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- Sistas Love Books Book Club

Any Heart Open



Love Ta'Shia Asanti

Any Heart
Open



First published by Rainmaker Publishing 2023
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First edition
e-Book ISBN: 979-8-9874300-4-0
Paperback ISBN: 979-8-9874300-5-7

Any Heart Open



LOVE TASHIA ASANTI



*My fourth novel and 9th book is dedicated to my friend and sister
from another mother, K̄iev Camden Asanti. 1/5/61-11/14/22.
Rest in Power. May the Ancestors receive you with love and peace.
See you next time...*



Early Praise for Any Heart Open

“Love captures the powerful healing journey of the characters in Any Heart Open so eloquently. Another slam-dunk!”

Sistas Love Books Book Club

“Ta’Shia Asanti is a master of her craft. Any Heart Open will have you up all night to see what happens next. Great storytelling!”

GBF Media

“Any Heart Open describes the pain and beauty of love with perfection.”

Urban Spectrum Media



Chapter

One



Delilah

Lined up across Delilah Winter's monstrous bed were a dozen eggs, a bag of white flour, a bottle of honey and a tube of cheap lipstick. Delilah loaded everything into a Macy's shopping bag and placed it by the front door.

She flipped through the risqué selections in her closet and settled on what she called a fuck-em dress, a black Lycra number that left little to the imagination. Her second level of devilishness was a red-satin push-up bra and matching thong that held her curves like a Cobra in its final death grip. She wanted Marcus to have a bird's-eye view of what his lying and cheating had cost him.

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Delilah dug around in her purse for her car keys while venting to no one in particular.

“Damn shame a woman has to stoop to this level to get a man’s attention. That shit he pulled last night was foul. Ignoring my calls. Acting like he wasn’t home when his car was sitting right there in the driveway. He’s gonna be damn sorry he treated me this way. And that whip of his won’t ever be the same by the time I get through redecorating it.”

She stopped by the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of wine from the wine rack. If things turned around she wanted to be prepared.

Her ranting continued, “Gave his ass the best of me. Cooked, cleaned and gave it up on the regular. Did it horizontally, vertically, hell, even aeronautically! This is how he thanks me! Brother Marcus, you’re about to learn an important lesson about the female species. Don’t F with them!”

Delilah dialed Marcus’s cell number one last time just for good measure. She actually hoped he didn’t pick up the phone this time. She wanted to leave her exciting news on his answering machine for shock value. That and the fate she had planned for his vehicle would damn sure get his attention.

The doorbell put her plan on hold. She hung up the phone and peeked at the video cam. The screen was black, which meant the batteries were probably dead. She made her way to the front door to see who had interrupted her scandalousness.

It had to be Velvet. Delilah had forgotten she’d called and asked her bestie to come by. She peeped through the tiny hole in the center of the door to be sure. Saw a magnified version of her best friend Velvet looking starched and creased as usual.

Velvet’s short haircut was fierce. Her two-piece Dakari suit fit her four workouts a week body like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

“Stop playing around and open the door, Delilah.”

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Delilah swung the door open and welcomed her BFF. “You’re just in time for the fun.”

Velvet gave Delilah’s outfit the stink eye. “What’s up with the ho dress? And what do you mean I’m just in time for the fun? Don’t tell me—some more of your homemade drama? Why couldn’t you have told me whatever it is over the phone?”

“Have a seat. I’ll fill you in in a minute. Want a snack, some iced tea or something?”

“No, I had a sandwich in the car. What’s going on, Delilah? You know I love you, but time is money and money is time.”

Velvet posted up on Delilah’s white leather couch, checked her cell for work messages, and turned her attention back to her friend.

“Talk to me, Delilah. I got hella-deadlines. Gonna need to get back to the office asap.”

“Stop being so busy-business all the time. Be human for a minute. I need you to listen in while I make a call to Marcus.”

“If I wasn’t human I wouldn’t be here. You gonna tell me what this is all about?”

“Remember that music industry exec I was dating? Well, that fool tried to play a sistah. Ghosted me after he hit this. But I got some news this morning that’ll get his attention. Gonna put you on a three way while I call him.”

Velvet rolled her eyes at Delilah as they waited for the calls to merge. The phone rang a few times before the outgoing message chimed in.

Velvet told Delilah, “Girl, his voice is as smooth as a hot cup of cocoa.”

After the beep, Delilah licked her lips and began her act.

“Marcus, this is Delilah. I hate to tell you this over the phone, but I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for three days. Since you can’t figure out how to call me back or answer your door, here’s my message.”

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She paused for effect.

“I want—no—I *need* to talk to you about our baby. Yes, Marcus...I’m pregnant and it’s yours. Things just happen sometimes and well...we can’t control our destinies.”

Delilah took the waterworks to level two. “I know you’ll do... do the right thing because that’s the kind of man you are. I’m at home—I just got the test results from my doctor. Call me when you can. You still have the number don’t you? Toodles.”

Delilah hung up on that note. She figured if that didn’t make him call, she’d pay a little in-person visit to the offices of Pure Platinum music label where he worked.

Velvet stared at Delilah like she was an alien. Her silence spoke a thousand words.

