear myself think.”

He laughed and turned down the volume. “That’s what I always say to Lynden and...” The scent of stale cigarettes and liquor wafted past his nose and set the hairs on the back of his neck on edge. He leapt off the couch and turned. “Dad!”

“Sixty seconds!” Joe snapped, his arms folded across his expansive chest.

Johnny Ray recognized the rage in his father’s eyes and quickly pulled

Matilda—who had confusion written all over her face—to the side. “Please don’t ask any questions. I need for you to take my car home,” he whispered. “I’ll come by tomorrow to get it.” He reached into his pocket and handed her the key.

He could tell the fear in her eyes wasn’t for her, but for him. He recalled how she’d stood up against her mother and couldn’t allow that here. *I love you*, he mouthed.

*I love you, too.*

He saw something flash in her eyes, but couldn’t quite read them. She rushed past Joe without glancing his way. Johnny Ray heard the click of her heels speed across the marble entryway. The heavy entrance oak door creaked open and close.

Now that his queen was safe, it was time to look after his own safety. “It’s not what it looks like,” he said with his head held low. He didn’t want his father to think he was challenging him in any way.

“So I didn’t see you all cozied up with some nigger gal.” Joe rounded the couch and lifted Johnny Ray off the floor by the lapels of his suit in no time flat. How a man who drank as much as Joe did had such fast reflexes was beyond Johnny Ray.

Fear gripped Johnny Ray and paralyzed his throat. Of the many times he’d seen his father enraged, this was the worse. Somehow, he knew he wouldn’t



survive this beating and thanked God for getting his queen to safety. That Joe had actually given him a minute to get Matilda out of the house and she hadn't argued with him further proved to Johnny Ray there must be a God. The Joe Sloan he knew and loathed would have beaten both of them to death and his money would have gotten him off.

"I...I can explain," he stammered.

"Explain!" Joe slammed him down onto the coffee table so forcefully Johnny Ray heard the marble embedded in the cedar table crack beneath his back. "It's my turn to explain!"

Intense pain wrapped around Johnny Ray and snatched his breath. Before he could regain his faculties, his father lifted him and threw him into the stereo system.

Johnny Ray crashed and fell to the floor. Feebly, he pushed up on his hands and knees. Joe came at him again and kicked him in the gut. "Omph." He rolled into the fetal position. His father kicked him again, this time in the back.

"I'll kill your useless ass before I allow this shit." Joe bent over Johnny Ray and reared his fist back.

*Crash!*

Joe yelled as ceramic from the vase broken over his head fell onto Johnny Ray.

“Get away from him!”

The sound of his queen’s voice pumped new life into Johnny Ray. He couldn’t let his father harm her. He couldn’t focus well through the pain, but he could make out Matilda grabbing the cast iron poker from the fireplace and his father approaching her. Johnny Ray’s heart wanted to stand and fight, but his body raised serious objections.

“Matilda...”

Joe, shoulders heaving, stopped and glanced back at his son

Matilda took the long way around the room to get to Johnny Ray. Furniture and shock kept Joe at bay. As she rounded, Joe remained in the middle of the room, but pivoted his body to follow her.

She reached Johnny Ray and stood her ground. “I’m taking him out of here.”

Joe laughed. “Found you one with some fight, huh, boy. Do you know who I am, gal?” He stalked toward the two. Johnny Ray was able to get on his hands and knees again. He had to get them out before his father struck. His queen was tough, but no match for Joe.

“I know if you take one more step, I’m gonna hit a home run using your head as the ball.” She held the poker with perfect batting stance.

“Feisty. Too bad I have to break your neck.” He rushed forward.

To Johnny Ray’s surprise, Matilda was fast enough to move out of the way.

As Joe passed, she grazed his arm with the poker, but to Johnny Ray's horror, her heel caught in the carpet. She stumbled and dropped the poker. She and Johnny Ray reached for the poker.

Joe quickly recovered and went after Matilda. He grabbed her by the French bun. She screamed as he yanked her up. Suddenly, Johnny Ray felt no pain and energy surged through his veins. He snatched the poker and stood. "Let her go!"

Joe grinned. "Sure." He shoved Matilda into Johnny Ray. The couple crashed to the floor.

"There's a gun in the top right drawer," Johnny Ray whispered quickly. There was only one desk in the room, so he knew she'd know where he was talking about.

Joe picked Matilda up and threw her into the coffee table face first. The sound of the thud sent another surge through Johnny Ray. Poker in hand, Johnny Ray got to his feet, but his father was too close to him to use it. Joe backhanded Johnny Ray. Every color of the rainbow flashed before Johnny Ray's eyes along with flashes of his life, and he could swear he heard birds singing. Joe slapped him about, and the singing changed to ringing of the ears.

"Joe Sloan!"

Joe dropped Johnny Ray and turned. Matilda aimed the revolver at Joe's chest.

Johnny Ray scrambled around behind Matilda and took the gun from her. Joe continued staring at the two.

“I should kill you,” Johnny Ray growled.

“Remember what I said about jail birds? Let’s just go.”



*Present Day...*

It took Matilda three hours to find the correct building, so she was a half hour late for work. *So much for leaving early and making a good first impression.* By the time she figured out where her office was in the complex, it was almost ten. In her office, she dropped her purse and briefcase on the sofa that was to the left of the door, then headed out to find Mr. Bernie Ridge, her boss, though she actually wanted to seek out Jonathan.

She brushed off the front of her white linen suit and stepped up to the slender brunette woman at the front desk. “Hello, I’m Matilda King. Mr. Ridge is expecting me.”

“Oh, Matilda!” The middle-aged woman stood with a genuine smile and outstretched hands. “I’m Sherry. Pleasure to finally meet you in person.”

They’d spoken on the phone several times over the past month. Their conversations usually ended with laughter. Sherry tipped up on her toes and hugged Matilda. “Wow,” Sherry gushed. “When you said you were a little tall, you

weren't kidding. And you're stunning." She backed away.

Six two without the heels she presently wore, Matilda was used to people's shock at her height. Embarrassed over the complement, she bowed gracefully. "Why thank you. You're not too shabby yourself."

Sherry teasingly batted her long lashes and fanned her face. "Well I do try." She returned to her seat. "We didn't expect you until this afternoon, so Bernie isn't in. And I trust you aren't planning on calling everyone Mr. this and Ms. that. We go by first names around here, honey."

"Thanks for letting me know. I wanted to come in early and get my bearings before I started working, so I only told Jonathan I'd be in early."

"Well, he'll certainly be glad you've arrived." A beautiful smile spread across her face and lit her eyes. "What have you done to my little Johnny?"

Brows knitted together and face scrunched, Matilda tilted her head to the side. "What do you mean?"

"Well...since you've been hired on, he's been..." She hunched her shoulders. "He'd always been a brooder. But lately he's come to life. Whatever you're doing, honey, keep doing it."

"I reckon I should go meet him face-to-face." Matilda held her hands to her chest and bowed slightly. *Little Johnny*. Isom was only five foot five. She'd never dated a man that much shorter than herself, but had already resigned herself to

accepting whatever and going with the flow. Eighteen years of pining for Johnny Ray and comparing any relationship she entered to their good times had been a disaster. “Thanks for making me feel welcome.”

“You come on by and see me any time, honey,” Sherry said with the cutest Texas twang Matilda had ever heard.

“I’ll do that.”

Nerves on edge, Matilda stood outside of Jonathan’s door. Worried he’d be put off by her height, she contemplated switching from her heels to the spare flats she kept in the rental car. *This is ridiculous. I’m me. I can’t shrink, and I love being tall, love being me.* She knocked on the doorframe.

“It’s open, come on in.”

She recognized his low, sexy voice from their nightly calls. It contained more of a drawl to it than a twang. She steadied herself and stepped into the office. A tall, broad, honey-blond male was facing the window and speaking on the phone. The jeans and long sleeved T he wore accentuated his well-toned body. “That will be great. Make arrangements with Sherry. Goodbye.”

*I thought I knew his voice, but I must have the wrong office.* She readied herself to back out. “I’m sorry, I must...”

The man turned quickly. “Matilda...”

Their gazes locked. *He has Johnny Ray’s eyes.* As confusion rambled through her

mind, his handsome face went from surprise to worry to longing back to worry.

*This can't be...He looks like an older Johnny Ray.* She forced her eyes down to the nameplate on the desk: Jonathan Balewa. To the right of the nameplate was a picture of...*Tunji, Johnny Ray and Isom!* Childhood memories rushed through her and ignited her rage. *I'll kill him!* Weak, she held onto the edge of the desk to keep from falling. "J...Johnny Ray?"

He stepped around the desk and drew her into his arms. "I'm sorry, my queen."

She gazed up into the face of the only man she'd ever loved, the one who would do anything to get his way, the one who broke her heart. "I...I can't..." The mix of memories and emotions were too much for her to handle. She ran out of his office and down the hallway. She heard his heavy footsteps nearing, so she rounded the corner and entered the stairwell.

The echo of the door closing, the cement stairs, everything reminded her of the pain she'd gone through so many years ago, the pain she'd run from, the pain he reminded her of. Unable to run any further, she sunk on the stairs and wrapped her arms around her knees. *How could he do this to me?* She wiped her tears away, but the memories wouldn't leave so easily. She would have done anything for him, but he chose his friends over the one he supposedly loved.



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Once in the car, Johnny Ray crumbled. Matilda could tell his adrenalin rush had worn off, and the pain and reality of what had just transpired had overcome him. He slumped into the passenger seat, and she rushed around to the driver's seat. She was afraid Joe would follow them outside, but there was no sign of him yet. She didn't bother to buckle Johnny Ray or herself up before she sped away.

"I'm taking you to the hospital."

"No," he breathed out. "No." He lowered the seat back as far as it would go.

"But you're hurt. Your ribs could be broken and puncture a lung. And your face is swelling."

He dropped the gun to the floor. "No, Matilda. Pull over. We have to get rid of this gun in case he calls the cops."

Usually she was the one to think things out, but this time he'd been the one with the cool head. They hadn't shot anyone, but she already had two strikes against her if the police stopped them: driving a car without a license and being black. The third strike of carrying a concealed weapon was one she could definitely do without. She drove to a nearby creek and parked. Her face, back and ankle hurt, but she couldn't concentrate on her injuries until Johnny Ray was safe.

She'd known something was terribly wrong when she saw the horror in his



eyes as he asked her to leave. With the intention of calling the police if something went wrong, she'd pretended she left, but when she heard a loud thump, she had to take immediate action. It only took her a few seconds to run into the den, but Joe was all ready bent over Johnny Ray about to pummel him. She'd grabbed a nearby vase and smashed it over his head. She wished she'd have thought of the poker sooner.

She took off her shoes and panty hose and wiped the gun down with her stockings. If the revolver were used in a crime, she didn't want her or Johnny Ray's fingerprints on it. "Do not go to sleep, Johnny Ray. I'll be right back." He grimaced and moaned. She slipped her heels back on and tipped out of the car with the gun wrapped in her hose. She lifted the skirt of her gown with one hand and raced into the brush. She placed the revolver in a patch of bushes far enough from the path that no one should happen upon it.

Once she returned to the car, she took off her shoes and tossed them into the back seat. "Those things are murder." She revved the engine and headed back for the road. "Since you won't let me take you to the hospital, where to?"

"Lynden and Nick."

"Whose place is closer?"

"Nick's." He gave her instructions, but she couldn't stand seeing him in so much pain—physically and emotionally.

She parked in front of a two-story white house. All of the houses in the neighborhood resembled one another and had well manicured lawns. “Is this the right one?”

He strained to lift his head. “Yeah...but I can’t...Please have them come to me.”

She was in too big of a hurry to get Johnny Ray help to worry about putting her shoes back on. She rang the doorbell and waited patiently. After about a minute, she rang the bell again. This time the door swung open immediately, and an angry looking, bulky, white woman sneered down at her. “What are you doing ringing my door this time of night!”

It wasn’t even ten yet, but Matilda decided not to point that out. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but John—”

“Get on out of here you little heathen. We don’t want anything you have to offer!” She turned hotly and slammed the door.

Matilda entered the car and got instructions to Lynden’s home. Once there she put on her shoes and gazed into the rearview mirror. The sight of her own swelling eye and disastrous hair caused her to gasp. Her face hurt like the dickens, but she hadn’t realized it was that bad. She hadn’t thought of what a mess she must look. *No wonder Nick’s mom didn’t want to speak with me.* She quickly yanked the remaining hair pens and daisy clips out of her hair, then combed her hair so the

bruised and swollen left side of her face was covered.

She hurried onto the porch, drew in a deep breath and rang the doorbell. This time someone answered after one ring. A petite woman with a pinched, but pretty, face peeked out. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry for ringing your door so late, ma'am, but my friend Johnny Ray is in the car." She motioned behind her. "He's injured and needs assistance. Could you come out and help him?"

The woman opened the door a tad bit wider and looked around Matilda at the red BMW.

"How you get a car like that?" The woman pulled her head back and closed the door so Matilda could barely see her nose. "Johnny Ray has a chauffeur. Get off my doorstep."

Exasperated, Matilda dropped her head back. "Please, ma'am, he's hurt pretty bad."

The woman closed the door. Matilda was tempted to ring again, but didn't. She needed to get help. For all she knew he could have internal bleeding. She ran back to the car and glanced over at Johnny Ray. He was still awake, but his eyes were barely open.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Don't worry. I'll get help." He'd be angry with her, but she headed for the

hospital. A few miles from the subdivision, a police cruiser began tailing them.

“We’ve got company.”

“Who?”

“Cops.”

“Oh shit, I’ll bet Lynden’s mother called them. That woman’s afraid of her own shadow.”

Matilda was driving the speed limit and obeying the rules of the road, but a mile from the hospital, the cruiser pulled them over.

Johnny Ray let his seat up and opened the glove compartment for the insurance and registration.

Two officers approached. One stood back while the other tapped on the driver-side window. Matilda lowered the window slightly. “Something wrong officer?”

He shined the brightest flashlight Matilda had ever seen into the car. She closed her eyes and turned her face away. “I think he’s trying to blind me,” she whispered to Johnny Ray. “If they take us in, I’m telling the truth.”

“We can’t.”

“We may not have a choice. I’m not lying for that monster. My first priority is getting you help.”

“I’ll need to see your driver’s license and registration.”

She lowered the window more and handed over Johnny Ray's information.

The officer scrutinized the license and handed it back over. "Where's yours, ma'am."

Matilda bit on her lip and tasted the blood from earlier. "I'm afraid I don't have one, but I'm an excellent driver," she added quickly.

He chuckled, which went a long way at putting Matilda at ease. "I'm sure you are, but in order to drive, you must have a valid license."

She turned to Johnny Ray. "I'm sorry, but this is ridiculous."

"Go ahead and tell them. There's no way to keep it secret anymore."

When they were alone, she'd be sure to tell him the shame he wore on his face didn't belong to him but his father. For now, she turned to the officer. "I'm sorry, but Johnny Ray and I were assaulted tonight." She pushed the hair that covered the battered side of her face behind her ear. Both officers winced. "Johnny Ray's in no condition to drive, so we were headed to the hospital. I know I don't have a license, but when I went to grownups for help, they wouldn't listen to me."

"Well I'll be damned," the closer officer said as he leaned into the car and looked at Johnny Ray. "Someone whipped the tar out of you, boy. Ernest," he called over his shoulder, "I'll take this car. Follow me in the cruiser."

Matilda wanted to hug the officer. "Thank you so much."

He opened the door. "You go on and get in the back seat for now. Looks like

you took a pretty good lickin' yourself."

## Chapter Eight

*Present Day...*

Matilda heard the door to the stairwell open and close, but didn't lift her head from her knees to see who entered. Too much was happening too fast. Heavy footsteps neared.

"I'm sorry, Matilda," Johnny Ray said softly. "There's no excuse for my actions."

She sniffed, but didn't lift her head. "No there isn't." Passion and fury battled for control, but she refused to relinquish control to either.

"I've been calling since yesterday to tell you the truth, but...And I emailed this morning..." He sighed. "I've really jacked this the hell up. I've just missed you so much."

"So your answer was to manipulate me into doing what you want." She faced him. "We aren't children anymore—"

"I know," he cut in. "I know. And I am sorry." The sincerity in his voice touched her, but she wasn't ready to forgive him. She couldn't.

"I can't go through that again, Johnny Ray. I can't. You can't use people to get what you want. You're better than Joe, stop acting like him."

Anguish distorted his handsome features. “You’re right.” He reached forward and took her hands into his. She wanted to pull away, but she’d missed his touch so much. “There are two other comparable positions you can have in the company. One here in Dallas, the other in Chicago.”

“What about Shelton Wireless?” Though she’d only been working the case for a few weeks, she felt as if it were her baby—their baby—and didn’t want to give it or Johnny Ray up.

The heavy metal door creaked open. Matilda jerked her hands out of Johnny Ray’s. The movement put her in mind of the many times she’d jerked away from his touch when they were teens and she wanted to prove she couldn’t stand him.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” A wide-eyed, red-faced man backed out.

Johnny Ray pulled Matilda to her feet and escorted her to the sitting area in her office. “I thought we could use a little more privacy.”

All Matilda could do, was stare at the irritatingly handsome man Johnny Ray had become. “You’ve always gotten under my skin,” she softly admitted.

He rested his forehead on hers, weaved his large fingers through her locs and gently massaged her scalp. “I’ve missed you so much,” he whispered.

Still amazed eyes could actually smolder, she wanted to turn away from the eyes that heated her in ways she didn’t wish to be heated—but couldn’t. “Johnny Ray,” she sighed more than said.



He brushed his lips over her brow, cheek and lips. "I know, baby."

"What do you know?" she uttered breathlessly as the heat built within her.

"I know what you like." He suckled her breast through the linen of her blouse until she moaned. "What you need. What we both want."

A taste of his lips was all she needed, before she'd push him away as she should have done when he first touched her. She lay fully on the sofa and pulled his mouth to hers. Hot, sweet, succulent, everything she'd missed over the years and more. She wrapped her arms around to his firm buttocks.

"Umm that's it, baby." He separated her legs and rested between them as he explored her mouth.

The way he moved between her legs told her that kissing wasn't the only skill he'd mastered over the years. A sensual rush surged through her veins and left her tingling. She deepened the kiss, and he deepened the grind. He swallowed her cries as they fell over an edge they hadn't neared in years.

Breathing ragged, she couldn't believe how easily she'd lost control.

He pecked her lips. "Just like old times," he mumbled.

She stiffened. "No!" She pushed him away. "Oh my God! What have we done?"

A huge grin flashed across his face. "I know it's been a while, but I was—"

"Not that." She looked down. The front of her blouse was wet where he'd

suckled her breasts. “Oh great. How will I hide this?”

“You think you got problems.” He motioned toward his nether regions. His jeans had a distinct dark spot on them.

Laughter bubbled out of her. “This cannot happen again.”

He inched closer and stroked the outside of her thighs. “So does that mean you’re staying?”

She pushed his hands away. “Of course I’m staying. I won’t let you scare me away from Shelton Wireless.”

“That’s my queen. A real fighter.”

“No, I’m not your queen. If you can’t handle a platonic, business relationship, then I’ll transfer.”

“Why can’t we have more? You want more. I want more.”

“No I don’t.” She straightened her posture. “I can’t go back.”

He sat beside her on the couch. “I’m not saying go back. We can go forward.”

“How? Even *if* I did want...” she hunched her shoulders, “this, we work together. This is a repeat of when we were kids and you bet about homecoming. You still don’t think things through.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on, Johnny Ray. I was hired here because of you.”

“All I did was drop your name to Bernie. He decided to call, interview and hire you.”

“I believe you, but how will our co-workers see it?” She flung her arms out. “One has already walked in on us. How many didn’t receive this promotion because I stepped in with a law instead of marketing background and stole their job because I’m banging you.”

He lowered his head into his palms. “Shit!”

“My career is important to me.”

“You are important to me.” He reached over to her. “I’ll do whatever we need to do.”

That’s what he’d told them when they were teens, but she wouldn’t fall for his lies again. She didn’t pull away. “I need a platonic relationship. Please, Johnny Ray. I’m so confused. I need time.”

He caressed her back. “It’s been eighteen years, baby.”

“If you can’t do this, I’ll transfer to Chicago.”

“No...We’ll do this your way, for now.” He stood. “I need to get back to my office and clean up.” He pulled his jeans away from his body.

She giggled. “You look like you just—”

“Don’t say it or I’ll kiss you until your toes curl.”

She pretended to zip her lips and throw away the key. He stalked across the

room to the wet bar. “Want something?” He filled a glass with tap water.

“No thanks.”

He poured the water down the front of his long sleeved T-shirt. It trickled on down to his pants.

She narrowed her eyes on him. “You thought of that too quickly.”

“Always a step ahead, my queen.”

“And stop that ‘my queen’ mess also.” She pulled her wet blouse from hardened breast.

“A blow dryer will clear that right up,” he teased.

She glared at him. “You’re wrong for that. Get out of my office.”



The way Matilda’s body responded to Johnny Ray’s touch told him she was still his. Just as when they were teens, she’d been correct. People in the office would never believe she didn’t sleep her way into the position. *I need to slow down.*

Glad his queen decided to stay, he intended on winning her back. After a quick shower and a change in wardrobe, he checked his voicemail. Madison had called again. He didn’t want to dwell in the past; his queen was the here and now, but he seriously considered returning Madison’s call.



“What are you up to, Joe?” Madison asked, still standing in the doorway.