Delilah wanted Velvet to cuss her out, call her insane or something. Velvet just sat there in silence, shaking her head back and forth. That made her feel crazier than she already felt. She knew what she had done was bonkers, but what else could you do but something crazy when crazy stuff happened?

Delilah wasn’t in the mood for one of Velvet’s holier-than-thou sermons about her not having any morals. She needed her bestie to be her rock through this storm.

Velvet wasn’t sure what to say. Delilah had done some messed up things over the years, but this was an all new low. She prayed a short, silent prayer. Asked God to guide her words and give her compassion. She fought the urge to tell her friend how trifling her actions were. A small voice spoke to her in what she thought was a corny, overused saying that was uber appropriate for the moment.

What would Jesus do?

Velvet knew exactly what Jesus would do. He would tell Delilah to come to Him, to leave her troubles in His hands. He would talk to his Father about His child and ask Him to help her get through. He would not only forgive her, He would help her

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forgive herself. Mercy. Compassion. Non-judgement. That's who Jesus is, and that's what He would do.

But she wasn't Jesus, and Velvet knew that acting like Christ in the current moment was going to be hard. She felt like she had a duty to tell her friend the truth. Delilah wasn't going to like it, but Velvet wouldn't sugarcoat her sentiments. It was her belief that sometimes hearing things unfiltered helped people get better.

Velvet understood her friend's disappointment, but the man Delilah had been dating was just that, a date. He hadn't lied to her. He hadn't promised her a picket fence and a diamond ring. It was okay for a woman to dream about being on the Love Boat, but it wasn't okay for her to get mad and retaliate when a man didn't buy the ticket and get on board.

It was clear to Velvet that Delilah's man-friend's heart was closed, and he wasn't planning on opening it anytime soon. She had to get her friend to accept the truth no matter how painful it was.



Chapter

Two



Velvet

Velvet Marie Chandler paced back and forth across Delilah's living room. Her sophisticated strut didn't mask the disdain she felt about the ratchet mess her best friend had just created.

Her question-mark shaped booty moved in sync with the rhythm of her judgmental steps. When she spoke, her index finger further expressed her disbelief in sync with her head, which was rolling like a yo-yo on top of her neck.

"Delilah Winters, you have lost the last bit of sense in your head. How are you gonna just up and tell that man you're carrying

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his baby over the phone? Y'all only dated twice before you started screwing like rabbits. If you call that a date. I'd call it a booty call, but a booty call is something you have after you've been in love. A booty call is what you have after you breakup but still sleep together occasionally. That boning you and him did didn't have a damn thing to do with love—old or new. Tell the truth, Delilah. You don't know whose baby that is swimming around in your belly. Wait a minute, is there a baby in your stomach or is that a lie too?"

Velvet tried to keep her lunch down as Delilah feigned that innocent look she got whenever she was knee deep in some madness.

"To answer your question, yes, Miss Thing, I'm preggers. It's either Marcus' or Charles' baby. I do know that."

Velvet shook her head in disgust. "Have you told your mother about this?"

"Hell no. Miss Fe-fe would have a cow if I told her I was pregnant out of wedlock. I gotta get Marcus on board before I say a word to the First Lady of Holcomb Baptist Church."

"What makes you so sure this is Marcus' baby?"

"Marcus and I had been together that morning and a couple of times the week before. Charles paged me on the way home from being with Marcus and offered to give me a free massage—you know he's one of the best massage therapists in town. Charles and his big, soft hands...I don't know where I got a second wind after turning Marcus out. But after that fab rub down, I had to hook a brother up with a little sumpin', sumpin'."

"You slept with Charles the same day you had sex with Marcus?"

Velvet's eyebrows were up so high they looked like the golden arches at Micky D's.

"Wasn't I being naughty? But if it weren't for that, I'd be sure that this is Marcus' baby. He's the only man I slept with before I

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tipped with Charles.” Delilah said, filing her nails and fluffing that huge mane she called hair.

Delilah walked over to the mirror, turned sideways, and ran her hand across her stomach.

“Am I showing yet?”

Velvet stared her down like she was a psychopath. She almost laughed but decided against it. There wasn’t a darn thing funny about this situation.

Delilah clapped back at her bestie. “Stop looking at me like that! Everybody can’t be as perfect as you. I made a mistake, that’s all.”

“A mistake? This was blatant irresponsibility. And for your information, I never claimed to be perfect, and furthermore, I don’t want to be. But this isn’t about me—it’s about you. I highly suggest you take your hind parts back to church, go to a few of those sex addict’s anonymous meetings and get a sponsor. Then you need to go to therapy for at least two years. In that order.”

Velvet gathered her purse and jacket to leave. “And while you’re at it, read every self-help book on the market. In fact, I’m going to buy you one. I’m worried about you, girlfriend. What surprise is next? HIV?”

Delilah looked shamefully down at the floor.

Good. She’s embarrassed, Velvet thought to herself. That means she’s actually thinking about her behavior.

“I get an AIDS test every three months, thank you. I make them wear condoms too. Mostly.”

Delilah and Velvet had been best friends for almost twenty years. They met in Junior High and went on to attend and graduate from Franktown High School. They’d both been on the pep squad because Delilah got passed over for the cheerleading squad and didn’t want Velvet to be a cheerleader without her.