Joe continued down the walkway to his SUV. “Nothin’,” he tossed over his shoulder with a wave. “Absolutely nothin’.” He tipped a hat he wasn’t wearing at Madison. “I’ll catch you later.”

“Catch you later.” Madison slowly closed the front door. He’d retired from law enforcement years ago, but his instincts hadn’t left him. Joe was up to something, and he had to figure out what before someone was hurt. He wished his instincts had of been as in tune when Joe attacked Johnny Ray and Matilda.

*I made such a huge mistake.* He went over to his phone and called Johnny Ray, again. To his surprise, Johnny Ray actually answered this time.

“Hey, Johnny Ray, this is Madison.” He watched out the window. Joe had left physically, yet he still felt the evil behind the man’s presence lingered.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you back, but...I don’t have anything to do with Joe Sloan.”

Madison scrubbed his face with his hands. “I know you’re still upset, son. And I apologize for my role. I should have done my job instead of trying to make things easier on everyone.”

“It wasn’t your fault. You were doing what you thought was best.”

“Well...” He turned away from the window. “I was wrong, and Joe’s up to something. I don’t know what, but he’s been spending an awful lot of time in

Texas. I just wanted you to be careful.”

“If he comes near me or my queen, I swear to God, I’ll kill him!”

Phone propped between his ear and shoulder, Madison held his hands out as if Johnny Ray were in the room with him. “Now calm down, son, Joe isn’t worth your being sent to jail over.” His brows drew in. Heart suddenly light, he asked, “Did you say your queen?”

“Yes, sir,” Johnny Ray said gleefully.

“Well I’ll be damned.” He punched into the air. “This is great!” Elated the couple had reunited, Joe came to his mind. “Now you be careful. You know Joe blames you two for ruining his life.”

“I will. And thanks for the call.”

The two exchanged pleasantries, then hung up.

*If I could only go back.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

The three cracked ribs and multiple abrasions and contusions Johnny Ray had gone a long way in substantiating what he’d said had happened. Matilda told the same story to a different group of officers and doctors while she received treatment for her black eye, sprained ankle and the knot on her head.

Lieutenant Madison didn’t know what to do. He’d called Lynden and Nick’s

homes and learned a wreck of a black girl had come to their houses claiming she needed help. Of course, the women knew she was running some sort of scam and turned her away. Madison had even had a chance to speak with Lynden and Nick and asked if they knew anything about a bet. Both of them reluctantly told about the bet they'd made with Johnny Ray.

Dr. Warner insisted he had to call child protective services and report the incident, and Matilda was insistent on pressing charges. "He tried to murder us!" she'd said, and all indications of his investigation pointed to her telling the truth.

*You really put your foot in it this time.* He and Joe Sloan had been friends since they were children. Madison knew of Joe's temper, drinking problem and his hate of non-whites. He also knew at times Joe took his anger out on his family, but he hadn't realized things had gotten this bad. *Something has to be done before he kills that boy.*

He glanced from Dr. Warner, who was sitting behind the desk, to Matilda and Johnny Ray, who occupied the two chairs across from Dr. Warner. Madison had taken over Dr. Warner's office and made it command central.

Madison, an average sized man with dark hair and eyes, sat on the edge of the desk. "Johnny Ray, you got somewhere you want to stay while we straighten this situation out. Maybe with your friends."

The shock that had humbled Johnny Ray's voice had transitioned to

boisterous fury. “I’m not *welcome* in my friends’ homes.”

“I know you’re upset, son. But their mothers didn’t know you were actually hurt. And arresting a man like Joe Sloan isn’t a simple task. There has to be another answer.”

“Hell, look at Matilda!” He motioned toward her, but quickly drew his arm back in and gingerly rubbed his ribcage. “Look what that bastard did to us. They could see someone was hurt and needed help. I’m not going back to him, and I won’t stay with their heartless asses.”

Dr. Warner nodded his head as if seeing Johnny Ray’s point. Matilda gently fingered the swelling around her eye and the knot on her head. Madison knew once her mother found out, there’d be hell to pay. The King family had money, prestige and connections of their own. But if Madison didn’t think of some way to get this situation under wraps, the Sloans would go on the warpath and everyone would lose. There was no way they’d allow a Sloan to go to jail for attempted murder. Madison sighed. The Sloan clan had never actually accepted Johnny Ray as one of them because they didn’t think his mother was “good enough.”

“I understand you are upset, but—”

“Do you?” Johnny Ray, face battered and bruised, glared at him. “Do you understand how it feels to have your father hate you so much he literally tries to beat you to death? I want to be an emancipated minor, or I’m pressing charges.”



Shock flickered in Matilda's eyes. Madison watched her and wondered what they could do to get her to drop the charges. Ready to handle one issue at a time, he turned his attention back to Johnny Ray. "Where would you live?"

"With Tunji."

Madison stalked to the window and back. "I don't see Joe agreeing to allow a black man to raise you."

"Then he'll see the inside of a prison, because Tunji is my only option. My family never wanted me. Dad will be glad to be rid of me."

"And what about you, Matilda? What do you want to remain quiet?"

Arms crossed over her chest, she lowered her brows. "I won't remain quiet," she said slowly and cautiously. "Joe Sloan is going to jail. My uncle is the Attorney General of the great state of Tennessee."

This time shock flickered in Johnny Ray's eyes.

Madison held his hands out slightly. "I'm aware who your family is, but I'm just asking if there is a way we can keep from dragging anyone's family into a long, ugly legal battle."

"Looks like you're trying to protect Joe Sloan to me."

"Yes, Joe Sloan will benefit, but the main benefactor will be Johnny Ray."

She *tsked*. "I don't even like him. The only reason we went out was because of some stupid bets. Look at me!" Tears fell from her eyes. "Look what he did to me."

“May I have a few minutes alone with Matilda?” Johnny Ray asked.

Madison hoped Johnny Ray would be able to talk some sense into Matilda, but if the reports his son had often told him about the battles these two had during school, he didn’t see much of a chance. *If this goes to trial, nothing good will come of it.* “Dr. Warner, is there somewhere we can speak privately?” While Johnny Ray worked on Matilda, Madison would convince Dr. Warner this incident must not be reported to the authorities.



*Present Day...*

Johnny Ray disconnected with Madison. Unfortunately, his past wouldn’t stay in the past. *We thought we were so smart.* He wanted to call Matilda and tell her about Joe, but knew she’d need a little more time before hearing about him.

*What is she afraid of? Why won’t she forgive me?* He grabbed the Shelton Wireless file and headed out to see his queen—strictly business of course.

The bruises on his queen’s face from Joe’s beating were fresh in his mind. He’d failed his queen. He’d never allow Joe or anyone to hurt her again.



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

As soon as the door closed, Johnny Ray and Matilda leapt out of their seats

and embraced one another. Johnny Ray softly brushed his lips over her blackened eye. "I'm so sorry, baby. This was all my fault."

"No." She shook her head. "This was not your fault, and I won't allow you to accept the blame." She grinned and caused his heart to skip several happy beats. "You made a move I hadn't anticipated. Emancipated minor. Wow, that was brilliant."

"And you played along perfectly."

"Well, I didn't want them to think I actually like you. Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

Though the doctors had said he hadn't punctured a lung, his ribcage and back ached something fierce. He returned to the chair and she to hers. "A hundred percent positive. The only thing I'm more sure of is how much I love you."

"This is all so crazy."

"Yeah, but something good is coming out of it. I'll finally be free."

She nibbled on her inner jaw and fidgeted in her seat.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I'm just...I'm sorry I didn't believe you about how awful your home life was. I was arrogant and insensitive."

"No, my queen, I'd mislead you. I didn't want anyone to know, but now that it's out, we might as well benefit. Do you think you can convince your mom not to

pursue?”

“It won’t be easy, but I think I can.” Sadness overtook her beaten face. “I’ve called home twice and left messages, and her pager isn’t on. We need to figure out what I want to remain quiet. I know I want copies of the police and hospital reports. Can you think of anything else?”

“He has to pay your medical expenses and set up a trust fund.” He grinned. “I’m thinking at least a million. It’s a small price to pay to keep him out of jail.”

“I don’t want his money.”

“I say a trust to keep anyone from becoming suspicious.”

## Chapter Nine

*Present Day...*

The workday was coming to an end. Matilda and Johnny Ray had accomplished a lot for this being only their first day. At least a lot professionally, that is. Personally, they were still in a holding pattern. The urge to call Jonathan was strong. In the weeks since they'd met over the phone—actually re-met—he had quickly become her confidant. Now she didn't know what the next step would be. She signed. Jonathan Balewa, the first man she'd connected with on a level higher than friendship since she'd left Tennessee as a teen, was actually Johnny Ray Sloan. The man she had always and most likely would always love. Remnants of the passion they'd shared earlier still warmed her inner thighs and scared the mess out of her. This time she wouldn't allow the passion to consume her. She'd control it instead of it controlling her.

*We can work together. Strictly platonic.* A sardonic smile tipped her kiss-swollen lips. Before he left her office, he'd walloped a kiss on her that had curled her toes. *What am I going to do? I can't go through the pain again. I won't!* She smacked her desk.

She brushed the locs that had fallen forward behind her shoulders and massaged her neck. Johnny Ray used to give the best massages. *Get out of my head, Johnny Ray!* She would call Isom for a distraction, but she was too angry with him for setting her up. She'd call Bobby, but she was angry with him for not warning her. She'd call her grandfather, but she knew he'd be in court. Her last hope of distraction was Georgia May. *I really need some friends.*

She pulled her cell off her belt clip and realized it wasn't on. Johnny Ray had said he'd tried to call, but she'd been too flustered to comprehend much of their conversation. She powered her phone and booted her computer. If her memory served her correctly, he'd also said he'd tried to email her. Her phone chimed, indicating she had a message. She put in her wireless earpiece, pressed the "1" to access her voicemail and set her cell on the desk beside the keyboard.

"You have three unheard messages..."

She logged into her company email account as she listened.

"Hello, Matilda, this is Jonathan. I have something important I need to speak with you about. Non-work related. As soon as you get this message, please call me."

"End of message. To delete message, press seven."

She pressed seven, then listened to the second message, which was basically a repeat of the first message. There weren't any emails from Jonathan in her company email account, so she logged into her personal email account.

The third message began. "Hello, Matilda. I pray you had a safe flight. I know I've blown up your phone, but..." He sighed. "I owe you such an apology. You see..." She heard him fidgeting with something on the other side of the line. "I can't let you go into the office without...Hell..."

Yeah she was irritated with him, but she found this bumbling, fumbling apology endearing. *Man, am I in trouble.*

"I've deceived you. You see...You see you knew me years ago as Johnny Ray. I'm so sorry," he rushed in. "I have already made arrangements for you if you don't want to work with me. There are two comparable positions. One here in Dallas and one in Chicago." The nervousness behind his voice told her which place he'd prefer she choose.

A scan of the email he'd sent to her personal account basically said the same things as his voicemail. *Okay, so he isn't a total jerk, but he did set this whole thing up. We're not kids anymore, but he's up to his same old tricks. He hasn't changed.* She deleted the email and voicemail from him.

A frown creased her brow. *Mama never called.* She speed dialed her mother's number.

“Are you still in Texas?”

“Hello, Mama. It’s so great to hear your voice on this fine Monday.” She leaned back in her executive chair. “I arrived safely, and my first day has been over the top, to say the least.”

“Don’t start with me, Matilda. You’re the one who left me here. I have no one.”

“Oh puh-leez, when I was there you barely had time to say hi to me.” She reached for the disconnect. “I shouldn’t have called. I don’t know what I was thinking. Goodbye, Mama.”

Shortly after she disconnected, her cell phone rang. She knew exactly what she was thinking. She’d erroneously thought her mother would think about someone besides herself. *Why do I do this to myself?* Georgia May was Georgia May. The name on the caller ID caused her to sigh. “Yeah, Mama?”

“Don’t you ever hang up on me. I’m tired of you always acting like—”

“Mama, please. I’ve had a hard day. I’m sorry for hanging up on you. I wasn’t trying to disrespect you. I thought the conversation was over.” So she wouldn’t be accused of hanging up on Georgia May again, she waited, and waited...Two minutes passed according to her computer monitor, yet Georgia May said nothing.

“Mama? I have work to do. Did you want anything else?”

Silence.



“Mama, I’m about to hang up in fifteen seconds if you don’t say something, so don’t claim I’ve hung up on you.”

Twelve seconds of silence ticked. Tired of her mother’s theatrics, Matilda readied to disconnect. “Goodb—”

“The only thing I want is for you to quit acting like I haven’t been here for you. I’m the one who saved you from those bastards in Tennessee. I’m the one who has *always* been there for you, no matter how hard headed you act. Me! I don’t deserve this treatment, Matilda.”

Matilda palmed either side of her head with both hands and squeezed. *What on earth possessed you to call her?* “Mama, this isn’t about you.” She pushed away from her desk. She hadn’t had time to fully appreciate her new space.

“Of course it’s about me. You blame me for your unhappiness. Now you’re punishing me.”

She clipped her cell onto her pants and strolled across the industrial grey carpet to her empty built in bookshelves. A box on the floor she hadn’t noticed previously called her attention. “Mama, this move has nothing to do with you.” She knelt beside the box to examine the envelope taped to it. She wanted to make sure the person who previously occupied the office hadn’t left anything. “I don’t want to be a lawyer. I want to be a marketing consultant. The top marketing firm in the

country offered me this position, and I took it. I couldn't allow this opportunity to pass me by."

"Humph, you're down there looking for Johnny Ray. I know Bobby lives in Dallas."

Matilda giggled. *If she only knew.* She opened the envelope and withdrew the letter from inside.

"What is wrong with you, Matilda? You are so sensible whenever it doesn't involve that Johnny Ray or Bobby. Don't let them bring you down. Come home..."

As Georgia May rambled on about how Matilda was screwing up her life, Matilda read the letter.

*My Queen,*

*I know you are angry with me, as well you should be, but I miss you.*

*I miss us. I've done some things I'm not proud of. Please forgive me for everything.*

*Love, Your King*

*P.S. The items in the box are for you.*

Heart warmed, she rushed to open the box. Inside contained book after book on marketing, advertising and public relations, plus an extra bonus of baseball tickets to several of the Rangers home games. *You are too much, Johnny Ray.* As teens they'd speak for hours about baseball and marketing.

“...Are you listening to me, Matilda.”

“I’m sorry. I missed the end of what you said.” She began placing the new books on her shelf alphabetically by topic. The baseball tickets included an extra little note that said the second ticket in each set was for whomever she invited and that his schedule happened to be free on all of the dates of the tickets. *Way too much.*

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. You have always been distant, yet claim I’m the one who is.”

“Don’t even go there.” Matilda continued organizing her bookshelf. “You are the queen of distant. We lived right down the hall from Bobby’s, yet I barely saw my aunt and uncle. The only reason I saw Bobby and Granddaddy was because they would barge into *your* world whether you liked it or not. I’m beginning to think you got pregnant with me through artificial insemination. The question is, why?” Past tired of this same old discussion, she took the empty box and her tickets back over to her desk. She was in no mood to coddle her mother today. If Georgia May kept pushing, she’d get the truth behind how her daughter felt.

“I love you, Matilda, and have always been here for you. I won’t let you turn me into the bad guy.”

“I’m not trying to turn you into anything.” She returned to her chair, dropped the tickets on her desk and started breaking down the box. “All I did was move from New York to Texas. This is my career, my life. We don’t have to live in

the same city to have a relationship. I just don't understand why you're so upset."

Matilda stopped breaking down the box. "Hey! You didn't say I wasn't a result of artificial insemination."

"Stop being ridiculous. Of course you're not."

"Then who's my father?"

Silence.

"Mama, I asked who my father is."

"He's dead."

"Then what was his name? Where are his people, my people?"

"See! There you go, trying to replace me with him."

Matilda allowed her head to fall forward into her hands. "Please don't think I'm trying to disrespect you, but you need some serious psychological counseling."

Georgia May gasped, but Matilda continued, "How on earth is my wanting to know who my father is some sort of attack on you? Everything isn't about you. Look, I feel myself nearing the point of no return. How about we end this now and talk when I get off from work? Maybe I can fly to New York this weekend, and we can do a little shopping."

"How could you say such a cruel thing?"

"I'm tired, Mama. I'm tired of being this little trophy you pop out whenever you need an ego boost." As teens, that's how Johnny Ray had described Georgia

May and Matilda's relationship. At the time she hadn't agreed, but over the years she saw his point. "It's time I be a little selfish for a change and do something for me."

"For a change! That whole fiasco with you and Johnny Ray was because of your selfishness. You didn't think about how you two's actions would affect anyone but yourselves."

"And your point? I was fifteen and without a family. I wanted a family. I wanted someone I could count on besides my goofy cousin."

"You could count on me."

"No, I couldn't. Where were you when Joe kicked our asses..." she trailed off, inhaled deeply and released it slowly. "Johnny Ray was there for me in ways you can't comprehend. He tried to be the man he wasn't ready to be. I know you did your best. I appreciate and love you for trying, but I need you to understand that you can't supply many of my needs and refuse to supply others."

"So you're doing this because I won't tell you who your father is?"

Matilda resisted the urge to bang the phone into oblivion. "No, Mama. Your refusal to tell me who my father is, is only a part of the problem."

"If I tell you about your father, will you come home?"

"I am home, and I will not be paid off or guilted into returning to New York. You should tell me who *my* father is because I have a right to know, because you

know how I've struggled over the years from not knowing, because you want to be there for me."

"I am."

"Then what's your excuse for not telling me who my father is now? He's dead, right? Are you scared his ghost will take attention from you?"

"That bastard was married. I don't know or care if he's dead!"

Okay, so Matilda wasn't ready for her mother's words. She didn't know what she was ready for, if anything. She'd spent years trying to figure out what had happened between her parents. Her grandparents, aunts and uncles always claimed they didn't know who he was and to ask her mother. Now she believed them and regretted holding a grudge against them for not revealing her mother's secret.

"What happened, Mama?" Georgia May had some strange ways, but sleeping with married men wasn't one of them. Unable to sit still, Matilda paced between the bookshelves and the small conference table. "Is he alive?"

"I fell for his lines again, and he didn't even come for me! Just like Johnny Ray didn't come for you. He doesn't love you. Don't fall into that trap."

Matilda stopped mid-stride. "You're confusing me. What do you mean again? What happened? Please, Mama, I need some answers."

"I...I can't."

“Start at the beginning. How did you meet?” She returned to her executive chair.

“In Nashville. He was a doctor at the hospital...I swear I didn’t know he was married. You know how hard it is for me to allow anyone close. I’m so sorry, baby. I thought he was the one, but, but...I didn’t know until it was too late.”

“Does he know about me?”

“No,” Georgia May said softly. “I should have told you, but I didn’t know how. The right moment never came.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about all of this, Mama, but thanks for telling me. You’ve lifted much of my burden. What’s his name?”

“No, Matilda. I won’t have you popping into his life after all of these years.”

“You should know me well enough to know I’m not that type of person. Is he still in Nashville?”

After a long hesitation, Georgia May answered, “Last I heard, he was in Memphis.”

Mind blown, Matilda shook her head. “This is all so crazy. Was he there when we lived there?”

“Yes, and I’m not talking about this any longer. You wanted to know about your father, now you know. He cheated on his wife and lied to me,” she said bitterly. “He never loved me.”

The saying “So close yet so far away” echoed within Matilda. She knew she wouldn’t get more out of her mother and was truly grateful for what she’d shared thus far. “Are you going to be all right? Maybe you should spend some time with Granddaddy.” Matilda’s grandmother had passed over twenty years ago.

“I just...” Georgia May trailed off. “We’re more alike than you realize.” Matilda doubted that but listened anyway. “If you meet up with Johnny Ray, don’t be taken in. You and he remind me of your father and I. I had to leave him because of the pull that man had on me. The signs were all there, but...but just don’t be taken in. Goodbye, baby.”

“Bye, Mama. I love you.”

“I love you, too. And I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you so many years ago. I should have stood up for you against Joe’s cronies.”

“Leave it in the past, Mama. I am.” They disconnected, but Georgia May’s words hung around.

The question of her paternity had finally been answered, sort of. *So I come from a dog and a woman with serious issues. Great!* Exhausted, she leaned back and stared at nothing in particular. First Jonathan Balewa was actually Johnny Ray, and now this. Resentment swirled through Matilda. Yes Matilda was gratefully shocked for the little information her mother gave her about her father, but she resented that Georgia May was still protecting herself instead of giving Matilda what she



actually needed. Her mind wandered back to homecoming night. The beating from Joe hurt, but not nearly as much as Georgia May not being there for her.



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Matilda rested her hands on her waist and stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars she'd taped to her ceiling years ago. *Where is she?* The night's events had traumatized Matilda, and she really needed her mother. Lieutenant Madison had taken Johnny Ray with him to "straighten out this mess" and had a female officer take Matilda home. The officer didn't want to leave Matilda alone, and, quite frankly, Matilda didn't want to be alone, so she set the officer up in the guest room.

Angry tears streamed down her face. *How could she leave?* Georgia May had only left a note saying she'd gone out. She pushed thoughts of her mother's abandonment out of her mind and replaced them with Johnny Ray. Lieutenant Madison had ensured Matilda that if she could convince her mother to go along with the plan, he would show Joe Sloan that his only choices were to follow the plan or go to jail.