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Four years straight they had waved the green and white pom-poms, created cheers and rhyming chants for a consistently losing team. Rah, rah and all that jazz.

It was no secret to Velvet that Delilah had a not-so-nice childhood. Delilah's uncle on her father's side had molested her. Delilah's Mother didn't find out until Delilah was an adult. When Delilah told her Mother what her uncle had done, her mother blamed it on Delilah being fast. The mother's response had devastated Delilah. Her self-esteem took a hit that she had never recovered from.

Couple of years after Delilah graduated from high school, her father passed away. He left his daughter a chunk of cash and a condo in Fox Hills. Thankfully, Delilah had the sense to use the money to go to law school.

Velvet had come to accept the fact that her friend had no scruples. It wasn't her fault. Delilah's soul was torn. And it would never be repaired until she slowed down long enough to slay the dragons from her past.

Delilah's self-proclaimed life mission was to find a man who would love her unconditionally. Velvet had tried to explain to her countless times that unconditional love was something you had to have for yourself before you could receive it from somebody else.

"So, what're you going to do?" Velvet asked, knowing Delilah didn't have a sensible plan for miles on her warped radar screen.

"I'm telling Marcus this is his baby. Brother man is clocking at least two-hundred thousand a year as the VP of Pure Platinum. If he gets promoted in the next few years, his salary has to go up at least another hundred thousand."

Delilah finger-combed her hair in the mirror and yakked on, "Shit, it won't hurt him to drop me a little child support every month. But I'm going for the gusto. I'm gonna ask him to step up to the plate and be a father to his child."

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“You...you’re gonna try to force that man to marry you? You must be smoking crack. Are you on drugs, Delilah? Tell the truth. I’ll get you some help.”

“You know damn well I don’t smoke crack. All I’m saying is a man like Marcus will marry his child’s mother because he’ll want his baby to have a respectable family.”

“I know it’s only a small possibility, but have you considered that maybe, just maybe, that really isn’t his child in your uterus?”

“Girl, all Black folks are connected through slavery. This baby is going to have something on his body that looks like Marcus. I’ll tell him the baby has feet like him. Wait, is that biologically possible?”

“That’s your plan?”

“If the baby doesn’t look like him, I’ll just say it took to my side of the family. What can he do? Hell, I’m a lawyer. Or at least I will be a lawyer in six days after I pass the bar. I’ll sue him if I have to.”

“And what if he wants a paternity test, Miss Lawyer?”

“By then I’ll have made him fall in love with me and it won’t matter.”

“Therapy chile’. Please invest in some. That is the lowest, raw-dog plan to set a brothah up I ever heard. I don’t condone it, not one bit.”

“I’m your friend and I have your back. But don’t ever ask me to testify on your behalf. If you do, I’m telling the truth, nothing but the truth, so help me God. Do you hear me, Delilah?”

“Girl, damn. Yeah—I hear you. Why’re you talking about testifying? This is gonna go smooth. You watch and see. The element of surprise is going to work on my behalf.”

Velvet looked back at her friend as she walked toward the door.

“Lord, please help her.” Velvet said under her breath as she grabbed her keys and got the hell out of there.

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“You’re about to set women’s empowerment back thirty years.” Velvet said out loud as she walked out the door.

Delilah left just minutes behind her. She was toting her bag of destructive goodies.

Chapter

Three



Marcus

Marcus Middleton bent down and rubbed a small scuff off his three-hundred-dollar Lucchese loafers. Satisfied with the shine, he took a small rectangle mirror from his desk drawer.

He checked and affirmed his hair.

“Yeah. Still wavy as the Pacific Ocean.”

Affirmed his lips.

“Soft and just right for the ladies.”

He caressed his beard and mustache.

“Yeahhhhh. A brother stays ready for anything.”

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Marcus didn't think he was vain. He just understood the connection between success and personal image.

"Don't hate, celebrate." He said, hiding his mirror and primary tool of vanity inside the desk drawer.

Marcus scrolled through the messages in his voicemail. As he listened, he stroked his sandalwood-scented goatee and reminisced about the soap opera drama that had unfolded at the offices of Pure Platinum just a few days ago.

His boss, Joseph Wainwright the first, who everybody called Papa Joe, had caught his son, his only son, with another dude's lips plastered on his manhood. Happened right down the hall from his office on the penthouse floor of Pure Platinum.

The night of the fiasco, Papa Joe was supposed to be on a private plane on the way to the Virgin Islands with one of his women. A tropical storm put the vacation and the trim on hold. Papa Joe had come back to the office to do some work until the weather cleared. That's when their family secret came out—right along with Papa Joe's pride and joy, his son, Baker Joseph Wainwright the Third.

Papa Joe had launched Pure Platinum Records twenty years ago with two gangster rappers from the dirty south who went by the handle Rock Hard and a half-decent singer from L.A. named Sapphire.

Papa Joe and Baker built the company into a seventy-two million-dollar money-making machine, complete with rappers, jazz musicians, singers, R&B groups and even a Heavy Metal band.

Pure Platinum was months away from breaking two new acts that music critics had already deemed the next 50 Cent and India Arie.

The company was soaring, and the money was flowing, but the industry buzz was that this was Papa Joe's last year on the front lines. Papa Joe had confided in one of his colleagues that he wanted out of the game while he still had some blood flowing

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through his veins. That information was leaked to the press and everyone was waiting to see if it was true.