The man had been outraged by what Joe had done, but she noted he wasn't outraged enough to lock Joe up and throw away the key. *There's no way he didn't know*

*that monster was beating Johnny Ray.* She seethed at the thought of how many people had allowed this to happen to her king. She was even angry with Tunji. Johnny Ray seemed to worship the man, but to her, he was no better than the rest. He should have reported Joe. He should have protected Johnny Ray. But then again...She rolled over with a heavy heart. Realistically, he was probably doing the best he could under the circumstances. No one would believe a black chauffeur over Joe Sloan. Or worse yet, they'd believe him and not do anything but make his life miserable.



*Present Day...*

“Lynden, I need for you to check around town for me. See what Joe is up to.” Johnny Ray adjusted his earpiece as he watched the parking lot ten floors below. Matilda had agreed to follow him to her apartment. He wasn’t allowed in, at least not tonight. He planned on working on that. For now he was to show her the best route between her home and office.

“Do you think Joe will come after you two?”

“I hope not, but better safe than sorry. Madison said he’s been hanging around Texas for months.” He returned to his desk. “I cut all legal ties with him so many years ago. I thought this was all over with.”

“Well, I’m only a professor, but I’ll check around. Nick still has a few ties

with the family, maybe he can find out what's going on."

The sound of Nick's name made Johnny Ray tense instantly. "I thought I'd forgiven him, but I guess I haven't. I still don't trust him."

"He's changed, Johnny Ray. We all have. I wouldn't bring him in if I had the slightest inkling he'd harm you or Matilda. He's carrying all of this guilt. This may be a way for him to redeem himself."

Johnny Ray strummed his fingers on the desk. "I'll leave the decision up to you. I don't think Joe is up to anything, but better safe than sorry."

"So," Lynden's robust chuckle filled the line, "what's the deal with you and Matilda. I take it this means she's staying."

"Of course she's staying. She loves me," Johnny Ray lazily boasted over Lynden's laughter.

"Sounds like old times."

"Yeah." Johnny Ray sighed. "A little too much like old times. I've set this whole thing to mirror an adult version of what we went through as teens. What on earth was I thinking?"

"I'm sorry. I was so anxious to make amends that I encouraged you to take this path. But this time it can end differently."

"Damn skippy it will. Look, man, I need to straighten up before we leave."

"We," Lynden's voice quirked up.

“Well you know how hard it is to find your way around Dallas.”

“And?”

“And,” he drawled out, “she just happens to live in the same complex as Bobby, so we’re only a few blocks apart. I’m sure I’ll be able to convince her to start car pooling.”

“Well I’ll be damned!” Lynden laughed so hard, Johnny Ray was sure tears were falling from his eyes. “That’s too far, man. How did you arrange that?”

“I didn’t do it. I’m not some sort of psycho. It’s the fates, man. They know we belong together.”

“Fates my ass. Pull back, Johnny Ray. I’ll snoop around and see what I can find out about Joe.”

“Thanks, man.” They disconnected, but Johnny Ray couldn’t disconnect from his feelings of discontent where his father was concerned. *Just stay out of my life!*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Johnny Ray settled in the office chair behind the desk in the den. He’d chosen the seat behind his father because he didn’t want to see his face. Actually, he didn’t even want to be in the same room with the man, but Lieutenant Madison had insisted Johnny Ray be there.

His father sat in the overstuffed armchair. He'd glared at Johnny Ray when they first entered, but hadn't turned since.

Joe's sister, Debbie Swanson, and her husband, who happened to be an attorney, were seated on the love seat. Lieutenant Madison, Judge Rush and Dr. Warner occupied the sofa. Nick paced nervously behind his parents.

"I can't believe y'all taking the word of this boy without even hearing my side," Joe raged.

"Your side!" Everyone stared at Dr. Warner. The young doctor had been quiet until this point. "Your behavior is indefensible. You almost killed your own son. What the..." He smoothed stray hairs into his ponytail and blew out an exasperated breath.

"I know you don't expect me to take this nonsense from a hippy!"

"Be quiet!" Madison snapped. "Listen for a change. I want you to hear why you almost *murdered* your son, then we're putting an end to this shit right here and now." He waved Nick over to him. "Get on over here, boy. Tell your uncle what happened."

Nick's terrified gaze jumped from his mom to his dad to Joe back to his mom. He gulped.

"This isn't his fault." Debbie stood and hugged Nick. "It isn't fair to put him through this. Johnny Ray isn't worth it."

“I love you, too, Aunt Debbie,” Johnny Ray spat.

Her eyes shot wide open, and she spun around with her hand over her mouth. “I didn’t mean...I mean...”

“Just sit down, Debbie,” Madison instructed, “and let the boy talk. Go on, son. You don’t have nothin’ to fear.” He pointed at Joe. “And don’t you say one cotton pickin’ word until I say you can speak.”

Nick crumpled the edges of his suit coat and stared into the plush carpet. “Johnny Ray don’t want nothin’ to do with that black chick. He acts like he likes her at school to get on her nerves, but that’s about it.” He peeked at Madison.

“You’re doing fine, son. Tell about the homecoming dance.”

“Well, you see...Johnny Ray is always so cocky. Lynden thought he’d teach him a lesson and make a bet he knew Johnny Ray would lose. He...I guess, we bet him two hundred dollars he couldn’t get that black girl to go to the homecoming dance with him.”

“What?” Joe raged.

“Shut it!” Madison warned and turned to Nick. “Please continue.”

“Well...you see we ragged on him so bad at the dance. I mean he was humiliated because that girl’s cousin had bet her she couldn’t get Johnny Ray to go to the dance with her. By the time they arrived at the dance, everyone knew about her bet, but not his. A lot of folks lost all kinds of money when he walked through

the door with Matilda on his arm. He left early, and I guess they came here.” He shrugged and wiped the tears from his eyes. “I’m sorry, Johnny Ray. I didn’t mean to get you in trouble.”

Debbie stood and hugged her son. “That’s enough, darling. This isn’t your fault.”

Joe stomped as he stood. The furniture rattled from the vibrations. “The hell it’s not, and why didn’t you take Johnny Ray in when he came to you for help?” he barked.

Eddie, Debbie’s husband, rose from his seated position, but Debbie stepped around him. “How was I supposed to know Johnny Ray was actually hurt?” she shouted.

“What the hell! How you miss a red assed BMW?”

“I only saw that girl. I didn’t see any car. And even if I had, she could have stolen the car. You know how they are.”

“Get out!” He jerked his hand dismissively and headed for his son.

Johnny Ray turned the chair to face the large bay window. He saw Debbie rush out of the room with Nick in toe. He also saw his father’s reflection, which was more than he wanted to see.

“I’m sorry, son. You have to forgive me. You’re all I have left of your mother.”

“I hate you.” He could see his father lean on the desk and Madison

approached.

“Come on, Johnny Ray. You know how the liquor does me. You know I didn’t mean it.”

“Well, I mean it. I should have shot your ass. Get the hell away from me.”

Madison gently pulled Joe away. “Let’s get this finished up. Everyone’s tired.”

Johnny Ray faced the rest of the group once they’d seated

“I can’t lose my boy.”

“Now let me tell you what’s gonna happen, Joe. We been friends since before I can remember, and I want you to know I’m doing this for your and Johnny Ray’s good. If that gal or Johnny Ray decides to pursue this, life as you know it will end, and you *will* go to jail. No ifs ands or butts about it.”

Johnny Ray wanted to yell, “Matilda. Her name is Matilda, and I’m in love with her,” but he knew the others were trying to keep the focus off the black girl and onto Joe’s white son.

Madison picked up a stack of papers. “By signing these, you are giving up your legal custody of Johnny Ray.”

“What? Hell no! I’m not giving up my son.”

“Humph, don’t force him to sign them,” Dr. Warner interrupted. “He needs to go to jail and be the punching bag and girlfriend of a few *darkies*. That’ll teach



him a little something.”

Joe thumped his chest. “Do you know who I am? No jury in its right mind would convict me.”

Judge Rush shook his graying head. “Joe,” he said wearily, “not only is the young lady you assaulted the niece of the State’s Attorney, but her grandfather is a Federal Judge. Hell, she lives down the hall from her uncle who just happens to be a prosecutor.”

Man how Johnny Ray wished he could have seen his father’s face when that bomb was dropped. *Probably the same dumb look I had on my face when the good ol’ judge said he wouldn’t emancipate me.*

“You will be prosecuted and convicted,” the judge said confidently.

“This can’t be happening.” Joe lowered his face into his palms. “Where will he live? With Debbie is out of the question.”

“Like you give a damn,” Johnny Ray spewed.

“Be quiet, boy,” Madison chastised. “I’ve made arrangements for Tunji Balewa—”

“With the chauffeur!? Never! He’s black.”

“You allowed your family to treat this boy like shit. Where else is there?”

Joe easily lifted and slammed the frame of the oak coffee table down. “This is not happening! You can’t take my boy from me and give him to a filthy—”

“You don’t care about me!” Johnny Ray rounded the desk and joined the others. “You just don’t want something with your name on it under the control of a black person.”

“That’s not true. I love you, Johnny Ray. I’m sorry for what I’ve done. Don’t do this.”

“Love?” He stared at his father a long while. “Yes you love me sooooo much.” His eyes became large, and he wrapped his arms around himself until the pain took over. “Why don’t you tell everyone why you bought me the BMW?” He ignored the pain and lifted his shirt to display the freshest batch of scarring left behind from the whelps on his back from the beating with an extension cord.

Eddie and the judge grimaced. “Son of a bitch,” Judge Rush bit out under his breath.

Johnny Ray tugged at his shirt to lower it. “The only thing you love is that damn bottle.”

Joe stiffened.

“That’s enough, Johnny Ray,” Madison said. “We aren’t here to put salt on your father’s wounds.”

“Johnny Ray.” Judge Rush’s voice was soft, yet potent enough to draw everyone’s attention. “Take a seat by your uncle, Eddie.” He motioned toward the loveseat. “This will all be over shortly. Joe, I must say your daddy and I go way

back. That bottle killed him. You'd best clean up your act before it kills you, too."

Joe and Madison retook their seats. Johnny Ray also did as he was told, but he was still fuming. Layer after layer of scaring proved his father didn't love him.

"I'm writing an order for you to pay three grand a month in child support."

"What?" Johnny Ray leapt to the edge of the sofa. "I don't want his money. I don't want anything from him but my freedom."

"Be quiet, boy." Rush's voice remained soft, but harsh. "Mr. Balewa volunteered to do this for free, but raising you will cost him money and position in his community. Your daddy isn't the most liked man around, and I'm sure his people will give him a hard time for taking you in."

Johnny Ray fell back on the couch. The pain that followed was a reminder for him to act as if he had sense instead of a spoiled brat.

"As I was saying, Joe, you will be expected to pay child support of three grand a month until Johnny Ray reaches eighteen. You will pay for his medical insurance and any deductibles. You will also set up a trust fund for his college education. I'll let you know the amount first thing in the morning. You will also set up a trust for Matilda King for one million dollars, which she is to receive on her eighteenth birthday."

"What!"

"Don't start, Joe," Madison warned. "She has you dead to rights. Pay her off

or go to jail. You're getting off easy."

"You will also be paying her medical expenses that are a result of your assault," the judge continued. "If she wants psychological counseling, you will also be paying for that. Last but not least, you will enter the rehabilitation center of my choosing."

Joe stared at his son. Instead of the rage Johnny Ray usually saw, he saw defeat and regret. "Will I get a chance to regain custody of my son after I come out of rehab?"

"You will no longer have any legal claim to Johnny Ray. If you are to be a part of his life is entirely up to him and Mr. Balewa."

"Is this what you want, boy?" Joe asked.

This would be his father's last guilt gift to him. Johnny Ray wanted to gloat, but chose to take the high road. "Yes, please. I can't live like this anymore."

Joe snatched the papers and began signing. "I'll do this rehab and show you I've changed, boy. You'll see. I've learned my lesson. I'll win you back."

## Chapter Ten

*Present Day...*

Matilda watched Johnny Ray devourer the homemade buttermilk biscuits, smothered liver, mashed potatoes and green beans she'd prepared for supper. Bobby called before they left the office to say he'd be working late, so not to keep dinner for him. Of course Bobby had assumed she'd be preparing dinner for the three of them, just as she used to in the good old days. Even Johnny Ray had walked in, washed his hands and helped set the table as if he'd expected to be invited for dinner. At first she was taken aback, especially since she'd told him he could only show her the best way home, but now it felt normal.

"I reckon I have good eatin' like this to thank for those lovely curves you've acquired over the years." Johnny Ray shoveled his last spoonful of gravy topped mashed potatoes into his mouth.

"Oh you smooth talker you," Matilda teased. "Want more iced tea?"

"Nah, baby." He rubbed his belly. "I'm stuffed. Go on and rest up a piece while I clean up." He motioned toward the living room.

"I hate doing dishes, so you won't get any argument from me." She pushed away from the table. She could feel his eyes on her as she left. Tempted to turn and

lick her tongue out at him, she decided to continue on to her room to change her clothes instead of playing with fire.

*Why did I let him in?* The answer to that question was easy. She needed someone to vent to who would understand her relationship with Georgia May. Plus, she enjoyed his company. He could still make her laugh one second and ready to rip his head off the next. She pulled a pair of blue sweats out of her drawer.

“Matilda! Where is the Tupperware?”

“I haven’t unpacked it yet. Fix yourself and Bobby a plate for later and toss the rest.” She stripped out of her white linen suit. “I can’t believe we’re actually going to Florida. I guess we made quite an impression on Shelton Wireless.” She shook the sweat pants out and stepped into them.

“Hell, I thought I’d lost that account, but you pulled it off, baby. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“That’s true.” She laughed and tugged the sweatshirt over her head.

“Big head. You sure you don’t want me to fix you a plate?”

“Yeah, I’m good. How long will we be in Florida?” She tossed her linen suit into the corner to be taken to the cleaners later. *I’m such a slob.* They’d worked tirelessly all day to come up with a more comprehensive preliminary marketing plan for Shelton. Day after tomorrow, they’d be on their way to Shelton Wireless headquarters in Miami to get a better feel for the company. They would receive

hands on exposure on the vast range of wireless technologies Shelton had to offer its customers and that they would be marketing.

“I’m thinking at least a month,” he answered. She heard him banging about the kitchen. “When we get back, I’ll help you finish unpacking.”

*A month? I guess Bobby will be herb garden sitting for me.* Finished dressing, she flicked off the bedroom light and joined him in the kitchen. She stood in the doorway admiring the snug fit of his jeans as he bent to place the cast iron skillet in the dishwasher.

“I can feel you checking out my butt.” Still crotched down, he glanced over his shoulder and winked.

“I was not.”

“Sure you weren’t.” He stood with his arms open wide. “I’m here for you any time you want, baby girl.”

“Still arrogant.” *And cute as hell.* Subject change at the tip of her tongue, she went for it. “You won’t believe what Mama told me today.”

He dried his hands on a dishtowel. “What’s Miss Georgia May up to these days?”

“Driving me crazy.”

“Same ol’ same ol’, huh.” He took her by the hand and led her to the living room couch. “You were mighty quiet on the ride home. What happened?” He drew

her into his chest and held tightly until she began to relax.

“I’ve always loved your hair,” he whispered. He weaved his fingers through her locs to her scalp and gently massaged, then worked his hands along her neck to her shoulders. “Talk to me, baby. Tell me what’s wrong.”

She snuggled comfortably into his side. “Mama told me my father was a married man who doesn’t know about me, but she refuses to tell me anything more.”

“I’m sorry, baby. I know that had to be hard on you. Did she give you any clues to his whereabouts? I’ll hire an investigator to find him.”

This was the type of support she wanted and missed, but what would happen when things got hard. Would he be there when she needed? She’d never been number one to anyone. Would he put their relationship as number one for him?

“No,” she said softly as he stroked her back. “I don’t want to look for him.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just...” She turned away from the conflicting feelings she had for him. “I love Mama, but I can’t be the person she wants me to be, and she’s not interested in getting to know the person I am.”

“I remember when my mother first died. I used to jump through fire hoops to be accepted by my dad. By the time I was ten, I gave up. I accepted him for who



he is and decided I don't like him."

She situated herself on the sofa so he could spoon her. Stacks of moving boxes blocked her view out the patio. *Boxes*. She sighed. "Just as Mama has been trying to make me fit into this box that isn't suited for me, I've been trying to make her fit into one."

"I'm not telling you to cut your mom off, but I think it's a good idea for you to stop trying to make her fit." He brushed her locs behind her ear. "Admit it or not, she's just as abusive as Joe. No she didn't do the physical damage, but the emotional..." he trailed off. "You can't change Georgia May, but you can take steps to protect yourself."

"You're right." She dozed off in his loving embrace and with Georgia May on her mind.



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Matilda cleared the breakfast dishes and wiped down the counters and stovetop.

"Do you need some help," Officer Sally Banks asked.

"No thanks, Miss Sally. I appreciate your staying with me last night. Fixing you a little something to eat is the least I could do." Overnight, Matilda had heard Officer Banks creep into her room to check on her several times. She couldn't

remember the last time her mother had checked on her overnight. The all too familiar resentment dragged Matilda's mood down even further. Tunji had called and told her Johnny Ray made it to his place and the paperwork would be completed by close of business Monday. She heard Johnny Ray in the background asking to speak with her. Tunji only allowed the two to speak for five minutes, before he said they both needed to go to bed. Though it was three in the morning, she wasn't ready to hang up.

"I heard your mother come in around five."

"Did she say anything when she saw you?"

"I didn't want to scare her to death, so I remained quiet. I'll give her another hour before I wake her and tell her off for leaving you home alone."

Matilda rushed over to the light-skinned, motherly officer. "Please don't do that. I like being here alone. I'm fifteen. I don't need a babysitter. Actually, I babysit. Please don't."

She took Matilda's hands into hers. "You were terrified last night. You kept waking up crying for your mother." She shook her head. "She should have at least left a way for you to contact her. Anything could have happened. For Christ's sake, you were almost killed, and she's sleeping in late."

Matilda couldn't agree more, but she'd grown used to her freedom and didn't want it taken from her. "Then just tell her about last night. I really don't

need or want a babysitter. I'll be fine. I haven't done anything wrong and shouldn't be punished."

"I'm not trying to punish you. I'm trying to keep you safe."

Matilda pulled out a chair and sat with the officer. "I appreciate and understand, but last night was a rarity for me. I'm not afraid of staying home alone. I've been doing it for years."

Eyes wide open, Sally gasped. "Years!"

Matilda rolled her eyes. "I have relatives who live right down the hall." Granted, she rarely saw them because her mother discouraged it and she resented them not telling her anything about her father, but they were there.

Sally pursed her lips. "Then why didn't you stay with them last night."

"Because if I went there looking like this," she pointed at her blackened eye and touched the knot on her forehead, "I would still be trying to explain. I was exhausted and needed to be alone, but I didn't want to be totally alone. Does that make sense?"

"What's going on out here?" Georgia May asked as she exited her bedroom.

Sally, still in uniform, stood. "It's about time."

"Matilda, what's going on?"

She faced her mother. Georgia May's eyes grew large. "Oh my God!" She ran to Matilda and grabbed her into your arms. "My baby."

“Mama, you’re holding me too tight. My body aches.” Though it felt good to be in her mother’s embrace, she wanted to scream out in pain.

Georgia May loosened her grip. “Who dared touch you?”

Officer Banks explained what happened with Joe Sloan and the arrangements that had been made.

“Why didn’t someone contact me immediately?”

“Mama, I phoned home twice and your pager wasn’t on. If you had listened to your messages when you got in *this morning*, you would have known.” She stepped away from her mother. “You told me you would be home when I got here. How could you go out? How could you leave without your pager? He tried to kill me, and I needed you. Where were you, Mama? Where?” Tears welled up in her eyes. “I needed you.”

“I’m sorry, baby, I...I’m sorry. But I’ll get Joe Sloan. This deal is off. No one lays a hand on my child.” She marched over to the kitchen phone. “I’m calling Daddy.”

“No.” Matilda snatched the phone from her mother. “No, Mama. I want the deal.”

“What?” Georgia May cocked her head to the side. “Honey, I know a million dollars sounds like a lot, but believe me, it isn’t. Joe Sloan deserves to rot in hell. Right now jail is the closest we can get. You’re a smart young lady.” She nodded

toward Officer Sally. "Sloan owns the police department. They aren't trying to help you, but him." She reached forward and gently brushed Matilda's hair behind her ear. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here last night, but I'm here now."

"Then why can't you do what I need you to do instead of jumping in after the game is finished and trying to change the outcome. I don't want to go through a trial. If I press charges, he will make sure it goes to trial and that it is dragged out. No." She walked over to Officer Banks. "I won't do it." She hugged her and accepted the woman's comforting embrace.

"Thank you so much for being here when I needed," she whispered so her mother wouldn't get jealous. "I would have fallen apart if you weren't here." She blinked away her tears. She didn't want her to leave, but knew she couldn't stay.

"You would have been fine." Officer Banks nodded at Georgia May. "You have a fine young lady here. A fine young lady. Matilda, if you need me, you have my number, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Thanks again." She showed her out and returned to her mother who was standing in the kitchen in a state of shock.

"Matilda, darling, I...I can never express how horrible I feel about not being here last night when you called."

"You should feel horrible." She cautiously sat on the sofa. Her body ached physically and emotionally. "Dr. Warner said you need to call the school on

Monday morning. He's arranging for Bobby to bring my lessons home for the next few weeks, but the school will need your okay also. The story will be that Johnny Ray and I were in a car accident."

"Do you hear what you're saying?" She entered the living area and knelt in front of Matilda. "He's getting away with trying to murder you and his son."

"He's lost his son to a black man, has to pay a black woman a million dollars and has to go to rehab. I don't think he's getting away with anything. I'm tired, Mama. I don't have the energy to fight anymore."



*Present Day...*

Johnny Ray watched the rise and fall of Matilda's chest as she slept in his arms. In their younger days, they'd slept on the couch more often than a bed. Here it was eighteen years later, and from what he could tell, not much had changed for either of them. They were both still lonely, both longing for the family neither ever had, both disappointments to their parents, both what the other desired, both scared witless with what their future held.

*Things will end differently this time, my queen. I promise.* How to keep that promise was the million-dollar question. With the possibility of Joe entering the picture and Georgia May being Georgia May...He sighed. *I'll think of something.*

Matilda stretched in his arms, and his manhood hardened instantly. *It's been*

*too long.* He brushed his lips over her ear, laid back and suffered. This platonic relationship thing was highly overrated. A smile tipped his lips as he remembered the first time she'd relieved his suffering.



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

A month after homecoming, Thanksgiving was quickly approaching, but Johnny Ray and Matilda hadn't returned to school.

Matilda tucked Tom into his crib. "Why don't you and Tunji come here for Thanksgiving?" she whispered. "No pork, I promise. I'll even use smoked turkey in the greens."

Johnny Ray fingered the baby curls around Tom's ear. He hadn't brought up the subject of starting their family since before homecoming, but the urge never left. "Good night, little man." He led her into the living room. "I'll be here, but I'll be a little late. Dad's been in rehab for a month, so he can have visitors now."

"I'm so proud of you, Johnny Ray." She snuggled up with him on the sofa. He rested his hand on her satin covered waist. She'd changed to the satin nightclothes he'd given her.

"Actually, Tunji said I have to go. He says Dad is still my father in the eyes of Allah, so I have to try. As long as Dad isn't drinking or tripping, I'm to visit him at least an hour a week. Humph, that's more than I saw him before."

“Well, I think it’s a good idea. Maybe he won’t be such a jerk now that he’s stopped drinking.”

“Oh I have something for you.” He reached into the back pocket of his jeans and took out a note from the doctor. “Here you go.”

“What is this?” She opened the slip, read it and laughed.

“What? You don’t like my clean bill of health?”

“You are too much, Johnny Ray.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “I love you.”

He took the ponytail holder out of her hair and massaged her scalp. He loved the feel of her cottony soft hair between his fingers. He couldn’t wait until he felt it on his chest again. “Matilda.”

“Hmm.”

“There’s no reason we can’t start our family now. I mean, why can’t we have what we both want and is within our grasp?”

She bit on her lip. “I’m scared. I’ve never...”

“Me either, but I’m ready. If you aren’t, I can wait. I don’t want to rush you.”

“Oh no. I’m ready. This is just a little scary is all.”

He helped her stand. “Let’s move to the bedroom.”



*Present Day...*



The silly grin on Johnny Ray's face sent the giggles through Matilda. Whatever he was dreaming, must have been a hoot. She backed away, but he held her close. She rested her chin on his chest. *This isn't fair.* If things were to stay platonic, she'd have to stop sending mixed signals. She hated Georgia May's mixed messages with a passion and wouldn't purposely do the same to Johnny Ray. But sometimes the passion got the best of her—she sighed—which was the problem.

“Oh God, Matilda,” he murmured and held her close.

Another giggle tickled her. At least his dreams were as filled with her as hers were of him. She'd always been the more logic oriented of the two. If she hadn't pushed her logic to the back burner for passion and dreams, things would have turned out differently—for the better. A platonic relationship was the best answer for them, she reaffirmed. Their friendship was too important to loose and their passion too powerful to give in to.

She glanced at her watch. They still had a half hour before they needed to get ready for work. She closed her eyes and rested her head on his chest. *I wish I had the confidence of my youth.* She smiled. *Or should I say ignorance.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

“Oh God, Matilda!” Johnny Ray gripped the sheets and shuddered as the

release overtook him. Once his body calmed, he kissed her lips. “I love you so much.” He rested beside her. “I told you it would be out of this world.”

Matilda couldn’t believe people made fools of themselves over making love if this was it. “I think you did it wrong. I like the old way better. And weren’t we supposed to be pumping longer than that?”

“What?” He propped himself up on his arms.

She covered them both with the blanket. “I’m just saying I didn’t have an orgasm, but when we did it the other way, you curled my toes and straightened my hair.”

He raised a brow. Worried she had hurt his feelings, she quickly added. “I’m sure it will be better next time. We just need more practice.”

The moonlight caught the glint of his sly grin. “I’ve always wanted to taste you.”

“I love kissing you, too.”

He lowered himself to her belly. “I’m not talking about that type of kissing, my queen. Just lie back and relax.” He worked his way lower.

She never would have thought of kissing someone down there, but loved the core shaking result. Afterward, Johnny Ray entered her again, but this time their climaxes hit simultaneously, and they both screamed so loudly she feared they’d wake Tom.

“You are incredible, Johnny Ray.”

“We are incredible, my queen.”

## Chapter Eleven

*Present Day...*

Johnny Ray and Matilda worked through the day and halfway through the night on the Shelton Wireless marketing strategy. Glad he'd convinced her to bring her luggage along, he pried his arm from under her to check his watch—6 A.M. They were lying on the middle of the office floor, surrounded by product specification documents, customer demographics and rough drafts of their plan. He drew her close to his body and caressed her waist. Someday she'd forget about this silly platonic relationship business. He just hoped that day would be sooner rather than later. He'd been waiting eighteen years and wasn't sure how much longer he could do things at her pace.

He intended to close his eyes momentarily, but quickly fell asleep. When he opened his eyes, Sherry was standing above him with an “aw isn't that the cutest thing” look on her face.

She knelt beside them. “Don't wake her on my account,” she whispered. “I just wanted to let you know you two will be taking the corporate jet.”

Eyes wide, he drew his head back. “The corporate jet? Wow!” he said under his breath.

“I knew you’d earn a seat on the jet someday. You two are big time. This account is worth over a hundred million.”

The ten percent bonus he and his queen would split would have them sitting pretty. Maybe they could start that firm they’d talked about as teens. “What time do we leave?”

“Not until this evening, six. It has to make a stop in Atlanta before it drops you two off in Miami.” Her big brown eyes sparkled. “I knew there was something special about Matilda. You’ve been acting like a man in love since she accepted the position. Where do you know her from?”

“I’ve been in love with Matilda since we were children. Could you do me a favor and not tell anyone what you’ve seen. Many wouldn’t be as understanding.”

She stood. “Of course not, honey. I’ll lock the door on my way out.”

“Thanks.”

Matilda stretched awake as Sherry walked out the door. She rolled over and gazed lovingly into Johnny Ray’s eyes, then stiffened. “What the...” She propped herself on her arms and looked around. “We’re at work. Oh my God!” She whipped her head around to the door. “Who was that? They’ll think we...we...” She motioned at the mess. “You know how rumors spread.” She began stacking papers.

“Don’t worry, it was only Sherry.”

“That’s what you said last time, Johnny Ray. How can I hold my head high

with everyone whispering behind my back what a slut I am?”

He knew exactly what “last time” she referred to and couldn’t disagree more. They’d gone to Little Rock for a doctor’s appointment and a shopping expedition. They never thought they’d run into someone they knew, and technically, they hadn’t. But the results had been disastrous. “You’re over reacting. This is completely different. We are grown now. Yes we need to keep our relationship under wraps for a while, but in a few months everyone will see you were the best choice for this position.”

“There is no us, Johnny Ray. There can never be an us.” She swiped up the stack of papers and set them on his desk.

“Why the hell not?” He stood in front of her.

She stared at him a long while. “Because I need someone who will stick by me through thick and thin. Once things get crazy around here, where will you be?”

“What?” He couldn’t believe his ears. “Stick by you!”

“I’m not arguing about this. I put my faith in you, and you chose your friends and the life you *claimed* you hated over me. After we return from Miami, I want that transfer to the other department.”

He couldn’t believe his ears. Where was she eighteen years ago? It couldn’t have been the same place as him. Where was his queen and who was this crazy woman who looked just like a sexy as hell, older version of her. “Fine! The flight

leaves at six.”

As she stalked out of his office, he snatched his cell phone and speed dialed Bobby.

“This shit had better be good,” Bobby said groggily. “I only fell asleep an hour or so ago.”

“You are not going to believe this!” He plopped down on the sofa in the lounge area of his office.

“I’m not playing Twenty Questions either. Out with it, or I’m hanging up.”

Completely outraged, he could barely form a thought. “Matilda left me, not the other way around! This is a bunch of bull. I’m so sick of this.”

“I know you didn’t wake me up over this stupid mess.”

“But she said I wasn’t there for her when she needed me! What a bunch of revisionist bull. How could she say such a thing?”

“Look man, Matilda’s a woman. God doesn’t even understand what’s going on in her head. Stop taking her lame excuses, and instead of tip-toeing around the real issue, force it. You’re a man, be a man and let the chips fall where they may.”

Johnny Ray strummed his fingers on the arm of the couch. “You’re right. Sorry I woke you.”

“Think nothing of it. When you land in Miami, I expect to have some sort of news.” The line went dead.

*I'm blowing it. Still holding the phone, he lowered his head. Why would she say I wasn't there for her? What does she mean? This isn't a repeat of the past.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

By the time Christmas came along, Matilda knew she was pregnant. Johnny Ray practically lived at her apartment, and the couple was truly happy. They went to a physician in Memphis to verify the results of the at home pregnancy test, then celebrated by registering in a hotel and enjoying each other. The baby was due early August, the same time classes at the university started. They decided to sit the first semester out to get used to being parents. They continued her prenatal visits with a physician in Little Rock. Neither knew anyone in Arkansas, so they figured they were safe.

Johnny Ray continued meeting with his father once a week. He even attended a few therapy sessions with Joe. Matilda had been correct; when Joe wasn't drunk, he wasn't that bad. In one more month, he'd be released from extended rehabilitation, and that was when the real test would begin.

Johnny Ray was seriously thinking of cutting ties with Nick and Lynden. Ever since homecoming, they'd been acting strangely and treating Matilda even worse than they used to. They somehow blamed her for the whole fiasco. Since Nick never had a thought of his own, Johnny Ray knew the downturn in attitude



was Lynden.

By the time May hit, Matilda was showing and Bobby was doing double time to help the couple hide their secret. Johnny Ray didn't know what they'd do without Bobby. Having Bobby as a friend showed Johnny Ray what true friendship was about. If Nick weren't his cousin and he hadn't known Lynden his whole life, he wouldn't be bothered with them at all.

The prom was only two weeks away, but Matilda didn't want to go. After what happened at homecoming, he didn't blame her. Since they weren't attending prom, he decided to take her on a weekend in Little Rock. Summer was quickly approaching, and he wanted to buy his queen a new wardrobe. They spent Saturday morning at the doctor's office and discovered they were having a girl. They were both ecstatic, but Matilda still refused to even consider naming the baby Princess.

Matilda stood in front of the department store mirror and turned to the side. The peach sundress she wore had a definite bulge in it. "I'm *huge*. I'm telling my mom Monday. She's between clients and shouldn't be assigned a new one for another week."

He stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her and his baby. "That's my baby in there." He felt something pressing against his right hand. "Hey!" He rounded her and placed his head on her belly. "Princess knows her daddy's out

here.” He kissed her belly. “That’s my girl. Daddy’s here.”

“No child of mine will be named Princess.”

“Of course not, my queen.”

He loved to hear the freedom of her laugh. He prayed the baby was as easy to laugh as her mother. “I don’t think we should say anything at school.” He picked her packages off the floor and led the way toward the food court. While listening to the baby, he’d heard Matilda’s stomach growling. “You know the rule about kicking out girls if they become pregnant. We only have three weeks, but I don’t want to take a chance on them enforcing the rule.”

“Yeah, I see your point, but even if they do, we’re taking the GED anyway.”

“Yeah, I know. I just don’t want to cause any additional drama. This summer you will be free.” He lifted the packages. “And have plenty to wear.”

“Johnny Ray, is that you?”

He turned toward the sound of a male calling him. The mall was quite busy, and he didn’t recognize anyone.

“Over here.” A medium-built, white man with neatly cut brown hair and dressed in a charcoal designer suit exited the jewelry store and approached them.

“I have no idea who this is,” Johnny Ray whispered to Matilda.

“Wow, you’ve grown. It’s been what, four five years since your father and I used to be drinking buddies. I gave up the bottle a few years ago,” he boasted.

“How’s Joe?”

Johnny Ray raked his mind to remember this man, but couldn’t. “He’s doing well. He stopped drinking back in October. We’re all pretty proud of him.”

“That’s fantastic.” The man drew his hand to his chest and bowed slightly. “I’m sorry. Where are my manners? I’m Terry Scott,” he said to Matilda.

“Oh no,” Johnny Ray said. “I’m the rude one. This is my fiancée, Matilda King and,” he rubbed her protruding belly, “our daughter, Princess.”

He could tell Matilda was stifling her giggle. He nudged her slightly, and the giggle escaped.

“Congratulations!”

“Thank you,” the proud couple said in unison. “Well, Mr. Scott. I hate to run off, but I need to feed my girls.”

Terry chuckled. “Oh I understand completely. I’ve gone through three pregnancies with my wife.”

“It was nice meeting you, Mr. Scott.”

“You, too, Matilda.”

The mixture of smells in the food court made Matilda nauseous, so they went to the grocery store, purchased items for a picnic lunch and went to a nearby park to eat.

“This rotisserie chicken is delicious, but not as good as yours.” Leaning over

the table, he took another scrumptious bite. He'd been hungrier than he'd thought.

"This garlic potato salad is to die for. I've gotta learn how to make this."

"Don't eat too much of that. You'll give Princess bad breath." They both laughed.

She rubbed her belly. "Stop calling my baby Princess." She forked through her food. "I'm worried about Mr. Scott. What if he tells your father?"

"He hasn't seen my dad in years. Don't worry, baby. I have everything under control. You believe me, don't you? I'd never let anything happen to you or Princess."

She hesitated before saying, "Yes I believe you. I guess it's just the hormones." She ate at her potato salad. "What do you think Lynden and his shadow will do when they find out about the baby?"

He dropped a chicken leg bone onto the paper plate. "Matilda, please. I have it under control. This stress isn't good for you or Princess. I'll just tell them I won the bet and have to take responsibility for my actions."

She lowered her gaze and forked her salad about her plate. "Why don't you just tell them the truth?" she asked softly.

Johnny Ray reached across the picnic table, took her hand into his, and looked into her sorrowful brown eyes. "I'm sorry, baby. You're the love of my life, and I want to shout it from every hill, but I have to tread lightly or I'll lose my

friends and...”

“And your father.” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m not asking you to choose between your friends and me or between your father and me—”

“There is no choice for me. You are my queen. You are the one I’ll spend the rest of my life with. I just think by doing it this way, I may be able to save my friendships and continue a relationship with my father. They’ll have to see it as me taking on my responsibility. This will give them more time and a reason to accept us as a couple.”

“And if they don’t.”

“Then we’ll continue to live life happily ever after. We won’t be able to keep Princess a secret much longer. I think I’ll tell them.”

“And what about Joe?”

“It won’t be easy, but I’ll tell him.”



*Present Day...*

Just as when they were teens, Johnny Ray had blown off Matilda’s concerns of others reactions to them. Why he couldn’t see the parallels between their present situation and their past amazed her. This time things would end in career suicide for her. Then what would she have left?

The marketing community was small, and word of her alleged less than

ethical ways to obtain her position would spread quickly. By the end of their month in Miami, she was sure everyone would think she slept with the board of directors of Shelton Wireless to get them to change their mind about where to spend their marketing and advertising dollars.

*How will I get out of this?*

Her cell phone rang and startled her out of her musing. She checked the caller ID. “Hello, Mama.”

“You lied to me!”

Dread filled her. *Why did I answer?* “About what?”

“You work for Johnny Ray! I knew that excuse you gave for giving up your partnership was flimsy.”

“How did you find out...Never mind. You’re wrong, Mama. I didn’t even know—”

“Stop lying to me! Why are you letting him ruin your career? He doesn’t love you. He didn’t even contact you when we moved to New York. Don’t do this Matilda. Come home before it’s too late.”

“I love you, Mama, but I’m not discussing this any further. I’m headed for Miami. I’ll be there at least a month. I’ll have my cell. Please feel free to call about anything besides Johnny Ray or my career choices.”

“You’re going to regret this!” She hung up.

“That went nicely.” She rubbed her belly. “You’ve always taken news so well.”

*Princess.* She wiped tears from her eyes. *Princess.*



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Matilda and Johnny Ray sat across the dining room table from Georgia May and Tunji.

“What’s this about?” Georgia May fidgeted with her hands in her lap. Tunji continued to watch Matilda intently. She had a feeling he knew what was coming.

Matilda tried to rein in her anger. Here it was a man she rarely saw could tell she was pregnant, but her mother...Suddenly, she realized that in the past few months, she’d seen Tunji more than she did her mother. Tunji would drop by her apartment at least once a week to see if she needed anything. He said it was a crying shame that her mother wasn’t around more, and Matilda agreed.

She pursed her lips. Johnny Ray caressed her thigh under the table, and she calmed slightly. Soon, they would be a family. After the homecoming incident, Georgia May had stayed closer to home on the weekends. By the time the New Year turned, she was back to her old tricks, and then some. Since she always carried her pager, she barely ever came home. Matilda and Johnny Ray suspected she spent weekends with Jerome.

Georgia May had explained that Jerome didn't want children, which was why she didn't tell him about Matilda. In Matilda's eyes, Georgia May had chosen Jerome over her. A tiny bit of her had felt that Johnny Ray was choosing his friends over her, but then she realized he spent just about all of his free moments with her. He'd see them once a week—the same day he went to see his father. She hoped his father and friends would eventually come around, but she knew in her heart that if they didn't, her king would be by her side.

"Matilda," Tunji said smoothly. "Your mama asked you a question."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I zoned out there a second." Under the table, she intertwined her fingers with Johnny Ray's, then lifted their joined hands to her heart. "I'm in love with Johnny Ray."

"And I'm in love with Matilda."

Georgia May waved them off and giggled nervously. "I knew that way back when Matilda used to say she hated you. Shoot. Y'all had me scared."

"I'm having a baby. She's due in August."

Georgia May gasped and pushed away from the table. "What?"

Tunji remained calm and seated.

"But you can't be." Brows furrowed, Georgia May tilted her head. "You...August...No this can't be. How can you be pregnant?"

"I asked Matilda to marry me back in October, and she accepted. Because



we are underage, we must have the consent of our guardians.”

Tunji crossed his arms over his chest. “I wondered how long you two was goin’ to wait to say something. It’s about time.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Georgia May returned to her seat, “wait, wait.” She faced Tunji. “You knew what they were up to and said nothing! What’s wrong with you? They’re only children.”

“I understand you’re upset.” He raised his hands slightly. “But these *babies* been pretty much on they own since they hit they teens. They is both responsible and—”

“Responsible!” She pointed at Matilda. “She’s pregnant.”

Matilda and Johnny Ray flinched at the rise in Georgia May’s voice, but Tunji continued without missing a beat. “Yes, responsible. This pregnancy was not an accident. They have the means and, more importantly, the maturity to raise a child.”

Georgia May shook her head. “Why didn’t you tell me, Matilda?” she asked softly.

“When, Mama? You’re never here.”

“And I resent that babies remark,” Johnny Ray added. “You haven’t been home in three months. How can you leave your *baby* home alone for a day, let alone months at a time? I don’t mean any disrespect, but you can’t have it both ways.” He

held his hand to his chest. “Yes we are young in years, but we are aged in maturity.”

He drew Matilda’s hand to his heart. “I’m in love with Matilda and want to make her my wife, but the law says we need your permission. We knew you’d say we were too young, so we manipulated the situation, but we didn’t see an alternative.”

“I’m sorry, too, Mama. We’re tired of hiding our love for each other. Please help us.”

Georgia May wiped the tears from her eyes. “My baby is having a baby.” She shook her head. “Wow.” Her eyes brightened. “My baby is having a baby!” She rounded the table and wrapped her arms around Matilda. “Oh my goodness, you’re actually having a baby.”

The excitement in her mother’s voice didn’t lift Matilda’s spirits. She plastered on a smile as her mother pulled her up from the chair. She knew the source of her mother’s glee wasn’t that she was about to be a grandmother. Heck, Georgia May didn’t even want people to know she was a mother.

Johnny Ray pulled Matilda into his arms. “What’s wrong?”

Georgia May stared at the two.

Matilda blinked away the tears. “She’s just glad to finally be rid of me.”

“That’s not so!” Georgia May pulled Matilda from Johnny Ray. “Tunji was

right. In spite of my absence, you've grown into a fine young woman. You'll be an excellent mother."

## Chapter Twelve

*Present Day...*

Johnny Ray snuck another peek at Matilda. She hadn't said a word to anyone since boarding the corporate jet. Eight double sized, moveable seats were locked into place to watch a DVD on the large flat screen in the front section of the plane. Each seat also came equipped with a personal screen, play list and headphones.