The staff at Pure Platinum thought Papa Joe's retirement was just a rumor until the company's PR department released an announcement to the public that corroborated the gossip. Everyone assumed Papa Joe's son would step into the CEO spot. Papa Joe had been watering, pruning and preparing his seed to inherit his empire since the day he was born.

After the incident went down, Papa Joe gave his son an ultimatum. His gay boyfriend or the CEO position. The two of them argued about the matter for days. Baker challenged his father with questions like what did who he loved have to do with his ability to run a company? He reminded Papa Joe that he hadn't built the company by himself and that he'd recruited just as many big money making acts as his dad.

Papa Joe was an old-fashioned man. In the end, Baker's plea for cultural sensitivity sank like a pair of threes at the poker table.

Joe senior confirmed whose name was on the loan that started the company. Reconfirmed who had mortgaged his house and sacrificed his marriage to build it up to where it was. He stated the facts again: it was either Baker's man or the new job. One of them had to go. He wouldn't fire Baker or take him out of his present position, but he wasn't giving him the CEO position until he went back to the panties full-time. Baker told Papa Joe that his boyfriend did wear panties.

Everybody in the company had their ears glued to the door while Papa Joe and Baker were shouting it out. The receptionist even turned off the switchboard because the beeping of the phones interfered with her and the staff's quality of eavesdropping.

Baker pleaded with his father. Told him he was in love with Curtis, his male lover. Said there was no way he was giving him up. When the door opened and the staff heard Papa Joe say, "Then

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you've made your decision," everybody knew the fight was over and the Elder had won.

Papa Joe let that doorknob hit his son right where the good Lord, and sometimes Curtis, split him.

Baker came storming down the hall. "What the hell y'all looking at? Get back to work!"

Everybody snapped back into work mode, acting like they hadn't heard a word. Baker almost tore the door to his office off the hinges slamming it as hard as he did.

Things had been real tense around the office since then. As quiet as a woman when she had had enough of her man's caca. Everybody was waiting to see what the big man was going to do.

Nobody was talking to the press. They knew if the family secret got out, Papa Joe wouldn't rest until he found the culprit. And that person would have hell to pay. Every one of them had signed a non-disclosure agreement and Wainwright Senior had one helluva team of lawyers.

Marcus sat in his spacious corner office suite watching the sky give its tears to So-cal, listening to the sixth of seven voicemails waiting in his inbox.

Message number six was from Papa Joe's secretary, Peggy, who said the big man wanted to meet with Marcus at nine a.m. Marcus looked at the gold clock on his desk. He had ten minutes to spare before their meeting. He decided to listen to the remaining message after he met with Papa Joe. Later, he'd regret not listening to that seventh message right then.

Marcus guzzled down the rest of his fresh squeezed orange juice and popped an herbal combination of gotu kola and ginkgo so his mental state would be sharp and ready. He took a few bites from his energy bar and tossed the rest in the chrome trash can next to his desk.

He stepped into his private bathroom and checked his appearance one last time. He smoothed out the tiny wrinkles in his

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midnight blue linen suit that fit his five percent body fat physique to a tee. He splashed a little Nautica cologne over his chiseled face and headed down the hall to the penthouse suite where his boss reigned as the King of Hip-hop and R&B music.

Marcus was a tad bit nervous as he sat waiting in front of Papa Joe's huge desk that stretched the length of the massive room he called his office. The skyscrapers of downtown L.A. loomed in the background, emulating the raw power of a shrewd businessman.

Papa Joe walked in the room talking. "Wanna talk to you about something, Marcus."

The Elder sat down and lit one of his fat imported cigars.

Marcus hated the smell of cigar smoke, but he didn't say a word. His VP position paid him a stupid-generous salary and if Papa Joe wanted to blow cigar or even chronic smoke in his face seven days a week, he'd sit there and inhale it without complaint.

"Go 'head, bossman. What's going on?" Marcus leaned over and lit a corner of Papa Joe's cigar that he'd missed.

"Don't be playing dumb. I know you heard about what happened between me and my son."

Marcus nodded. Noted the hurt and embarrassment around the corners of Papa Joe's eyes.

"Yeah, I heard a little sumpin' 'bout it."

Papa Joe got up from his desk and went over to the bar. He poured two fingers worth of aged cognac into a crystal glass. He offered some of his sin to Marcus. It was way too early to be drinking hard alcohol, but Marcus took one anyway.

"I'll take mine on the rocks big man."

Papa Joe's long feet slid across the floor toward Marcus. He handed Marcus the drink and made his way back around to his chair. He flipped through some papers, fiddled with the picture of his son that sat front and center on his desk.

Papa Joe was fighting with himself about something. Stalling. A nostalgic expression graced his youthful face for a hot second.

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Then that no-bullshit scowl Papa Joe normally wore returned without warning.

“Situation with Baker kind of threw me for a loop but life gotta go on. You know what they say, shit happens.” He paused to see if Marcus was listening.

Marcus nodded his head respectfully as Papa Joe continued his litany.