Body slouched in her chair, Matilda stared out the window into nothingness. She wasn't the only one with a lot on their mind. He was livid. How she could place all the blame for what happened at his doorstep was ludicrous. No matter how they sliced it, she claimed to be madly in love with him, but turned on him and ran away when their love was tested. Bobby was right. They needed to have it out over the real issue.

Matilda excused herself and headed for the lavatories at the rear of the plane. He closed his eyes to take a few moments to gather himself. D-day had arrived. The others were so engrossed in the movie and the free bar they wouldn't notice their absence. *D-day*. The day he told his father about Matilda's pregnancy came his mind. *D-day*.



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Johnny Ray bopped into his father's home with a happy tune on his lips. In a few short weeks, he'd be married to his queen, and they'd be moving to Memphis. Lynden and Nick had acted a fool when he told them Matilda was pregnant, but after he gave them his "owning up to your responsibilities" spiel, they admitted there were no other options. Now if the same tactic worked with Joe, he'd be good to go.

Eerily quiet, the squeak of his gym shoes on the marble tile was the only sound. "Anybody home?"

"In the den."

Johnny Ray froze when he saw Nick and his father on the sofa. Nick's face was red and his eyes were filled with tears. Dread overcame Johnny Ray.

"What's going on?" Johnny Ray asked.

Joe inhaled deeply and blew it out slowly. "An old acquaintance contacted me to congratulate me on my seven months of sobriety."

Nick sniffed and wiped at the snot running from his nose with the back of his hand.

Busted, Johnny Ray wished he'd taken Matilda's concerns more seriously. The fact that his father wasn't strangling him was proof things had changed for

the better, and they could work this out eventually, but he'd have rather his father found out from him about the pregnancy. "Yes, sir. I met Mr. Scott when I was in Little Rock."

"Yeah." Joe flat handed his knee. "We caught up on what's going on in our lives. Or should I say he caught me up on what's going on in your life."

"I wanted to tell you, but—"

Joe held up his hands. "I didn't want to jump to any conclusions, so I called Nick here."

"I'm..." Nick looked from the floor to Johnny Ray back down again. "I'm...sorry. I had to tell him. I was scared about what happened last time."

"It's all right, Nick." Johnny Ray felt sorry for Nick. Without someone telling him what think, say and do, he had to feel lost.

"So let me get this straight. You won the bet, but now think you've knocked this colored girl up."

"I know the baby is mine. I have to fulfill my obligations."

Joe rose. Out of habit and old fears, Johnny Ray backed away.

"I'm not gonna hurt you, boy. I done told you, I've changed. And I know how you take your responsibilities seriously. I admire that in you. But you don't even know if this child is yours. You may think you're the only one she's sleeping with, but that's just what you think, not reality."

Heat simmered within Johnny Ray, but he appeared calm and collected. “She was a virgin when we started having sex. She got pregnant that first time.”

“Shit!” Joe stalked between the desk and fireplace. “She trapped you. She won’t get away with this,” he raged. “Everyone knows our family is loaded.”

“Dad, she didn’t trap me. She wanted to use condoms, but I convinced her the chances of pregnancy from that one time were slim and none. It’s my fault, and I have to live with the consequences. I’m sorry. I messed up.”

Joe ran his hands over his face, then stuffed them in his pockets. “I’ll pay her off to leave town. Another million should do.”

“That’s my baby, Dad! No.”

Joe approached his son. “I know you think I’m a heartless bastard, but this will ruin your life. What about that baby? That baby won’t be white. It will grow up confused, not fitting in either world. It’s best to let her move away and raise the child as black.”

“That child is *my child*.” Johnny Ray crossed his arms over his chest. “You allowed family to deny my paternity for years. I won’t do that to my child. I’m sorry I’ve disappointed you, but I will never turn my back on my child.”



*Present Day...*

Matilda let the top down on the commode and took a seat. She'd needed to get away from Johnny Ray, and this was the only place she could find privacy. She loved him so much, but after her mother forced her to leave Tennessee, Matilda was in mourning. She'd known Johnny Ray would come for her, but he never did. Just as her mother said he wouldn't. Then when she was eighteen, her pride had been bruised too badly, and she was too angry with him to search for him. Now she realized that was also why she didn't look up Bobby. She knew Johnny Ray would be somewhere near him. It had all been so good then...She sighed. Why had this happened? She wiped the tears from her eyes. *Why?*



### *Eighteen Years Ago...*

A few students rushed past Matilda as she stood at the top of the stairwell. For extra exercise, she usually took the stairs instead of the elevator. The first semester she and Johnny Ray's schedules were the same, so they'd take walks together, but they had no such luck this semester, so she was on her own.

She stepped back to turn. Someone shoved her. Her books flew out of her hands, and she fell forward. She held her arms out to break the fall. The few students on the stairwell screamed and rushed to her aid as she tumbled. Just before everything went black, she saw Nick huddled over her with tears in his eyes.





*Present Day...*

Johnny Ray waited outside of the lavatory for Matilda. The folks at the front of the plane were liquored up and having a loud enough time that he and Matilda could even raise their voices and not worry about being over heard.

She opened the door, but froze when she saw him. Her eyes were red, her face puffy, and her blue denim blouse darkened in spots from moisture. She straightened her back and stepped out. "It's all yours."

"We need to speak."

"No, we don't." She tried to step around him, but he placed his arms on either side of the wall and blocked her path.

"Then I'll do the talking."

She looked over his shoulder at the other passengers. "Not here."

"They can't hear us. I need to have my say."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine."

He took her hands into his, but this time she pulled away, which infuriated him even more. He blew out an exasperated sigh. "I'm sorry for everything that happened between us when we were teens. But I'm only human. And at the time I was a fifteen year old human. I thought I could have you and my friends. But I loved you...love you."

“When I needed you, you weren’t there,” she bit out.

“You were the only one I could count on.” He hit the wall with his fist. “I lost everything! Where were you? I needed you, and you left me behind to deal with the shit. We should have supported each other, but you split town.”

A momentary recognition of pain flashed in her eyes and was replaced by anger. “Split town? I didn’t have a choice in the matter.”

“What do you mean?” Uneasy about whatever she may say, he steadied himself on the wall.

“I was only fifteen. I went to sleep in Tennessee and woke in New York. You hadn’t been to see me in over a week before we left. Mama said...” She choked up. “Mama said you didn’t care.”

“How could you believe her, Matilda? Why didn’t you have faith in me?” He smacked his chest.

“I did have faith in you. I didn’t believe her. But she put me on serious lockdown until I turned eighteen. Why didn’t *you* have faith in *me*!”

Knowing Georgia May, he’d bet Matilda couldn’t even go to the pot alone after they left Tennessee. *I should have known she wouldn’t have left me.* He’d been so angry and hurt that he hadn’t stopped to think things through—just as Matilda always said.

“You never looked for me.” She choked back tears. “Mama was right.”

“No, baby.” He cupped her face in his hands. “We were both young and immature—”

Her eyes grew wide, terror contorted her face, and everyone began screaming. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a liquid substance and fire shooting from spigots in the lounge area of the plane.

Scared shitless, he pushed Matilda into the lavatory. Smoke quickly filled the cabin. A loud *poof-pop* sounded, and he felt himself being pulled toward the front of the plane.

“Johnny Ray!” Matilda struggled to pull him into the bathroom.

He held onto the doorframe. Everything became blurry as he struggled for oxygen. Tears streamed down Matilda’s face.

*Joe Sloan!* was the last clear thought he had before blacking out.



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

“You have to calm down now, boy.” Joe held Johnny Ray by his shoulders. “Losing control won’t help anyone.”

“But, Dad, you don’t understand. You just don’t understand.” He turned away from his father and stalked across the waiting room to Georgia May. “Why don’t they tell us something?”

Lieutenant Madison entered the waiting area and approached Johnny Ray.

“I just heard about the baby. I’m sorry, but don’t give up, son. Matilda is young and strong. She’ll make it.”

“I’m losing my mind. Please Lieutenant Madison, can you hurry them along?”

“I know this is hard for you, but the doctors are doing the best they can.”

“Johnny Ray,” Tunji called from one of the pleather covered sectionals. “Come sit with me. Allah will guide the doctors.” Johnny Ray stuffed his hands in his Dockers pockets and headed over to Tunji.

“May I speak with you outside, ma’am?” Lieutenant Madison asked Georgia May.

“I can’t leave. Matilda needs me.”

“We’ll be on the other side of the doorway. You’ll hear when they have word.” There were two doorways in the waiting area: On one side were a set of large metal double doors that led to recovery, opposite them was the doorway that led to a general usage hallway. She followed him out.

Johnny Ray sat next to Tunji, but his mind was elsewhere. He chastised himself for suggesting Matilda continue taking the stairs for exercise. He’d read somewhere that walking would make her labor easier, but the stairwell posed too many dangers: the cement steps, the rushing students, and her own clumsiness.

A nurse burst through the double doors of recovery. With the opening of the doors, he heard Matilda scream, “Johnny Ray!”

He leapt to his feet, but Tunji held him back.

“Help me, Johnny Ray!”

“Let me go!” He struggled to free himself from Tunji.

With the closing of the door, her voice was blocked out. Georgia May, wild look in her eyes, headed for the nurse. Lieutenant Madison was close behind her.

Johnny Ray struggled to reach the nurse, but Tunji continued to hold him.

“Wait, boy. Don’t get thrown out of here.”

“But she needs me. She’s calling for me.”

“I heard, but you gotta calm yourself. She sounds hysterical. How you gon’ help her when you just as hysterical?”

“You’re right. You’re right.”

The nurse motioned for Johnny Ray. “As you can tell, she’s calling for you. But she’s in a delicate state. I need your help.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes.”

She offered a genuine I’m-proud-of-you smile. “She’s upsetting the other patients, so she needs to be moved. We don’t want to strap her down or sedate her. Do you think you can calm her?”

“I’ll do my best.”

The nurse glanced over her shoulder. “Mom,” she nodded at Tunji, “Dad, you can come along also. Your presence may calm her.”

Instead of correcting the nurse, all three followed her into recovery. As soon as the doors cracked open, everyone heard Matilda crying out for Johnny Ray. Twenty-four beds lined the curving unit; twelve on each side. Johnny Ray ran down to Matilda and embraced her. Her whole body convulsed as she cried. Several transporters quickly began readying the hospital bed to roll to a private room.

“They’re trying to take Princess from me, Johnny Ray. Make them go away!”

He felt lightheaded. *Princess is gone...My baby...gone...* Grief wouldn’t help his queen. No. He had to be strong. Be the man she needed. He drew Matilda’s hand to his heart. “We’re about to move to a private room.” He positioned himself so the transporters could move the bed easily. He followed along as they rolled her out. Georgia May and Tunji trailed along.

“I want out of this place,” she said between hiccups. “Why am I here? They tried to make me believe Princess is dead.” She wiped tears from her eyes. “Why are they doing this to us?”

Tears blurred his vision and sorrow weighed down his heart. “There was an accident.” He looked to Tunji. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just hold her, son. Be there for her.”

They changed floors and rushed through a maze of hallways for what seemed like an eternity before they entered her private room. Lieutenant Madison

and Joe were in the room, standing off to the side.

“Johnny Ray, just tell me what’s wrong?” Matilda drawled out. “Why am I here? Why are they scaring me? Why is everyone crying? What accident?” The transporters left and the nurse remained behind.

He gently placed his hand on her stomach. “You fell down the stairwell at school. We lost the baby. Princess is gone.”

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

He drew her into his arms and rocked until neither shed another tear. Georgia May and Tunji also joined the embrace.

Dr. Warner peeked into the room. “Excuse me. Lieutenant Madison, could I speak with you a moment?”

Madison shook his head and exited the room. Murmurs from the two’s conversation could be heard. “Son of a bitch!” Madison snapped. A few moments later, he peeked into the room. “Something’s come up. I’ll come back before visiting hours are over.”

Johnny Ray appreciated the show of support he and Matilda were receiving. He crossed the room to his father and hugged him. “Thanks, Dad. You have no idea how much it means to me that you’re here.”

Joe embraced his son for the first time in years. “It will all work out.”

“I love her, Dad.”

“You’re young. I know you can’t replace a child, but you have your whole life ahead of you. Don’t let this tragedy stop you from living.”

An anxious smile tipped Johnny Ray’s lips as he realized his father thought he was talking about his love for Princess. He returned to Matilda’s bedside. Georgia May and Tunji were speaking words of encouragement, but Matilda’s eyes had glazed over.

A few minutes later, Debbie Swanson burst into the room. Everyone jumped and stared toward the doorway. Her face was red and eyes were puffy. She scanned the faces in the room and stopped at Joe. “How could you!” She ran for him with her claws drawn and tried to scratch out his eyes.

It all happened so fast, everyone in the room was in shock. Joe guarded his face, but she screamed, scratched, and punched until Tunji was able to pull her off Joe. Georgia May ran out for help. Debbie’s shoulders heaved up and down as she breathed heavily. She tried to lift a fist, but the bear hold Tunji had her in prevented it.

“You bastard! How could you? How could you? I hate you!”

Three police officers rushed into the room. Two assisted with Debbie, the other one helped Joe right himself.

“Lieutenant Madison asked to speak with you privately, Mr. Sloan,” said the officer helping Joe.



“What’s going on, Dad?” Johnny Ray went to his father’s side.

“I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“Nothing!” Debbie screamed. “You’ve ruined my son’s life by having him do your dirty work.”

“Be quiet, Debbie,” Joe snapped.

“I will not! Tell your son how you had Nick push that nigger girl down the stairs. Tell him! Tell him!”

Johnny Ray willed his feet to move, but he was frozen in place.

“I did it for you, Johnny Ray. I couldn’t let her ruin your life.”

“For me? For me! Matilda’s my queen. Matilda’s my life. You killed my baby.” Feet finally free, he went for Joe’s neck, but was stopped in midair by the officers and Tunji.

“I’ll kill him!” He reached for Joe and squirmed to free himself.

Lieutenant Madison stormed into the room. “Get them out of here!” he barked. The Sloan siblings were dragged out of the room. Tunji held Johnny Ray against the wall until Joe was gone.

“I hate him. I hate him...” Johnny Ray cried until he went limp in Tunji’s arms. “How could he?” The sound of Matilda weeping broke his already shattered heart.

“What happened?” Georgia May asked.

“Well,” Madison said, “like I told you earlier, there were witnesses that Matilda was pushed. They’d said it was Nick Swanson. I’d sent a squad car over to pick him up, but his parents had already brought him to the hospital for a panic attack. He was ranting and raving about *him* making him do it. How he didn’t mean to hurt her. He thought she was pretty. He would never hurt anyone...Seems the reality of what he’d done didn’t hit him until he saw Matilda on the floor.”

“He killed my baby!” Matilda shrieked.

Johnny Ray reached for her, but she pushed him away, screaming, “No! No! It’s your fault. He was your friend. You knew he hated me, but you kept being his friend anyway. Now he’s murdered my baby. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.” She grasped at the covers.

“Matilda, please. I love you.”

“You,” she choked up, “let him,” she struggled for a breath, “kill my baby! You killed her!”

“Get him out of here,” the nurse ordered.

“No!” Johnny Ray stretched for Matilda as Tunji dragged him out of the room. “I’ll always love you. You’ll always be my queen.”

## Chapter Thirteen

*Present Day...*

In the midst of a hacking attack, Matilda jolted back to consciousness. Disoriented and lungs burning like hell, she drug her hands over her face and slowly opened her eyes to the minimal light. *What happened?* Nose scrunched and brows furrowed, she held her hands out from her face and stared at them, they had an acrid, sticky film on them. With a vengeance, it all came back to her. Fire and some flammable liquid sprayed her co-workers in the front the plane and Johnny Ray had pushed her into the lavatory.

“Johnny Ray!” She frantically crawled on all fours along the aisle to Johnny Ray who was a few feet away. The only light came from a hole toward the front of the plane and a few of the windows on the right side. The last clear memory she had was of being sucked out of the lavatory and holding onto him. She’d held onto him for dear life, but she couldn’t breathe, then everything went black.

She felt along his arms back and legs for breaks. *Thank God. Nothing’s broken.* She wedged her hands under his torso, heaved him onto his back and rechecked for broken bones. “Talk to me, Johnny Ray.” His breathing had become shallow and irregular, but she was grateful for every breath they took.

She caressed his jaw. She couldn't see his color clear enough, but his skin was moist and cool to the touch. *He's in shock.*

In hopes of easing his breathing, she stood and straddled him, slipped her arms under his then over his shoulders, lifted with all of her strength and scooted him to be sitting against one of the seats.

She glanced over her shoulder for help toward the front of the cabin and cringed. The anguished squeals and screams of her co-workers haunted her. She lowered her head and prayed silently for her flight partners, but couldn't grieve, not yet. First she had to stabilize Johnny Ray as much as possible. Next she'd have to drag him to safety. She saw the cockpit door was closed. She'd have to check to see if the pilots needed help also.

Her cell phone was in her purse—in the front of the plane—so most likely destroyed. She searched Johnny Ray, took his phone off its clip and checked for a signal—no signal. She turned off the phone to conserve the battery and shoved it into her pocket.

She drew in a deep breath and straightened fully. The fumes burned her lungs and caused a coughing fit. Holding her chest, she turned away from Johnny Ray and hacked up greenish phlegm. *I've gotta get us out of here.* Once she calmed, she took out a few of the thin blankets and a pillow from the overhead compartment, then propped Johnny Ray's head and covered him with a blanket.

She needed to see what their positioning was in order to figure out how to get them to safety. Carrying a light blanket, she moved from the darkened back of the cabin toward the front of the cabin where minimal light crept in through windows and a large hole in the side of the plane.

She stopped just short of where the passengers had been seated—her co-workers. Though she'd only known them a short while, grief began to overtake her. She could clearly hear their tortured screams. She cried out as she stepped forward but didn't dare look at the few seats that were left. She couldn't bear to see her co-workers like this. The fumes grew much stronger near the front of the plane. So strong she feared she might faint, but she couldn't let fear or fumes stop her. She prayed for strength and took the long journey to the cockpit door, which was charred but intact. She stood in front of the door and bowed her head. *Oh please, God, let the pilots be alive. Too many have died. Spare them.*

A mixture of soot and film coated the cockpit door. She covered her hands with the blanket and grasped the knob, but stopped short of opening the door. She stilled herself and tried again, this time opening the door quickly. The cockpit hadn't been touched by the fire, but had been soaked in some flammable substance—she could smell it. The fire igniters must have malfunctioned. *Thank you, God.* The pilots were slouched forward in their seats, their seatbelts keeping them from falling.

She draped the blanket over her shoulder and rushed in to help. She rounded the seats and reached for the co-pilot. “Oh God!” she gasped, covered her face with her hands and screamed. The substance had eaten through his skin. Tears blurred her sight as she ran out of the cockpit all the way to the back of the plane. “No, no, no, no...”

Trembling, she leaned forward and rested her hands on her knees. “I can do this...” She sniffed. “I have to...” She choked back her tears, whipped open the overhead bin, snatched out several blankets and marched back into the cockpit.



Johnny Ray smelled gasoline and something he didn't recognize—something that burned his lungs. He cracked his eyes open but couldn't see or bring himself to full consciousness. Stuck between the past and present, all he knew was he hated Joe Sloan and would make him pay. He blacked out again...



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Johnny Ray pulled his BMW up to his father's estate. Bobby and the rest of the crew from the block exited the car, gas cans in hand. Over the months since Johnny Ray moved in with Tunji, he and Matilda had become quite popular in the neighborhood. The group of boys went through the house soaking it in gasoline.

Once everyone was safely outside, Johnny Ray lit the place up.

“I wish his ass was in there,” he said as the flames quickly spread throughout the house.

They all cheered as Johnny Ray drove away. *This one was for Matilda and Princess.*

“Y’all make sure you go on ahead and wash your shoes and clothes in case you got some gas on them,” Johnny Ray said twenty minutes later as he pulled into the parking lot by the basketball courts where they all played ball. “Now I didn’t see y’all tonight, right?”

“Hell no, man!” said one young man.

“Who are you?” another one added.

“I don’t know no Johnny Ray.”

“I’m outta here y’all,” Bobby said. “Y’all best get a move on, too. We need alibis if something goes wrong.”

They all split up, and Johnny Ray drove around for a bit before heading home. Matilda wasn’t the only one who blamed him for their baby’s death. He blamed himself. His father *had* tried to murder them when they were only sitting on the couch. *What was I thinking?* Yes Joe had stopped drinking, but he was still Joe with the same prejudices. And Nick...*Why couldn’t I let them go? Why?*

Though Matilda never asked him to end his friendships with Lynden and

Nick, his favorite teacher, Mr. Wilson, had told him he should, and in his heart, he knew he should have also. He just kept telling himself he could have it all, one day Lynden and Nick would change and see Matilda for the queen she was instead of some black chick trying to steal their friend. If only he could hold out a little longer.

Head lowered and hands stuffed in his pockets, he strolled into his and Tunji's apartment and was shocked by an unexpected guest. With an air of nonchalance, he nodded at Lieutenant Madison as he entered. "Sorry I'm late, Tunji."

"Come sit with us," Tunji said.

Madison's nose twitched. "How you holdin' up?"

Johnny Ray shrugged. "I've been better." He sat in the recliner next to the sofa where Tunji and Madison were.

"I'm real tore up over this." Madison sighed. "I blame myself. Joe should have gone to jail after he assaulted you two. Instead of avoiding the fight, I should have done my damn job. Now look at this mess." He paused. "So, where have you been? I've been waiting to speak with you for a bit."