“Since Baker is on some other shit, I’ve been thinking about who to put in the CEO position. Thinking ‘bout it every waking hour of the day. I need somebody who understands finance. Somebody who can deal with these temperamental ass artists. Need a person who can maintain cohesive relationships with the folks we have to work with to keep our artists visible. You know the folks that work for them three-letter companies—MTV, BET and VH1. Went through my deck five times in a row looking for potential candidates. Couldn’t find one person that fit the bill. I put the word out and got a few interesting prospects, but nobody that lit my fire. Then my mind went to you.”

Marcus’ heart started pounding.

“You listening to me, boy?”

“Yes sir. You have my full attention.”

Papa Joe spun around in his chair, stared out of the window for a second, sipped his elixir, and turned back around to face Marcus.

“You have a knack for picking hits. You know how to get people to do what you want without telling them straight up to do it. You already work here so I’on’t have to teach you the ropes at this company. I figure in about six months, I can leave my baby in your hands. Don’t get me wrong, I’ll still be keeping an eye on you. A good father never abandons his child.”

“Papa Joe, this is...I’m flattered, man. I never expected you to even consider me. But I can see how I would be your second choice. Hey man, lemme let you finish. Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

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Papa Joe leaned back in his chair. Laid it back so far Marcus thought it was going to topple over.

“I been watching you. You’re conscientious. Even though you have a lofty expense account, you always stay within your budget. Last year you actually spent less than you were allocated for those fake business lunches and trips that I know my execs take. I also noticed that your office is the first stop for our artists when they come off tour. They feel comfortable talking to you. They say you keep ‘em focused. And your staff likes you, but they know they can’t take advantage. You’ll put ‘em in the unemployment line if they slack up. The perfect balance of rope and freedom—that’s what most employees need. And I believe you have a degree in finance. Am I correct?”

“Yes to all of the above.” Marcus told him, trying not to act too excited.

It seemed like a regular old day when Marcus woke up, but it was turning out to be a blockbuster.

Papa Joe cleared his throat, puffed his cigar and spoke the words that had the potential to change Marcus’ good ass life into something spectacular.

“I’m prepared to put an offer for the CEO position on the table. All the basics are included. Penthouse suite at the company’s Beverly Hills Condoplex. Chauffeur driven Lincoln Town car for local transportation. Stretch limo during national trips and PR campaigns.”

Marcus relit his cigar.

“Two hundred-thousand-dollar salary increase—effective upon you signing the agreement. Officers of the company get six weeks of vacation the first year, high visibility in the media and...”

“Sir, I think you can stop. What fool would turn down an offer like that? Joe, man, I want you to know how honored I am that you thought of me. I hope my next few questions won’t cause you to retract that incredible offer.”

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“Go ‘head, young blood. Lay it on the line. I want us to be able to talk about anything. Treat me like I’m your pops.”

Those words made Marcus’ armpits start sweating.

Treat me like I’m your pops.

Marcus was excited but he didn’t want to be in the middle of a war between a father and a son. Blood was always thicker than water.

“What happens if Baker decides to give up that life and come back and run the company? Where does that leave me? This could be some phase he’s going through. These dog ass women can make a brother do some crazy shit when his heart is broken. I mean, crazy stuff...”

“Say it like you feel it! Crazy shit. That’s what I like about you, Marcus. You real. Always thinking ahead. On that note, when and if my son comes to his senses and decides to be a whole man instead of half-a-man, I can offer you his current position—Chief Operating Officer. All the perks and bennies will stay the same, except you have to drive yourself to work. But you can stay in the condo rent free. I think that’s a damn good deal. What you say?”

“What else can I say? I’m in. I won’t disappoint you, sir. But... uh...I have one final question. What are we telling the media about why Baker didn’t take the position?”

“The official media statement is that my son’s family commitments prevent him from taking on extra duties right now. He has no plans to leave Pure Platinum and he’ll assist the new CEO in any way that he can.”

“Sir, they’re gonna want details.”

“Just tell ‘em Baker and his fiancé are working on a family and she doesn’t like him to travel too much.”

“Just like that?” Marcus asked Papa Joe, still not believing what he’d just agreed to.

“Just like that.”

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Marcus picked up the contract. “I’ll have my attorney look this over. It’s not that I don’t trust you but it never hurts to have a second pair of eyes on a contract.”

“Of course. This is business. I’m sure your attorney will find everything in order. You get my contract by next week, auight?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll meet with the Board next Wednesday to announce my decision. Our PR department is already arranging interviews for you with all the major industry pubs. We’ll need to get you in for a wardrobe fitting so that your image truly represents Pure Platinum. Your business cards will be coming in two weeks.....”

Papa Joe kept rattling off the details. Marcus heard him and didn’t hear him. He was in another world, the world of dreams-coming-true-right-before-your-eyes.

Fate was a tripped-out thing. You never knew where it would lead you or what your lessons would be when you got there. God had blessed him beyond measure because he’d stayed ready. Ready for any and everything except the seventh message in his voicemail...



Chapter

Four



Marcus

The seventh message was from Delilah Winters, a one-hitter-quitter he'd met at a legal conference. Delilah was a straight up dime piece, but her marriage thermometer was on desperate. Her sensitive eyes let him know more than a few men had broken her heart. Normally he would've passed up trim that came with a shitload of emotional baggage. Unfortunately, he'd let his lower brain make the decisions that day. They'd tipped up to her hotel room after the banquet and got busy.

Delilah gave him the best lip service he'd ever gotten from a stranger. She gave him a brand of fellatio women put out after

they'd known Chester up close and personal for a while. He messed up by hitting it again and two more times after that. The fifth time got him hooked. He knew he'd messed up when she started staring at him with love in her eyes and telling him how she thought he was the one.

Marcus' heart stopped a beat or two when he heard her message. He couldn't believe she had gone there with that "I-need-to-talk-to-you-about-our-baby" crap. Hell, he personally knew at least one other brother that was hitting it. He listened to her wacky message a couple more times, then saved it for legal purposes.

He spoke the words out loud, like he was communicating with an unseen force.

"If Delilah Winters thinks she's gonna get away with trapping me with a baby that's carrying some other dude's DNA, she's gonna learn the rules to a whole new game today. No way some undercover THOT is sabotaging my blessings. Not now, not ever."

He had to stay cool. Delilah was just a fly that needed to be swatted off the map of his life. Some wanna-be lawyer looking for a man to put in the empty picture frame on her dresser. And Marcus Middleton was not the one to be framed.

Marcus thought about Delilah's pretty face and curvy body. She was fine and kind of intelligent, but he didn't think she wasn't the caliber of woman he could walk down the aisle with. Until that Pure Platinum agreement was signed, he had to keep his shit squeaky-clean. He'd toss a few coins her way to make her departure and the departure of that little crumb snatcher—short, sweet and drama free. With the kind of money he was getting ready to be clocking, he could afford a little black-fe-male money. He looked down at her number.

"Let me call this trick right now and get this mess over with."

Chapter

Five



Delilah

Delilah had just returned home from redecorating Marcus' car. Her landline was ringing like something was on fire. She tossed her purse on the couch and ran to catch the call before it rolled into voicemail. She figured it was Marcus calling to apologize.

She peeked at the phone screen before answering. The caller ID read Dr. Waverly.

Why the hell were they calling her again? Hadn't they screwed up her life enough for one day?

"Hello, Dr. Waverly. This is Delilah. What's up now?"

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“Miss Winters, we have some test results we’d like to discuss with you. When can you come in?”

Her mind said, damn, don’t they communicate in their stupid ass office?

Her mouth spoke, “I already know everything. Your nurse called earlier and told me the happy news.”

Delilah had been thinking about changing doctors. Their incompetence had revealed itself more times than a few.

“So you know your HIV test came back positive?”

“No, I was talking about being pregnant and.....what did you just say?”

“I said your HIV test...came back positive.”

“You’re mistaken. I didn’t take an HIV test. Plus, I just got tested a few months ago and I was negative. I’m about to have a baby, Dr. Waverly. You can’t get AIDS when you’re pregnant.”

She heard the phone beep letting her know another caller was trying to get through but she didn’t bother looking to see who it was.

Dr. Waverly kept talking. “Miss Winters, unfortunately you *can* get HIV when you’re pregnant. I’m sorry you’re finding out like this. We never tell people this kind of information over the phone. You said you knew so I...”

“What the hell are you talking about? There must be some kind of mistake. I told you I didn’t take an AIDS test.”

Delilah felt like she couldn’t breathe.

“Again, I’m very sorry....when you said you already knew I thought....anyway, we need you to come into the office so we can talk about medication and options for the baby. That’s why I was calling you back. The nurse said you hung up on her earlier.”

Delilah dropped the phone. Without a doubt, those people were crazy and she was definitely changing physicians. There was no damn way she had that shit. She was weeks away from fulfilling her dream of becoming an attorney. She went to one of the top law schools in the country. She was pregnant by a gorgeous, successful

ANY HEART OPEN

man. She hadn't done anything to bring down the wrath of God like this. She had lied to and cheated on a couple of guys but Karma didn't come back that hard or fast. Or did it?

She heard Dr. Waverly screaming her name into the phone. She left the receiver right there on the floor, plunged her face into the plush comforter on her bed and started screaming to the top of her lungs. She picked up the phone in a daze and dialed Velvet's cell phone number again.



Chapter

Six



Marcus

After one and a half rings his call rolled over into her voice mail for the third time. Her sultry voice filled his ears and made Chester wake up. Marcus couldn't believe how good she sounded. He was disappointed she'd turned out to be a fruitcake. She would've been interesting to visit every now and then. He stopped romanticizing their lust-ship and initiated the cut off.

“Delilah, this is Marcus Middleton from Pure Platinum. I got your message and you're right, we do need to talk. I'm sure we can work this out. I want you to know I'm here for you. Call me at

my office, queen. You have the number. Platinum is forever, baby. Peace.”

‘*Platinum is forever*’ was how the staff at Pure Platinum music label were trained to end their calls. He threw in the line about being there for her so she’d know she didn’t have to be by herself when she got the abortion.

He knew women took that shit to heart. A life being sucked out of your body wasn’t pretty, but Marcus was all for a woman’s right to choose. He believed that no man should be able to tell a woman what to do with her own body. If they were married or a couple, her man *did* have a right to give her his input. Thankfully, that wasn’t their situation.

When she called back, he’d make sure everything was on schedule. This little bump in the road would be smoothed out in no time. Or so he thought...