Tunji's face was void of emotions, which signaled Johnny Ray to proceed with caution.

"I needed to clear my head, so drove around a bit."



“Your father’s place was torched a little while ago. You know anything about that?”

Johnny Ray shrugged. “Nope, but I hope he was in it.” The living room was actually quite sizeable, but he felt the walls closing in on him. “Did you get any more information from Nick?”

“Joe manipulated him. You smell like gasoline.”

“The pump at the gas station is broken and overflowed. I probably still have some on my shoes.” He hoped the others had time to wash their clothes and shoes.

“Which station?”

Johnny Ray didn’t answer.

Madison raised a brow. “I know you’re hurting, son, but arson isn’t the answer. Who helped you?”

“Helped me what? I went for a drive. And even if I did do something illegal, I wouldn’t bring others in on it.” He faced Tunji. “Can I go to my room now? I’m exhausted.”

“Go on. Any further questions will be answered in the presence of our lawyer.”



*Present Day...*

Johnny Ray woke just as Madison was taking him to the station to be

booked for arson.

“It’s like I told you, *if* I were guilty, I would have worked alone,” Johnny Ray said aloud, but he wasn’t in the squad car. Disoriented, he shook his head and tried to gather his bearings.

Then it hit him—the terror in his queen’s eyes, the screams, the fire, the explosion...

He frantically looked around for his queen. He was outside on the shore of a river, and the tail of the plane was sticking out of the woods about fifty yards away. The ground was damp in the shade, so he figured it must have rained recently. He saw his queen lying on the ground a few feet away. He knocked off his blanket and crawled over to her. *Thank God.* He lifted her into his arms and held her close. “Thank you, God.” Realizing she may be injured, he loosened his grip and slowed himself.

“Don’t worry, baby,” he whispered, “I’ll get us out of here.” Worried that she hadn’t woken up, he rocked her gently. If she were in shock or injured, he had no idea of how to care for her. He took in their surroundings. Someone had stacked blankets, pillows, luggage and bottled water from the crash close by.

Measurably relaxed, he thanked God again. Whoever did this must be near and could go for help while he watched over his queen. He felt for his cell phone, but it was gone. *Whoever took us off the plane must have taken it with them.* He continued

his scan of the area and saw two bodies laid out a few yards away. They, too, were covered with blankets and had their heads propped up on pillows. Their heads and neck were covered with gauze. The First Aid kit and several empty liter water bottles littered the ground around them along with a pile of clothes.

Though the trees shaded them, he was still burning up. He placed his hand on Matilda's forehead—cool and clammy to the touch. *This is not right.* He remembered something he saw on television about concussions and not allowing the patient to fall asleep. He brushed his knuckle along her jaw. He didn't see any injuries, but what if she had some sort of internal bleeding?

“Wake up, baby. I need you. Please...wake up.”

*I've got to get her to the doctor, now!* He nervously smoothed down his goatee. He had no idea where they were or how far they were from “civilization.” Hell, he didn't even know what state they were in. If his father hadn't tampered with the flight equipment—which he doubted—they should have been over Alabama at the time the plane went down.

He checked his watch—12:37, September 3. By now the authorities would have a search party out for them and could find them using the black box. He cringed. Knowing his father, he'd bet the black box was of no use.

He glanced at the other two survivors. He didn't want to leave his queen for even a second, but knew he had to check on their wellbeing until whoever got

them off the plane returned. They couldn't have gone far.

He laid Matilda back on her pillow, covered her with one of the light blankets and kissed her gently. "I'm only a few feet away."

He moved over to the other two bodies. Flies had gathered on the gauze and were crawling under it. He shooed the flies away as he opened the First Aid kit for new bandaging. He knew he couldn't smell the best, but the odor coming from these two men was straight up foul! He swallowed the lump in his throat and pressed two fingers against one of the men's necks. He didn't feel a pulse. He bent so his ear was at the man's mouth; he didn't hear breathing. He felt for a pulse again—nothing. He did the same for the second man with the same results. Not ready to accept what no pulse meant, he gently cut and peeled the bandages from one of the men's face to clean his wounds and give him fresh dressing. The site of the melted flesh, open wounds, and blood made him drop the bandage and run to the edge of the river where he convulsed with dry heaves.

He couldn't recognize which of his co-workers it was. Suddenly, the grief of his loss overtook him. These were his colleague, his friends...His blood father was responsible...He crumpled to his knees and cried out. Minutes later, he laid in the fetal position, too broken to move.

"My queen needs me...my queen needs me." He pushed up to his hands and knees. "My queen needs me..." He crawled over to Matilda and drew her into his

body. "I need you my queen."



*Eighteen Years Ago...*

Johnny Ray had been locked up for two weeks in Juvenile Hall before he was released. He'd had to plead guilty to arson, but received a light sentence because of extenuating circumstances and this being his first offense. He would be on probation until he was eighteen and couldn't leave the state. Tunji had told him Matilda had been released from the hospital a week prior.

Disappointed she hadn't visited him, he made light of the situation the best he could. How many times had she told him about her and "jailbirds." He ran down the corridor to Matilda's place. These two weeks had to be hell for her, just as they had been for him. Joe Sloan had actually murdered his baby, his princess. He leaned on Matilda's door. He loved his baby girl and couldn't see how they'd make it through this loss, but knew they would as long as they stuck together.

"Hey," Bobby drawled as he approached. "When did you get out?"

"About twenty minutes ago." They did a brotha-hug, pat-on-the-back combo. "Thanks for taking care of my queen while I was...was...detained."

"I'm sorry, man, but Matilda's gone."

"What do you mean she's gone?"

"My folks won't tell me shit."

Panic sent Johnny Ray's heart racing. "My queen wouldn't leave me."

"Hell, she didn't even say bye to me. When I'd try to visit her at the hospital, Auntie Georgia May let me know Matilda didn't want to see either of us. She said it's our fault the baby died."

"Matilda said that?"

"Look, Auntie isn't my favorite person, but she isn't a liar."

"This doesn't make sense? You had nothing to do with my father. Why would she blame you?"

"Matilda's a woman," he answered. "I'm probably guilty by association, plus she's got to be grief stricken and not thinking straight. Give her a little time. Once she comes to her senses, she'll be back. You'll see."

He tried to see things Bobby's way, but he needed his queen.



*Present Day...*

Cursing his father, Johnny Ray dragged the two dead men closer to the plane. Hours had passed since he first woke, and it looked like whoever had taken them off the plane originally would not be back any time soon. Thinking the bodies would be better protected from scavengers on the plane, he carried one man at a time up the emergency staircase and placed him in one of the few remaining seats, then wrapped him in blankets in hopes of keeping the bugs away. He

remembered his father's excitement about the patent he'd received on the flip-out staircase. It was sturdy without being bulky or an eye sore and more useful than the typical escape chute.

He searched the overhead compartments for anything that might be useful until their ordeal was over. Besides a few more bottles of water, the plane had been picked clean. Exhausted, he headed back for his queen. He'd hate for her to wake and think he'd deserted her as he'd wrongfully thought she'd deserted him years ago.

*I should have known better.* He kicked himself internally for thinking his queen had turned her back on her king. Georgia May had lied and done everything in her power to convince Matilda that Johnny Ray's love for her wasn't genuine, and he'd played right into it. *I'm such an idiot.* It didn't matter that he was only fifteen at the time. It didn't matter that his family had betrayed him in the most unthinkable ways. It didn't matter that he'd been grieving at the time. All that mattered was his love for his queen. He should have believed in her, in them.

She still hadn't regained consciousness, but at least her skin didn't feel cold and clammy anymore. She even had a soft snore going. He washed his hands in the river, then returned and wrapped her in his arms. He would never let her go again. She snuggled into his chest, and he knew she had gone from unconscious to asleep at some point.

His stomach growled, but he didn't want to move and risk waking her. The trail mix he'd found would have to wait. After what they'd gone through and what lay ahead, she'd need her rest. He slowly took the band out of her hair and allowed her locs to fall freely. "I'm so sorry, baby."



## Chapter Fourteen

Henry King was a good father and faithful husband, loved his family, worked hard, tried to do the right things, yet still had many regrets. He embraced his grandson, Bobby. “We’ll find them alive,” he reassured. He rested his hand on his chest. “I know in here they’re alive.” The unshed tears he saw in his grandson’s eyes brought tears to his own. “I’m so sorry, Bobby.” He held him close and the two rocked. “Please forgive me.”

Over the years, Henry had kept in contact with Bobby, had showered him with love, and had been there for him in every way except the way he should have. When Matilda first lost the baby, everything was chaotic and Henry didn’t know what to do. At first he’d thought Matilda needed some time alone, and he had agreed with Georgia May taking her away. He didn’t like the idea of Matilda being with that white boy and knew Bobby would choose his cousin over Johnny Ray, but Bobby hadn’t. At least that’s how Henry saw it at the time. Now he understood that the family had ostracized Bobby for doing as he’d been raised—being a good friend and cousin. Bobby was barely sixteen at the time, in the midst of his rebellious teens. He’d needed his family’s support and understanding.

“I love you, Granddaddy. I know you did what you thought was best.”

“Well, my best fell short at your and Matilda’s expense.” Henry backed away and nodded at the detectives.

Bobby’s apartment had become command central. All they knew for sure was the private jet that Joe Sloan’s company customized took off at 6 P.M. from Dallas Ft. Worth Airport for Atlanta, but never landed. A few UFO and odd sighting reports came from the Thomasville, Alabama area around the time the flight would have gone over that region, but nothing concrete. It had rained last night in southwestern Alabama, so everyone was grateful for the few leads they had.

“Auntie Georgia May will be here any minute.” Bobby took three long strides to his oversized recliner. “This is one reunion I can do without.”

Henry had already alerted Detectives Meeks and Jones of Georgia May’s volatile temperament and the strife within the family. Henry had thought Georgia May would finally stop being so selfish and step up to the plate when she’d run off to New York with Matilda. He had to give his baby girl the chance, but...but...she’d just made Matilda a prisoner. *Why didn’t I take Matilda from her?*

He was so disappointed in Georgia May he didn’t know what to do. He blamed himself for the way she turned out. *We spoiled that girl rotten, Mabeline.* He missed his beloved wife, Mabeline. She’d passed on some twenty-odd years ago. Mabeline had had six miscarriages over eight years before Georgia May was born

two and a half months early. Back then, technology wasn't nearly as advanced, and they thought they may lose Georgia May, too.

He loved his daughter, but how such a selfish, self-centered person could be born of a woman with such a beautiful spirit dumfounded him. Everything about Georgia May confused him. Even as a child, she couldn't bond with anyone. He could tell she cared, but something kept her from normal emotional attachments. Then again, he often wondered if Mabeline's psychological detachment from her pregnancy had somehow seeped into the baby.

Mabeline wanted a baby girl so badly she wouldn't give up trying, but after the second miscarriage, she protected herself from the pain of losing another baby by disassociating with the child she was carrying. She refused to grow to love the baby until she knew it would live. Even after Georgia May was born, because the baby was so sick, it took Mabeline a few years before she actually began holding and caring for her child. Within the blink of an eye, Georgia May was three and the old Mabeline was back full force and showering her baby girl with an overdose of love and affection as if making up for lost time.

His cell phone rang and jarred him out of his musing. Mind still on his mistakes, he absently answered, "Hello."

"Daddy, I'm in Memphis."

"What?" he barked, causing three pair of eyes to train on him. "What the

hell are you doing in Memphis?”

“I’m doing what I should have done years ago. Listen to me, Daddy. This isn’t the first time he’s tried to kill my baby. I shouldn’t have let him get away with it. None of us should have. We were supposed to protect her. I won’t let them cover it up this time. I won’t!”

Henry knew exactly what “he” she was talking about. “We don’t know Joe Sloan had anything to do with the disappearance,” he said in hopes of calming his daughter before she did something stupid.

“Daddy, planes don’t disappear without a trace,” Georgia May raged. “This has Joe Sloan written all over it. He’s hurt my baby, and he will pay!”

Every fiber of his being told him Joe Sloan was indeed responsible, but he had more than enough to worry about with Matilda missing. He couldn’t handle Georgia May jumping off the deep end right now. “Listen, honey, go to your brother’s and stay there. Right now we have to concentrate on finding Matilda. We’ll worry about Joe after she’s safe.”

Her sorrowful sigh filled the line. “I’ve failed her so many times.” She sniffed. “I love her so much, but I keep hurting her. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’ve got to make things right before it’s too late. I’ve got to, Daddy.”

“Honey,” he said softly, slowly, “Joe is a dangerous man. Your sacrificing yourself will cause more pain. I understand you’re angry and ready to lash out. We

all are, but we must do what is best for Matilda.”

“I love her, Daddy...I...I...” she hiccupped between sobs, “she...was so upset with me the last time we spoke. But she...she kept her composure. I’ve always admired her. I’ve...I’ve got to make things right.” The line went dead.

“Shit,” he bit out.



Georgia May fidgeted nervously. On the opposite side of the large oak door was the only man she’d ever been in love with, the man she was still in love with, the man she feared telling the truth. She rested her hand on the door—the opening to Pandora’s box. Mind quickly changing, she stepped away.

The door creaked open slowly, and a tall, handsome, cinnamon brown man with long, thin, graying locs stared down on her. “Georgia May?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat and forced a smile. “In the flesh,” she said shakily. “I...I...need you.”

The confusion on his face transformed to sorrow then anger. “I haven’t heard one word from you in what, eighteen years? And you have the audacity to show up on my doorstep talking about you need me.” His quiet rage put her in mind of Matilda; she was so like her father in looks and manner it scared Georgia May at times. “I was scared shitless with worry until I went to your job and they said you had quit. When I went to your apartment, the superintendent said you’d moved

out.” Door still wide open, he stepped onto the porch and folded his arms over his expansive chest. “You quit and left town without even saying goodbye. We were engaged! I loved you. How could you just walk out?”

“You looked for me?”

“Of course I looked for you, but you left of your own accord. What did you expect me to do, scour the globe for my runaway fiancée?”

Actually, yes she had expected him to search high and low until he found and saved her. But now she realized she was being foolish. He had no idea what she was going through at the time because she hadn’t told him. He couldn’t have seen anything on the news or in the paper because her family and the Sloans had ensured the sensational story didn’t hit the media.

She lifted her gaze from the porch to his deep brown eyes—the same disappointment reflected in them she often saw in Matilda’s eyes. “Please forgive me, Jerome.”

“I forgave you years ago, but that doesn’t mean I’ll let you back into my life. You’ve left me twice. Twice! Without explanation!”

Her own anger grew. “You failed to tell me you were married! That’s enough explanation!” Early morning, the neighborhood was quiet except for their raised voices. “Can we go inside and speak. Please, I’m not here to argue. Just hear me out.”

Once inside, Jerome went into the kitchen to fix her a cup of coffee. At least that's what he told her. She knew he needed time to cool off, and so did she.

"Here you go," he said, breaking into her thoughts.

"Thank you." The rich smell of the coffee brought back memories of the many mornings they'd shared. Waking in his arms had been her little slice of heaven.

He sat on the couch beside her, and in true Jerome/Matilda style, went straight to the point. "I won't rehash the first time you left me. We discussed it. I apologized for not telling you about my wife. You said you understood why I hadn't and accepted my apology."

"I know I did, and you're right. I fully understood. I just brought it back to hurt you. I'm sorry."

He'd met Georgia May shortly after he'd been separated from his wife and was seeking a divorce. He hadn't told Georgia May about his wife initially because he knew he'd sound like one of those married men who "claim" to be seeking a divorce. Five months later, his wife hadn't signed the divorce papers. By then he'd fallen madly in love with Georgia May and asked her to marry him.

When he went to speak with his wife about the divorce papers, she informed him she'd been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. Guilt kept him from following through on the divorce; shame kept him from telling Georgia

May. He had led two lives for the next few months until one day when he'd taken Sue to the park to enjoy what she could of the day. Georgia May remembered walking up on him with his arm draped about the woman as they sat on a bench. A nurse, Georgia May had recognized this woman's slight weight was from sickness.

The shocked look on his face had said it all and then some, but Georgia May had to know for sure. Pretending she recognized the couple from somewhere, she'd introduced herself. That's how she found out he was married. That night he came to her place, trying to explain, but she wouldn't let him in. Instead, she had called the police on him and had him escorted away. The next day the doctor verified she was pregnant. Jerome was the first person she'd been able to connect with, and he'd betrayed her, hurt her...She'd left town and moved in with her parents in Texas until the baby was old enough to go to school. When she'd moved back to the Memphis area, she'd wanted to find Jerome, yet she hadn't wanted to "find Jerome."

She'd been lucky until she'd had to go Baptist Memorial Hospital in Memphis to take one of her patients for treatment and bumped into the head of surgery, Jerome Austin. The two caught up quickly and were soon dating. All was forgiven, and they fell in love all over again. But Georgia May had a secret, she knew if discovered would shatter his love for her.



Tears streamed down her face. “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” she wailed into her shaky hands as the gravity of what she’d done and what had happened hit her.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “The past is the past.” He pulled her hands from her face. “Please, Georgia May, tell me what’s wrong. No matter what, we’ll always be friends.”

“I can’t believe what I’ve done.” Eyes wide, she covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh my God! You’ll never forgive me. She’ll never forgive me.” Her breathing became ragged.

He patted her on the back. “Breathe, baby.”

“But you...you don’t understand. Oh my God!” She pushed up from the couch, but her legs were too weak to hold her weight. She fell under the weight of all she’d done to the floor in a ball of tears. “Please forgive me,” she asked God. “Please.”

Concern clearly etched on his face, he knelt beside her and helped her sit up. “Georgia May, focus on me.” He held her face and gazed into her eyes. “Talk to me.” He took her hands into his. “Please.”

She shook her head and lowered it. “You...you have a daughter.”

“What?” He jerked away. “What?” He nervously drew his hands through his locs. “I have a daughter?”

Biting her bottom lip, she slowly nodded.

“But, but...she’d be what, seventeen? You left because you were pregnant? This doesn’t make sense. We were engaged and you kept my child from me. You had no right!” he yelled, uncharacteristically.

“I know, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it,” he spewed.

“I-I...there’s more, she’s...” She sniffed and swiped her forearm under her nose. “She’s...”

“What? Spit it out!”

She lowered her face into her hands. “She just turned thirty-four.” Georgia May didn’t hear a sound and was afraid to look up. Several long moments passed when he all of a sudden snatched her hands from her face.

“How the hell could you do this?” he raged. “Where the hell was *my child* when we got back together? Two years, and you couldn’t mention I have a daughter? She couldn’t have been but fourteen when we started. You were barely home. Where was she? Where is she?”

“Sh-she was old enough to stay home alone.”

“Oh hell no!” He slammed his fist on the sofa as he stood. “How the hell can you leave *my child* like that? You rarely went home.”

“My brother lived down the hall.”

“And that’s supposed to mean shit to me? Since you obviously didn’t want her, you should have given her to me. Get your ass up.”

“Please, Jerome, you have to listen to me.” She slowly came to her feet.

“All I want to hear from you is where the hell my child is. Then I want your ass out of my life forever.”

“That’s why I’m here,” she could barely get out through her sobbing. “I have to set things right. She’s...” she sniffed, “she’s always wanted to know about you. I have to set things right.”

“You evil bitch!” Tears streamed down his face and his voice trembled. “Where—is—my—child?”

“Sh-she was on her way from Dallas to Atlanta, and the flight disappeared,” she stammered, voice filled with panic. “No one knows where she is.”

“How the hell does a plane disappear? I’ve heard nothing on the news about any flights missing. Stop these stupid-assed games and tell me where my daughter is or I swear to God you will be the first woman I’ve ever struck.”

“Just sit down and let me tell you the whole story.” Over the next few hours, she caught Jerome up on all that had happened since Matilda’s birth. She didn’t blame him for being furious with her. Hell, she wanted to beat herself to death. And once she confronted Joe, she might die, so she had to set things straight. There was no way she’d allow Joe to get away with this.

“So they think the flight went down somewhere in southwest Alabama?” he asked.

“Yes.” Now that he’d heard the entire story, she knew he’d go with her to confront Joe.

He yanked the cordless phone off the end table and dialed his secretary. “Heather, I’m on my way to the airport from my house. I need a flight to southwest Alabama, immediately...Of course I know it’s a state. I don’t have time to explain...Thanks. I’ll have my cell.” He disconnected and headed for the front door.

“What are you doing? Joe Sloan has to be stopped or Matilda will never be safe.”

He snatched his keys off the entry table. “I don’t give a damn about Joe Sloan or you. I’m finding my daughter.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Matilda interlaced her fingers with Johnny Ray's and drew his hand close to her heart as she slowly woke. Though she wanted to push him away, she couldn't, just as she could no longer blame him for not coming after her. The immaturity of their age, the grief and the situation were too much for either to handle. She felt overwhelmed now, and she was much older and hopefully wiser. But did she want a relationship with him? Easy answer—hell yeah. Logical one—not so quickly, if ever. She wasn't the same person she was so many years ago, and neither was he. And then there were their families.

She held no doubt in her mind Joe Sloan was responsible for the crash. There was no way Joe could have known she would be on the plane when he began customizing it to suit his needs. No, he'd been after his son. Her being on the plane was a bonus for Joe. And her mother...She shuddered to think what her mother would do once she found out Johnny Ray was back in the picture. Then there was her grandfather. She admired him more than anyone, but he'd often told her his views on interracial relationships—don't do it, especially with someone white.