IN ANOTHER PART OF THE CITY, A PSYCHIC FORCED HERSELF TO WAKE up from a nightmare about a caramel colored woman with reddish brown hair. In the dream, Violet Brown drove up in a black limousine to a house where a woman stood outside staring up at the sky. She followed the woman’s gaze to a massive storm front entering the horizon. Violet called out to her. The woman heard her but chose to ignore her call. As Violet walked back to the car, she heard the woman scream, “Help me, I’m drowning!” Suddenly, a wave of water rose like a giant hand and swept the woman into a raging ocean. Somehow, Violet dove into the murky water, grabbed the woman’s wrist and dragged her back to the surface. That was when Violet woke up and said, “Lord, have mercy. The dreams are back again.”

Chapter

Seven



Kelvin

All six-feet four inches of Kelvin's body jammed to the sound of Jor'Dan Armstrong's latest hit gospel song, *My God*. While he grooved, he stocked the store's shelves with newly arrived greeting cards, Afrocentric bibles and other ethnic religious gifts at *The Spiritual Corner*, one of Inglewood's coolest Christian book stores.

He'd just broken into a *Dancing with the Stars* routine when in walked a thick-bodied, Espresso-colored, tall drink of water. Kelvin froze in place and tried to play off his hilarious antics. He was too late. The sister had seen at least two minutes of his fiasco.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“Getting some exercise?” She said, straining not to laugh.

Kelvin walked toward her. The closer he got, the deeper he was hypnotized by her cherry-brown skin.

Her smile, her brown eyes—they made his loins hot. Before he knew it, he was licking his lips, getting ready to move in for the kill.

Then he remembered he was a Christian man and that this was a Christian bookstore. He remembered too that Godly men didn’t act like starving animals when they saw an attractive woman.

Check yourself, Kel.

“Good afternoon, sister. Can I help you find something?”

“I’m looking for T.D. Jakes’ new book. While I’m here I might as well get Iyanla’s new book too. It’s called...wait...I have it written down.”

She slid a piece of crumpled paper from her purse. “*Peace From Broken Pieces*. Can you point me in the right direction?”

“I can do better than that. Follow me.”

He walked her over to the section where inspirational reads were located, pulled both books from the shelf and handed them to her. He caught himself staring into her brown eyes again.

“Will that be all for you?”

“I think that’ll do it.”

“Is this a gift for someone or for your own collection?”

“They’re for a friend. She’s going through a tough time.”

“We have some nice gift bags over there in the corner. I have tissue behind the counter. We’ll get you all hooked up. You picked the right books though. Both are best-sellers.”

Kelvin tried to keep the conversation going.

“You heard T.D. is coming to L.A. in a few weeks? They’re calling it the *Relationship Revival*. It’s a retreat for Christian singles and married couples. Gonna be at the old Forum off Manchester and Prairie. Maybe you and your husband should bring your friend.” Kelvin said, trying to get her relationship status on the down low.

ANY HEART OPEN

“I love me some T.D. But hey, who don’t? Sounds like a must-do event. I’ll look into it.” She said, flashing those pearly whites again.

Kelvin noted that she hadn’t taken the bait to his inquiry about her marital status.

“So, how long have you been working here?”

Kelvin thought to himself, *the sistah asked—so I’m not bragging*

“Actually, I’m the owner. Been here one year next month.”

He could tell she was a little embarrassed by her assumption, but he wasn’t offended. It wasn’t like there was a slew of Black men who owned their own bookstore.

“Forgive my ignorance, brother. This is an amazing space.”

Kelvin smiled broadly, flashed his two-thousand-dollar dental work, let her glimpse two of his best assets—deep dimples on each side of his face. He wanted her to know the compliment was well received.

He really wanted to ask for her number, but wasn’t sure the timing was right.

“Maybe I’ll see you at T.D.’s lecture.” Kelvin said, handing her credit card back to her.

“That would be special. There’ll be about ten thousand people there. If we ran into each other it would truly be a miracle or more like fate, huh? But maybe I’ll be back for more books now that I know you’re here.”

“You can sign-up for our mailing list. That way you get our newsletter and we send out coupons for new releases. You also get a direct email when we have book signings and things like that.”

He handed her the clipboard with the mailing list. He had to have some way of finding her. He was a bit disappointed when she handed it back to him with a post office box listed under the address. She did leave a phone number and an e-mail address.

“Well, thanks Mrs.....”

“Miss. It’s Miss Chandler. But you can call me Velvet.”

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

He muffled a grateful sigh of relief. Being unmarried didn't mean she was single, but it did mean she hadn't been completely sold on whoever she was seeing.

"Thanks for coming in, Velvet. You have a blessed day, sistah."

Her cell phone started wailing as she walked toward the door. Kelvin stood there watching her pear-shaped backside sway back and forth as she walked to her car.

Right before she opened the car door, she turned around and looked back at the store. Kelvin quickly bent down, pretended to be picking up something so she wouldn't see him staring at her ass.

When he stood back upright, she was pulling out of the driveway.

"Man, you need to get it together. Acting all desperate and shit. Like you never seen a pretty woman before," He said, talking out loud to himself.