She hugged Johnny Ray's hand close to her heart, then released him and

crawled out of his embrace. There were too many obstacles between them. Body achy, feeling grimy and smelling less than fresh, she waded through her bags for a change in clothes. It had taken her hours to drag everything off the plane she'd thought they'd need. By the time she'd finished, her lungs burned hotter than hell, and she was so exhausted she could barely cover herself with one of the thin blankets.

She glanced over at Johnny Ray, then to the area where she'd laid the pilots. Panic washed over her as she rushed to the empty space where they had been. She'd cleaned and dressed their wounds as best she could and prayed for divine intervention to save the men's lives. She saw a new set of drag marks that went toward the plane and realized by the time Johnny Ray woke they had died, so he had moved them back to the plane. For the briefest of moments, she was angry with God for taking two more lives, for not answering her prayers, for allowing this to happen...Calm washed over her. The men weren't suffering anymore, and the only one to blame for this was Joe Sloan.

She left a note for Johnny Ray and followed the riverbank upstream a few hundred yards. The water looked calm, and it couldn't be but twenty yards across to the other side, yet she was still worried about washing in it. Swimming was never her strong suit. The only reason she'd learned how to swim was because she had an irrational fear of drowning.

Staying in the stench-filled clothes was not an option. And though she couldn't wash the death from her mind, she longed to wash it from her skin. She scanned the area in hopes of spotting someone, anyone, who could rescue them. Seeing no one, she set her clean clothes down and stripped.

Arms spread wide, she allowed her head to lull back as she soaked in the glorious rays of the sun. It was awfully warm out—she'd guess in the low eighties—and it wasn't even noon yet. She prayed the water was nice and warm also.

This was nothing like the pools she'd been in before, which increased her fear. One timid step after another, she entered the river. Determined to conquer her fear, she didn't stop until the water covered the tops of her breasts. What if there was some sort of undercurrent? She tried to shove her fears to the side. She'd been through too much to let a little water scare her.

The water was colder than she liked, but bearable. She stood with her hands resting atop her head and her eyes closed as she acclimatized to her surroundings. It was so quiet, so peaceful, nothing like the chaos from the plane. She lowered herself slightly and relaxed her arms, allowing them to float on the water.

Anguished screams of her coworkers replaced the tranquility she'd found, and fire surrounded her. Her foot came down on a sharp object. Startled, she slipped and became fully submerged under the water. The screams, the past, the

present became distorted and jumbled into one. Lungs burning, heart aching she fought against the fire, the water, the memories. Though disoriented, she knew she had to escape. She clawed for the surface through the pain, but she was drowning in the memories of her lost child, her little princess—their princess. She cried out, “Johnny Ray,” into the water.

Strong arms surround her, and she rose above the water. Johnny Ray held her close to his chest with one hand and stroked her locs from her face with the other, saying, “Oh God, baby.” She coughed water out of her lungs as Johnny Ray patted her back. “You had me scared to death.”

“Our...our baby’s dead...” She gazed into his eyes and saw a sorrow that matched her own. Would Princess have had his blue or her brown eyes? Would she be graduating from high school next spring, or would she have graduated early? Would she have been a daddy’s girl, mama’s girl, spoiled rotten? “He took Princess from us.”

Tears fell from Johnny Ray’s eyes. “I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault.”

“No.” She shook her head. “No more blaming ourselves or each other. We were only children, and we needed each other. What they did to us...” She included her mother in that “they.” Georgia May had manipulated Matilda when she was at her most vulnerable. “How could I believe you had turned your back on me? I’m so sorry, Johnny Ray.” She rested her head against his chest and allowed him to hold



her until she released the bits of anger she had held onto so strongly and peace settled in her soul. As she lowered her foot, a stinging pain shot through the sole of her foot and intensified as she touched bottom.

She gripped onto Johnny Ray and drew her foot up quickly. “I must have cut my foot on something.”

“Put your arms around my neck.”

“I know you aren’t going to try and carry me. I’m too heavy. You’ll drown us both.”

“Don’t start with me, woman.” He positioned her arms around his neck.

“I love you, but I’m not about to let you drown me.”

“Now that’s my queen. I knew you loved me.”

Realizing she had indeed said she loved him, her eyes flew open. “No I don’t. That’s the trauma speaking. I wouldn’t want you if you were the last man on earth.”

“For all intents and purposes, I am the last man on earth.” He lifted her from behind the knees and back, exposing her breasts. “You’ve grown...nicely.”

“Watch the shore.” She fought to keep from ogling his body, but he’d grown “nicely” also. “Where are your clothes, Mr. Balewa?”

“Next to yours.” He brushed his lips along her cheek to her ear, causing liquid heat to swirl about her center. “I’ve missed you so much. When I saw

you...well...hell...Like I said, you've grown, nicely," he whispered as he stepped onto the shore and headed toward their pile of clothes. Once at their clothes he stood there, watching her. Passion, longing and wanting brewed in his eyes.

"Umm, you can put me down now," she murmured.

"Your wish is my command, my queen." He gently lowered her onto the soft bed of moist weeds and wild flowers.

As she crouched to reach for her clothes, he embraced her from behind, stopping her.

Bottom lip sucked between her teeth, she timidly glanced over her shoulder at him. "I need to—"

"Not yet," he gently interrupted and rested his head on her shoulder. "I love you so much. I've never stopped." He brushed her locs away from her ear. "I'll never stop."

Eyes closed, she admitted, "I've never stopped loving you either, never will."

"We're no longer children." He suckled along her neck. "No one can stand between us."

"No one," she murmured and turned to give him better access.

Their lips touched once, twice. He deepened the kiss and reached for her soul. It had been so long, too long, since she'd felt secure, felt loved. Lying onto the bed of foxtails and wild flowers, she delved into the eyes of her soul mate, wanting

to stay stranded from the craziness of the outside world forever. *This is where I belong.* She snaked her hands around his neck, laced her fingers behind his head and drew his mouth to hers.

His hand traveled along her body to her breast with his lips close behind. Her back arched as he took her swollen peak into his mouth. This felt too good to stop. As he showed her other breast due consideration, he separated her feminine folds with the fingers of his free hand and fondled her until she squirmed in delight.

“That’s it, my queen,” he whispered over her lips.

His finger play had to be illegal because it felt so good. She found herself guiding his head as she gyrated on his hand.

He continued his assault with his hot mouth on the pebble hard peak of her breast and his fingers massaging her center. She tightened her legs around him as a climax engulfed her. Drenched in organic rapture, she cried out.

He positioned himself between her legs, but he didn’t penetrate. Instead, he throbbed against her heat. She wanted nothing more than to give him entry, but fear of repeating history crept into her heart. “Johnny Ray,” she said breathlessly.

“It’s alright, baby.” He brushed his lips over hers and took a little taste. “The first time you told me you loved me was the day I came to life.” He took another taste. “The day I thought I’d lost you, I died.” He pulled up and gazed into her eyes.

“You’ve brought me back to life. I’ll never allow anyone or anything to come before us again. No more broken promises. You are my queen.”

“And you are my king.” She lifted her knees and angled her hips upward slightly.

He descended on her mouth and penetrated her simultaneously. Filled and fulfilled, she met him stroke for glorious stroke. The wounds created by the torture of their separation slowly began to heal. This time things would be different for them. They wouldn’t allow anyone to come between them.

He propped himself on his elbow and thrust harder, deeper. She gazed into his eyes and saw he was nearing the same edge as her. She wrapped her legs about his thighs and gripped his butt as they jumped into ecstasy.

Breathing heavily, he kissed her gently, then lie on the ground and cupped her into his body. “I love you.” He rested his arm on her waist and rubbed her belly.

“I love you, too.”

“I’ll get us out of this.”

She turned toward him. “We’ll get us out of this. We’re a team.”

“I stand corrected. We’ll get us out of this.”

“That’s better.” Pain shot through her foot. “What the...” She sat up and looked at her injured foot; the sole was covered in blood.

“Oh, baby.” He helped her stand, carried her to the edge of the water and set

her down. "I should have taken care of you before I *took care of you*." He grabbed the bar of soap he'd dropped when he first saw her in the water and washed her feet.

She drew in a sharp intake of air. "That stings."

"Killing the germs, baby." He touched the open wound. "You shouldn't walk on this. I think we should wait a day or two." He dipped her foot into the water.

"Let's walk upstream. We're bound to reach civilization eventually. I can't stay here, Johnny Ray." She looked downstream toward the wreckage. "Not with this death."

"We'll leave first thing in the morning. For now I need to find you a crutch."



"Coward!" Georgia May banged on the heavy oak door. "I know you're in there, Joe Sloan." She kicked the door.

"Georgia May," Madison yelled as he hopped out of his SUV and rushed up the walkway.

"You're not getting him out of it this time, Madison! He's going to pay for hurting my baby." She wiped the tears from her eyes and banged on the door again.

"Get out here, Joe Sloan!"

"He's not even home. I've been looking for him since yesterday."

"You're lying! You're covering for him again. Well, I'm not having it! I've failed my baby for the last time. Do you hear me, Madison? The last damn time."

She marched over to the window and began pounding.

“Stop before you break the glass and cut your fool self.” He pulled her away from the widow.

She pushed him away. “You! You’re to blame just as much as that bastard in there. He tried to murder my baby and his own son, and you helped him get away with it. You’re just as bad,” she cried.

He swallowed and raised his hands slightly. “I’ll never forgive myself for the role I played in this whole fiasco. I honestly thought I was doing what was best for everyone. I didn’t know...” He ran his hands over his graying hair. “I’m using every connection I have to find Joe.”

“For what? So you can get him off again? No. He has to pay.”

He drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. “What good will you be to Matilda if you’re locked up? What if Joe were home? Do you honestly believe you can take on a man? He’d kill you. When they find Matilda—and they will find her—she’ll need you.”

“Yes, she does need me.” She sniffed.

“Your brother is still in the area, isn’t he?” He held his hand out to her. “Let me take you to him.”

“Yes, but I drove.”

“You’re too upset to drive.” He wiggled his fingers. “I’ll take you.”

She placed her hand into his outstretched hand and allowed him to escort her to his SUV. The ride to her brother's was a blur of disappointments and broken promises she'd made to Matilda over the years. Hate. She hated herself as much, if not more than, she hated Joe. Joe had no loyalty to Matilda, but Georgia May did.

Seeing the pain on Jerome's face, the disgust...the same look she often saw on her baby, brought her out of denial. She could finally hear what Matilda had been saying all of those years and acknowledged the pain she'd caused her child by emotionally abandoning her.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" Tears flowed freely down her face. "How could I?" She didn't care that Madison sat next to her or that he had no idea what she was talking about or the shame she carried. All she cared about was Matilda.

He pulled into the driveway of her brother's ranch-style, four-bedroom home. "Don't give up hope, Georgia May."

"Were you serious about not forgiving yourself?"

"I'm afraid so. How can I when I see the results of my actions?"

She played with her fingers in her lap. "All I've been is a source of pain to the ones I love." An eerie laugh escaped her. "Love. My love is misery. They'd be better off without me."

"Georgia May, listen to me."

She couldn't lift her face from the shame to look into his eyes. All she wanted was for the pain to stop. This was her punishment for the sins she'd committed against Matilda and Jerome—she knew it.

“Look at me.” He lifted her chin with his knuckle. “Suicide isn't the answer.”

“Who said anything about suicide?” No, what she was thinking was more of a death sentence.

“You didn't have to. How do you think Matilda will feel after she's rescued, then discovers her mother took her own life.”

“Relieved she doesn't have me to deal with anymore.”

Madison stared at her a long while. “Are you serious? You're her mother.”

“You have no idea the pain I've caused her over the years. She'll never forgive me, and I don't blame her.”

“Talk to me, Georgia May.”

She went on to reveal the entire story. In the course of that time, her brother had come home and looked at them curiously as he went into his house.

“I can't believe I'm telling you all of this. I can't believe what I've done. I mean...” Eyes closed, she leaned back in the seat. “I don't know what I mean, but I'm so sorry and don't know how to make it up to her, to them.”

“Wow. I don't even know what to tell you.”

A fresh batch of tears ran down her face. “I can't tell you how many times



she's asked about her father. And Jerome...he's always wanted children."

"Why did you do it?" he asked softly. "Why didn't you tell him?"

"At first I was angry and hurt, and wanted to hurt him. Then...then how could I explain to her I'd lied about her father being dead? Time passed so quickly, and the next thing I knew, she was pregnant and...and..." She looked away. "I've failed her in so many ways."

"This is your chance to make things right. Don't run away. Face the music. I know she'll be angry, but you owe her an explanation, and you need to apologize."

"But she'll never forgive me."

"So it's still all about you? You won't apologize because she may not forgive you? Georgia May, put your child first."

## Chapter Sixteen

“Granddaddy, I am seriously tripping.” Bobby slowly ran his large hands over his face. “I just saw this man outside who looks like Matilda. He has locs and everything. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was Matilda’s daddy.” He led his grandfather to the doorway of the fishing cabin that was being used as command central and motioned toward the tall, cinnamon hued man who was arguing with the search and rescue team.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Henry said.

The man looked in Bobby and Henry’s direction as if he’d sensed them watching him.

“Those are Matilda’s eyes.” Bobby faced his grandfather. “This is spooky as hell. Do you think it could actually be him? I mean, what are the chances of us bumping into her father? Impossible. Simply impossible.”

“I guess we’ll find out soon. Here he comes.”

“Excuse me,” the man said as he neared, “are you any relation to Georgia May King?”

“I’m her father,” Henry said tentatively. “And you are?”

“Jerome Austin.” He held out his hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,

sir.”

The life video in Bobby’s mind rewound to his teen years. Brows furrowed, he said, “Auntie had a boyfriend named Jerome. She kept leaving Matilda alone so she could run the streets with him.”

Guilt colored Jerome’s face. “I swear to God I didn’t know. I didn’t even know I was a father until yesterday. Matilda’s my child.”

Yes they had just been debating the possibility of this man being Matilda’s father, but his admission just about floored Bobby.

His grandfather staggered to the porch swing and took a seat. “She said you died in a car accident.” Elbows on his knees, he lowered his face into his palms. “How could she have done this? Why?”

“Granddaddy, are you going to be alright?” Bobby sat beside him and placed a comforting arm around his shoulder.

“No, I won’t.” Tears fell from Henry’s eyes. “I’ve failed my family.”

“No, Granddaddy, it’s not your fault.” Bobby glanced up at Jerome for support.

“Mr. King—”

“No.” Henry held his hand out. “Georgia May has never been quite right. I should have never allowed Georgia May to raise Matilda. Never. And how could I believe you’d died?” He shook his head.

“But Auntie’s your child; of course you gave her the benefit of the doubt. And she’s off, but I’ve never known her to be a liar.”

“But at what cost? This man doesn’t know his child. Bobby, you know how much not having a father has hurt Matilda. I should have put Matilda first.”

“I can’t allow you to take the blame, sir. I can’t even place all the blame with Georgia May.” He sat on the steps, leaned against the wood railing and relayed the entire story from the beginning.

Bobby still blamed Georgia May and swore never to forgive her. He couldn’t count the number of times Matilda had asked about her father. “I’m just so disgusted.” He pushed off the rocker and paced about the porch. “What she did was downright cruel. She knew!” he ragged. “How could she do this to Matilda?”

“This is too raw for all of us right now,” Jerome said and stood. “I’ve hired a crew. Finding my child is all I’m concerned with right now. Are you in?”

“I’m there. Just give me a second to go inside and see if Mr. Balewa wants to ride with us,” Bobby said and turned to his grandfather. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can forgive Auntie this time. I love you, but I can’t.”



*Two Days Later...*

Matilda’s foot ached like hell, yet she continued to walk as normal as possible. She didn’t want to let Johnny Ray in on to how much pain she was in, or

he'd make them stop. She swiped the sweat off her brow.

Johnny Ray glanced at her, again. "You're not looking very well. I think we need to take a break."

"No, I'm fine, really." As if things weren't bad enough, she felt a fever coming on, which was another reason she wanted to find civilization quickly. The snack packs from the plane were almost gone, they only had eight bottles of water left and she couldn't even begin to imagine how Johnny Ray would react if she became ill. "Can I have a bottle of water?"

He stopped rolling the suitcase of supplies, took one of the liter bottles out and handed it to her. "This is as good as a spot for a little rest as any. Sit by the shore so I can change your bandage."

Without argument, she kicked off her shoes and sat by the shore. It was calming. She didn't know if they were following a stream, creek, river, or what, but she did know the lush vegetation, slow current and soft breeze were all calming to her soul. "I want a house by a lake." She opened her daily ration of Party Mix.

"I think that can be arranged." He removed her bloodied sock. "Damn." He dipped her injured foot into the water. "I think it's getting worse. I can't let you keep walking on this foot."

"I don't have a spare foot on me," she teased.

He flicked water into her face. "And you need some real food." He gently

cleansed her wound and applied a little peroxide on it. “It’s still fizzing too damn much and will never close as long as you’re walking on it. Shit, I’ve got to get you some help.”

She gnawed her lower lip.

“What?” he asked.

“I was just thinking that you should go ahead without m—”

“There is no way in hell that’s happening,” he interrupted. “I’ll think of something.” He eased up beside her. “We’re going to make it.” He crawled closer, leaned and kissed her stomach. “Right, Tunji.”

“Tunji?”

“Our son.” He lifted her shirt and eased his hand underneath to her belly. The heat building in her had nothing to do with the fever.

They’d made love several times over the last few days, so there was a possibility that she could be pregnant, but the timing...She shoved her worries away. They would make it to civilization in another day, two tops. “First off, I’m not pregnant. Secondly, I love Tunji, but hate the name. I’d never name our child Tunji. How about Isom?”

“I’d never hear the end of it. His name will be Robert.”

“Perfect, Bobby will love it! But I’m not pregnant.”

“Of course you are.” He kissed her on the lips. “I’d love to make love right

now, but my babies need meat.” He looked into the tree line. “Maybe I’ll get lucky and catch a rabbit or something.”

“There must be some frogs around somewhere.”

“That sounds good.” He chuckled. “Remember when Bobby challenged me to that frog leg eating contest.”

“Oh yeah! I don’t think there was a frog leg to be found for months after that. I just knew you’d both be sick as a dog.” She rested back on her elbows. “Man we used to have some fun.”

“We will again, baby.” He knelt beside her. “I won’t be gone long. Soak your feet for a while. The water will help sooth them.”



*Monclova, Mexico...*

Nick waited in a beat up 1978 station wagon just outside of Joe’s ranch. For the last few months, Joe had been acting stranger than usual. Over the years, Joe had sought Nick out several times. He often told Nick they were two of a kind. *I’m not like him!*

He recalled how the children at school used to call him shadow because he didn’t have a personality of his own. After Matilda fell down the stairwell, his life also changed. No more following. He became his own person, but...But Joe still had an unnerving affect on him. That this man had so easily convinced him to harm

Matilda...*I have to make things right.*

He powered up his satellite phone and dialed Lynden's number. He'd kept his phone off because he had forgotten the charger in Tennessee.

"Nick! Where the hell have you been?"

"Damn, man. Glad to hear from you, too," he said sarcastically. "What's going on?"

"Johnny Ray and Matilda's plane went down!"

He gripped onto the steering wheel with one hand and forced the phone to his ear with the other as if that would make what Lynden had just said make more sense. Last he'd heard, Matilda had quit her job in New York and was headed to work for the same firm as Johnny Ray. "Wha...what do you mean, 'went down?' What are you talking about?" Burning up, he reached to roll down the window, but the windows were already down.

Lynden explained everything in record speed.

"That's crazy! Uncle Joe has really lost it. He has to be stopped." He stared out the passenger side window through the trees at Joe's property. Over the years, he'd maintained a relationship with Joe in hopes of someday being able to make things right. Lately, Joe would seek Nick out just to say, "Vengeance is mine." Or "Our day is coming."

"No one can find his ass."



“I know where he is.” From the moment he had reached out to push Matilda down the stairs, he regretted his actions, but a student had knocked into him, keeping him from retracting his hand fast enough.

“But how, where?” Lynden asked.

“I’m with him in Hell. There isn’t even a breeze in this God forsaken place.” He turned the key in the ignition. The car sputtered to a start. “I’m stopping him once and for all.”

“Nick, whatever you’re thinking, stop. Call the authorities.”

“You don’t get it do you! I murdered their child. And now he’s murdered everyone on that damn plane to get his vengeance. This has to end.”

“Listen to me. You were young and impressionable. He took advantage of you. Don’t do this, Nick.”

He drove onto Joe’s property. “It’s already done.” He disconnected and shut off the phone. “This ends today.”

He remained in the car a few minutes before he could bring himself to go to the door and confront his guilt. After tonight, he’d finally be free. Within the course of another few minutes, he rang the doorbell several times. He knew Joe was home; he’d followed him there earlier.

The door swung open. “What the hell do you...Nick?” Joe’s angry features softened. “What the hell are you doing down here?” He motioned for Nick to come

in. “Not that I’m not glad to see you. Come on in. I could use some English speaking company.”

The cool central air felt so good, for a second Nick thought he was in Heaven, but the site of Joe reminded him that this was Hell and the devil was playing tricks with his mind. He took a seat on the couch.

“So what brings you down to this part of the world?” Joe asked from the armchair diagonal from Nick.

“I’m tired, Uncle.” He stretched his long legs out and leaned back. “So tired.” The .45 Glock he’d stuffed in his waistband and covered with his shirt pressed into his back.

“What’s going on, Nick? Why are you here? How did you find me?”

“I followed you from Tennessee.”

“Why are you here?” he repeated more forcefully.

“Because I’m tired.” He drew in and released a long breath. “Why did you do it, Uncle? Why couldn’t you just leave them alone?” He knew the plane crash hadn’t been an accident. It had to be Joe.

“Leave them alone!” Joe raged. “They ruined my life.”

Nick sat up. “That’s not so. All they wanted was to be left alone. Why did you bring me into it? You’re such a coward. You sent a child to do your dirty work.”

“Boy, I’m not too old to whip your ass.”

“You don’t intimidate me anymore. You—are—a—coward. Always have been. Don’t get me wrong. I used to be a coward also. That’s how I can recognize one so well.”

Joe rose from his seat. Nick also stood and looked at his uncle eye-to-eye. “Johnny Ray is your son. How could you?”

“He’s not my son. My son died years ago. That bastard on the plane murdered him and tried to destroy me. But I got the last laugh.”

“And what about everyone else on the plane?”

“Casualties of war.”

“This is crazy.” He returned to his seat.

“Nick,” Joe said softly, “I wouldn’t have used you so many years ago if I could have gotten close to that girl on my own. You were too young. I shouldn’t have involved you, but you did it. We’re more alike than you want to admit.”

“I’m not like you.”

“Oh really? Then why didn’t you warn that bastard about what I’ve been up to? You’ve been following me.”

“I had no idea what you were planning. You aren’t putting this on me!” He’d just taken to following Joe in the last week.

“Well you’re down here with me now. The authorities will never believe you

weren't a co-conspirator, especially since we have a past of...well, you know."

"This has to end."

"Who's going to stop me, you?" He laughed.

"Yes."

## Chapter Seventeen

*Three Days Later...*

“There’s...something...crawling,” Matilda drew in a ragged breath, “under my...skin.”

Johnny Ray stopped at a fork in the river and placed Matilda on the damp ground. She’d been overcome with fever and was too weak to walk. He’d dropped their supplies over a day ago to carry her instead.

“Johnny Ray,” she breathed out, “please, just leave me.” She lie back on the ground.

“I’m not leaving you!” The shore along the left fork prong looked less hazardous than the prong to the right, but he’d have to carry Matilda across the water to go to the left.

“I love you...” She drew in a staggered breath. “Go for help.”

He knelt beside her and placed his hand on her forehead. “This fever has you talking crazy. I’m not leaving you.” He reached into his back jeans pocket and pulled out the Ziploc baggie he kept his cell phone in. He turned on the cell phone.

“Yes!” He showed her the LED screen. “See, baby, we have a signal. We’re almost there. Don’t give up.” He held her limp hand and dialed Bobby’s number

with his free hand, but the signal was too weak to connect. He turned the phone off to conserve its energy, placed it in the Ziploc bag and returned it to his pocket.

“We have to cross the river.”

“I’m too heavy for you to carry me across the water.”

“It’s not that far across.” He entered the water and walked to the center.

“See. It’s not very deep either.” The water went to his shoulders.

“It looks deep to me,” she said from the shore.

The current was stronger than he liked, but carrying Matilda over broken branches, rocky terrain and brush just wouldn’t work. “I’m sorry, baby, but we have to cross.” He helped her stand, then turned his back to her and crouched. “Your head will remain above the water. Just hold tight.”

She more fell onto his back than mounted. He placed an arm around each of her thighs and began to enter the river. Halfway across, his legs burned like hell, but he couldn’t stop.

“We’re almost there, baby.”

Once he got them to the other side, he set her on the ground. A few seconds later, her eyes fluttered shut. “Matilda, Matilda!” He shook her gently, but she didn’t wake.

Rejuvenated, he struggled to lift her weight and firefighter carried her over his shoulder. “I’ll find help, baby. Hang in there for me.”



A convoy of small motor boats continued along the river at a good pace. They veered along with the bank to the left. Bobby looked back and noticed the water had forked. “Jerome!” he called out to the lead boat.

Jerome stopped his boat, the others followed. “What’s wrong, Bobby?”

“I’m headed down that fork over there. It’s a lot clearer than where we came from. It would be easier for them to walk along it.”

“Do you have one of the satellite phones? I don’t want you getting lost.”

Bobby nodded. “Yep.”

“Okay, but if it forks again, come on back this way.” He motioned to one of the other boats. “Go with him.”

Not even a half mile along the fork, Bobby saw Johnny Ray hunched over Matilda. Excitement rushed through his body. “Johnny Ray! Matilda!” He sped the boat up and approached them. As soon as he neared, he saw something was desperately wrong.

Tears streamed down Johnny Ray’s face, and he clung onto Matilda. He looked up at Bobby, then returned his gaze to Matilda. “I can’t lose her. I can’t.”

Bobby stopped the boat close to the shore, jumped out and ran to them. “What happened?”

The man in the second boat pulled out his satellite phone.

“We have to get her to a doctor,” Johnny Ray said, voice filled with desperation.

“Jerome, Bobby was right,” said the man on the phone. “We’ve found them! We’ve found them!”



*The Next Day...*

The last time Johnny Ray was in a hospital room, he’d just discovered his father was responsible for the murder of his baby. Eighteen years had passed, yet not much had changed. His father was still a danger to the ones he loved most.

*Things will be different this time.* He caressed Matilda’s face. “Parasites, I can’t believe how stupid I am.” He ran his fingers along her hairline. Her fever had gone down considerably, but he was still worried. “I kept having her soak her feet in parasite ridden water. Stupid!”

“It’s not your fault,” Jerome said from the chair on the opposite side of the bed. “You didn’t know and you kept an infection from setting in.” He held his baby’s hand and continued to watch her sleep.

“Infection, yes; infestation, no.”

“Let it go, Jonathan. She’s here. She’s alive.” Jerome beamed with pride. “I still can’t believe this beautiful woman is my child. I’m a father.” He nodded. “I have so much time to make up for. I don’t even know where to start.”



“She’s always wanted to know you.”

Sadness darkened Jerome’s handsome features. “I’m so angry with Georgia May. I just can’t believe she’d do something like this. How could she be so cruel? How...”

Georgia May burst into the room. “My baby!” She rushed to Matilda’s side. “This is all your fault,” she hissed under her breath and glared at Johnny Ray. “You’ve been nothing but trouble for Matilda since day one.”

“How would you know, you weren’t around? I’m exhausted. Leave me alone, or better yet, just leave.”

Georgia May’s eyes blinked wildly and cleared her throat. “Get out! You have no right here. She’s only allowed two visitors—*family* members. You’re no better than your father. I won’t let you harm Matilda again.”

“I’m not going to argue with you. Yes, what Joe Sloan did was horrible, and I’ll never forgive him, but you stole eighteen years of our lives. I’m not a child anymore. Nothing and no one will keep me from my queen.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Georgia May, stop,” Jerome said. “This is not the time or place for you to run for ‘Mother of the Year.’ Try putting Matilda first for a change.”

“How could you...” wide eyed, she looked from Jerome to Johnny Ray back to Jerome, “side with him?”

“I’m siding with my child. Sit and be quiet, or I’ll have you removed.”

“But, but you can’t...”

“I can and will.” He pushed away from the bed and stalked toward the window. “I’m so angry with you I can barely breathe, but I know Matilda needs you near.” He rested his head on the window. “You stole my child’s life from me,” he said softly. “She needed me and you...you...” He returned to his seat beside Matilda, took her hand into his and watched her. “This is not the time.”

Georgia May placed her hand on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Jerome.”

He moved away. “You should be.”

Johnny Ray hadn’t known Jerome long, but from what he had learned, Jerome would have made an excellent father. When his queen woke from her drug-induced sleep and found out the truth of how closer her father was...He shuddered to think.

Tears filled Georgia May’s eyes. “I shouldn’t be here. Matilda will never forgive me.” She turned to leave.

He latched onto her hand. “She needs all of us,” Jerome whispered. “Please stay.” He released her.

“He’s right,” Johnny Ray admitted. “She needs us all.”



A few hours later, Matilda’s eyes fluttered open. Johnny Ray had pushed his

chair back, leaned his head on the bed and fallen asleep, yet kept hold to her hand.

“Johnny R...” she uttered. It felt like her mouth was filled with cotton.

He opened his eyes and offered a relieved smile. “I was so scared.” He pressed his lips against hers. “I love you with everything I am.”

“I...” Throat too dry to finish, she tried to swallow.

“I know, baby. Don’t try to speak.”

She turned her head to see who she’d assumed was Bobby or her grandfather holding her other hand and saw a man...a man with her eyes, her complexion, her hair. Nervousness skittered through her. Her heart told her, “This is your father,” but she was afraid to believe. Then there were the questions: Where had he been? Why was he here now? How did he get here...?

She felt little tremors in his hand as he caressed her face. Tears formed in his eyes as he helped her sit up and embraced her. “You know who I am, don’t you?” he asked softly.

Her own eyes, just as watery as his, she tried to answer, but her throat wouldn’t cooperate. “Umm hmm.” Joy...a complete joy filled her heart. She released Johnny Ray’s hand and held onto her father for dear life.

Jerome sat on the edge of the bed and rocked his weeping daughter. After she calmed, he said, “I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you, baby. I’m so sorry. Now that I have you, I’m never letting you go.”

She took both of his hands into hers and smiled broadly at Johnny Ray.  
“My...father,” she said with a thick voice.

“He led the team that found us.”

Brows raised, she asked, “How?”

Jerome nibbled his bottom lip a few seconds. “Your mother came to me a few days ago and told me I’m a father. I’m upset with her, but,” he tapped her chin with his knuckle, “look at the beautiful daughter she’s given me. I don’t want to dwell on the time we’ve missed.”

Since Matilda’s last argument with her mother, she’d been so consumed with anger and resentment toward Georgia May she wasn’t sure if she could face her again. She rested her head on her father’s shoulder. She didn’t want to dwell in the past either, but these bygones wouldn’t just be bygones. She loved her mother, but...but...She looked into her father’s eyes and decided for now she’d focus on what she had instead of what was denied her.

“Not talk...about now...please.”

“Of course, darling.” He pressed her head against his shoulder.

“Why don’t I give you two a few minutes alone before the family finds out you’re awake,” Johnny Ray said. “I love you.”

Matilda turned from her father and opened her arms for an embrace. Just as Johnny Ray sank into her arms, Georgia May stepped into the room.

“Matilda!” Georgia May rushed over and pulled her into her arms. “Why didn’t you tell me she was awake?” she snapped at Johnny Ray. “I won’t allow you to keep me from my daughter.”

Jerome cleared his throat loudly, and Georgia May’s demeanor lost all confrontation. Matilda wished she had half as much of an effect on her mother.

Georgia May wrapped Matilda in her arms and cried. “I was so worried about you.”

“I’m okay, Mama,” Matilda said, glad her voice was returning.

“I’m taking you home with me where you belong.”

Matilda pulled away from her mother. She’d been through too much and wanted to hold off the family drama so she could enjoy her father, but of course Georgia May had her own agenda and couldn’t see beyond herself. “I belong with Johnny Ray.” She reached out to him. He took her hand.

Just as she was about to tell her mother it was time for her to leave, her father stood and gently took Georgia May by the arm. “Let’s tell your father and Bobby she’s awake.” He kissed Matilda on the cheek. “I’ll be back in a little bit.”

*Thank you*, she mouthed, amazed he knew her mood so well, so quickly when her mother still hadn’t caught on.

Georgia May looked none too pleased, yet left the couple alone.

Johnny Ray kicked off his loafers, snuggled up to Matilda in bed and rested

his head on hers. “What’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?”

Tears fell from her eyes. “I’ve found my father, but I’m about to lose my mother. I know she loves me, and I love her too, but...” She couldn’t find the words strong enough to express how hurt, disgusted, and resentful she felt.

“You forgave me, you’ll forgive her, but in your time.”

“But there’s a major difference. I had to work to maintain my anger with you. With Mama, I’ve been working overtime to keep my anger with her at bay. Just as she can’t change me, I can’t change her. I have to accept her as she is, or not at all.” He wiped the tears from her face. “I just can’t tolerate the way she treats me any longer. Whenever she’s around, I’m miserable. I dread her calls and I’m tired...Tired of waiting on her to be the mother I need, the mother I want. And that she kept my father from me...” She shook her head. “How could she be so cruel? He obviously wanted me. She knew how much I needed him, she knew. She had me believing he was dead. She probably lied about him being a married man also. I just can’t trust her.”

He embraced her and she felt secure. With Johnny Ray, she knew she’d make it.

“Baby, I think you should go to family counseling.”

“It didn’t turn out too grand for you and Joe.”

“Joe and I literally hate each other, but you and your mom love each other.

Am I ready to forgive Georgia May? Hell no. Do I think she will ever be sane? Hell no.” They both laughed lightly. “But you aren’t ready to give up. Maybe a therapist can help cut through all of the justified anger and resentment you’ve built up and tone Georgia May’s crazy down to bearable between you two.”

“That’s a good idea.” She brushed her lips over his. “I think I’ll keep you around.”

“Oh God how I wish these doors had a lock.” He palmed her stomach. “We’d go about making Robert a little sister or brother before he’s even born.”

“You are too silly. You told the doctors not to use anything that would harm a baby, right?”

“I’ll admit, I was a tad bit hysterical when they found us.”

“A tad bit?” she teased.

“Okay, so I was a babbling fool, but your father said he’d make sure both of my babies were taken care of.”

“My father,” she beamed. “I have my father.”



Jerome was dumbfounded. He’d thought Georgia May would have enough common sense or at least the decency not to upset Matilda at this fragile time. His child could have died, and if she were pregnant...He didn’t have the heart to tell Johnny Ray the medication that saved Matilda’s life would kill their unborn child.

No, it was best not to let them know. Her chances of being pregnant were slim to none. He'd just have her kept in the hospital a few days until the drug wore off, and he'd be sure not to leave the couple alone for more than a few minutes at a time.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, Georgia May fussed, "What's wrong with you? How could you leave them alone? I know he's turning her against me."

He looked down his nose at her and calmly stated, "I have no respect or love for you, but I just saved you from yourself because I love Matilda. Your selfishness is the only thing turning Matilda against you. The child is a saint. I would have been done with you years ago."

"How could you be so cruel, Jerome?"

"So I'm the cruel one, huh? You honestly have no real concept of what you've done, do you?" The elevator doors opened. He stepped off with her close behind and headed for the family waiting area. "You need serious psychological help." He stopped a few steps before they reached the waiting area and faced her. "Just know this. If you ever interfere with me and Matilda's relationship, you *will see* just how cruel I can be. No one will ever keep me from my child again."

He turned from her and entered the waiting area. "She's awake!"

Bobby, Henry and Tunji rose from their seats and approached Jerome.

"Can we see her?" Bobby asked.



“I think she’d like nothing more.” Jerome escorted everyone back to Matilda’s room and peeked in. “You have a few visitors.”

A broad smile spread across her face as she waved in her family. “Oh my God, Tunji, I haven’t seen you in such a long time! You look fantastic.”

Tunji hugged her. “I’m so glad you’re safe and sound.”

Georgia May trailed in behind and said nothing, to which Jerome was grateful.

“So I take it I’m the last one to meet my father...Aw man, I just realized, I never got your name.”

Guilt rushed through Jerome’s body. No he hadn’t known about Matilda, but he still felt it was partially his fault how she’d been treated by Georgia May over the years.

“You still don’t know?” Bobby asked, looking at Georgia May.

Jerome couldn’t allow Matilda to be hurt like this, not now, and if it were in his power, never. Georgia May would be Georgia May. Nothing and no one could change the past.

“My name is Jerome Austin.”

He noticed Georgia May tearing up, but Matilda was looking confused, so, hopefully, missed it. The other men in the room remained silent yet slowly surrounded Matilda, blocking her view of Georgia May.

“Mama used to date a man named Jerome,” she said timidly.

“When I was young I hated my name,” Jerome commented absently. “It seemed every other guy was named Jerome, Jeremy, Jeremiah or something like that.” Matilda visibly relaxed. He couldn’t stand lying to her—even a lie of omission—and he truly hated Georgia May, but he loved his daughter more.

“Well I like the name Jerome.” She smiled. “It fits you perfectly.”

Georgia May gently squeezed her way through the men and took her daughters hand. “Baby, I love you so much.” She wiped her tears and drew in a deep breath. “I’ve done some awful things and pray you forgive me someday.” She turned to Jerome. “I’m sorry. Truly sorry.”

She turned back to Matilda. “This is the Jerome I dated when you were a teen.” She set her hand on his arm.

“What...? No...” Matilda looked into Jerome’s eyes, and he saw a part of her die. Georgia May wasn’t the best mother, but she was the mother Matilda loved, and this was killing his baby girl.

“He didn’t know about you,” Georgia May continued. “I’ll never forgive myself and will understand if you never forgive me.” She backed away. “I love you, Matilda.” She hurried out of the room.

“How could she, Johnny Ray?” Matilda’s gown became soaked with her tears, and her hands trembled almost as much as her voice.

“She’s sick.” He embraced her. “I can’t imagine the pain you’re in, but you love your mother, and she loves you.”

“She sure has a jacked up way of showing it. I don’t know if I can ever forgive her.”

“Do you want to forgive her?” Tunji asked.

“I want to, but I don’t know if I can. It hurts so much.”

“Set your eye on what you want, not on what you’re scared of.”

She reached out to Jerome. “What do you think?”

“I think I have the most beautiful daughter in the world. All I care about is showering you with my love. Don’t get me wrong. I’m so filled with anger and resentment I can barely stand the site of your mother, but I refuse to let those emotions rule me. Jonathan is correct. Georgia May is a sick woman and needs help.”

## Epilogue

*One year later...*

Matilda hadn't heard from her mother in months, so when Georgia May called and said she would be there within the hour, Matilda was shocked. The family therapy hadn't gone as Matilda would have liked, but she later realized she'd had unrealistic goals. Georgia May was Georgia May. What helped their relationship were the distance and the two ladies accepting the other for who they were. No more trying to change the other.

Matilda and Johnny Ray married and decided to stay in Texas. After a few months of therapy, Georgia May returned to New York. When Jerome relocated to Dallas, Matilda was sure her mother would pitch a fit, but she hadn't.

Joe's lifeless, bullet ridden body had been found in his home outside of Monclova, Mexico a few weeks after Matilda and Johnny Ray's plane went down. The murderer had not been found, and as wrong as it may be, Matilda couldn't say she cared. Truth be told, she would like to thank whoever put Joe out of her family's misery.

The doorbell rang.

"Don't you dare get up!" Johnny Ray yelled from upstairs.

“Stop being a mother hen.” She pushed herself up from the plush armchair.

Johnny Ray, speckled with pastel green and yellow paint, came running down the stairwell of their new six bedroom, two story home. “I told you to sit still.” He rushed to the door. “I’ve got this.” He’d said he wanted to fill their home with children before they hit forty. Though she wanted several children, she thought he was being a bit ambitious until five months ago when the doctors informed them she was pregnant with twins.

She waddled her seven-month pregnant self toward the door as he opened it. “Mama!” She was actually happy to see Georgia May.

“Oh my God! Look at your ankles. Johnny Ray, help her sit down.”

“Not you, too, Mama. He barely allows me to take a step. I’m shocked he hasn’t ordered a bedpan yet.”

He took her by the arm and guided her to the chair. “I have, but it hasn’t arrived yet,” he teased.

“I cain’t stand you, Johnny Ray!” Matilda drawled, pulled him close and kissed him on the lips.

“She loves me,” he lazily boasted over his shoulder to his mother-in-law. “I’ll leave you ladies to your visit.”

Georgia May hugged him. “Thank you for taking care of my baby.”

“I’m in love with her.” He gave Matilda a quick kiss. “Do not get up from this

seat.” He shot back up stairs to finish painting the nursery.

Georgia May laughed. “I’m a nurse, listen to your husband and stay seated.”

Past ready to have the babies, she grumbled, “So what brings you here?”

“I’m going to Europe!”

Georgia May jumped up and down, putting Matilda in mind to when Georgia May had gone to see her first Broadway play. But this time Matilda wasn’t hurting or resentful. She loved her mother, but didn’t need her mother. At least not in the same ways as she had when she was a child.

“That sounds great,” Matilda said honestly. “So when do you leave?”

“A day or so after you have my grandsons.” She crouched beside Matilda and rubbed her belly. “You hear that Robert and Jerome? Granny’s trip is on hold until you guys come on out of there.”

“Mama, you don’t have to hold off your trip.”

“Oh no you don’t. Pictures won’t do. I flew down here to see my grandsons. I can’t wait! No, I wouldn’t miss it for anything. Europe will still be there.”

Truly happy with her family, Matilda hugged her mother. “I love you, Mama.”

“I love you, too.”

*The End*

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An avid writer since childhood, Deatri has authored several articles, essays, workshops, and books. Deatri's idea of a great afternoon is a trip to the bookstore, followed by hours curled up on the sofa with her newly purchased romance, fantasy, or science fiction novel.

Red Rose Publishing

Trapped In Paradise

Broken Promises-Coming Soon November 2009

[Honey and Lemon](#)-Coming Soon

The [Other Realm](#)-Coming Soon

Stolen Heart-Coming Soon

White Rose-Coming Soon

Genesis

Caught Up

Ebony Angel

Parker Publishing

Beauty and the Beast

Whisper Something Sweet (Winner of 2008 Emma for Best Steamy Romance of the year)