Then he thought, *hell, maybe I am desperate. I've been celibate almost eighteen months.*

When he had given his life to Christ almost two years prior, he decided he was tired of laying and leaving sisters in bed before the sun came up. He wanted a wife. Someone to share his world with. Pastor Dixon had said one Sunday during a sermon, that if a man wanted a wife he had to start acting like a husband.

A marriage worthy man, according to Pastor Dixon, had to show women that he could talk about more than having sex. A marriage worthy woman didn't want a coochie-chasing, mack-running, penis-slinging player. She wanted a strong, righteous man with God on his mind. A man who worked hard during the day and worked magic on her body when the sun went down.

Kelvin had slowly become that man and now all he needed was a good woman to make the package complete. He didn't know how much longer he could hold out on the sex thing. On desperate nights he visited the five-finger heaven but that had gotten beyond old.

ANY HEART OPEN

Kelvin's homeboys thought he'd lost his mind when he told them he wasn't having sex out of wedlock anymore. They were playing cards and drinking beer one afternoon and his buddy Edward made him feel like a buster.

"Celibate? With all this good punana floating around town? Man, you're crazy. You do that Jesus stuff when you turn fifty. That's when a broh starts slowing down. It's alright though. More of that goodie-good for me." Ed said laughing.

Kelvin's buddy Darryl wasn't quite as ratchet.

"Ain't nothing wrong with being saved but dang man. We're in our prime. Jesus knows that. I admire your strength, but I got to feel some flesh up under me. Got to have some girl screaming my name while I'm breaking it down for her. You feel me don't you, Kel?" Darryl said, slapping him on the back.

"When I meet that one—the one I'm gonna walk down the aisle with, I want to go in clean. Not all worn out from banging women I don't care about."

Kelvin understood where they were coming from. That was the philosophy most men were raised with. Conquer women and collect panties.

He'd lived that life. At the end of the rainbow, the bucket was empty. Something changed inside of him when he gave it all up to God. He got this unshakable faith out of nowhere. He knew God was aware of what he needed and He'd give it to him when he was ready.

Maybe the sistah who just left the store was a sign from God that she was coming. His wife. A woman that he could love, nurture and respect with God's love. A woman he could laugh, play and pray with. A woman he could righteously turn out in the bedroom.

He panned through the names on the mailing list. There she was.

Velvet Chandler.

Velvet. Just like her skin and he hoped, her heart.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“I’ll see you soon, Miss Velvet. I don’t know how or when but I will.”

Chapter

Eight



Velvet

Velvet looked back at the bookstore and saw the fine ass brother from the bookstore checking her out like a piece of prime real estate. Broh was straight staring a sister down when she was in the store too. So much that Velvet started worrying there might've been a piece of lettuce lodged between her teeth.

Normally, she would've been offended, but since he was so damn gorgeous she didn't mind the ogling. She thought Kelvin's goofy dance number was kind of cute. His wire-rimmed glasses made him look like a bookworm, in a sexy kind of way. Those

deep dimples on both sides of his smile made her think of candy. She wanted to lick those dimples like a lollipop.

She definitely liked that the brother was in business for himself. Financial stability was at the top of her checklist of qualities for an ideal mate. She thought about giving him her number when he asked about attending T.D. Jakes' lecture, but she didn't want him to think she was easy. She did take one of his business cards.

Perhaps she'd find a reason to give Mr. Almond Joy a call.

As Velvet drove out of the parking lot, she pondered the games that men and women played. Games that got old sometimes. If a sister stepped out and did or said what was on her heart, some men took that as a sign of weakness and tried to play her for stupid. Members of the opposite sex seemed to be stuck in a silly game of cat and mouse that, in the end, led nowhere but being single.

Velvet saw that she had three missed calls from Delilah. She had called her back when she was leaving the store but she didn't answer. She tried her bestie's cell one last time before she drove into the parking lot at work. Delilah started screaming and crying like the end of the world had arrived. She was so hysterical Velvet could hardly understand what she was saying.

"Slow down Delilah. What's going on?"

Velvet was able to make out three words—come back and doctor. She made a quick u-turn and headed back toward her friend's house for the second time that day. On the way to Delilah's, Velvet called her office and let everybody know she'd be out for the rest of the day. Her boss let her know he wasn't happy about it. If she wasn't a top money maker at her agency, he would've hit her with a penalty for canceling an afternoon of meetings at the last minute.

"Delilah better be having triplets or at least twins for making me miss a whole day of work." Velvet said as she pulled into a parking space in front of her bestie's condo.

Chapter

Nine



Papa Joe

Papa Joe lit a blazing fire in the cobblestone fireplace that sat in the center of his mansion's massive living room. He poured himself a shot of peach brandy and copped a squat on an Italian leather couch. He followed the first shot of brandy with another, then another. As the warmth of the aromatic liqueur melted through his body, the reality of what was going on in his normally orderly life penetrated his thoughts.

A couple of tears crept into the corner of his eyes. He tossed back another shot to keep them in check. Papa Joe couldn't let himself lose it. Not even while he was all alone in his own living

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room. But the truth was the truth. And the truth was, this shit with Baker was breaking his heart.

He couldn't believe his boy was on some old gay shit. Where in the hell had he gone wrong? He spent half his life and a shitload of money giving Baker the best education and life experiences money could buy. In the book of good parenting, it seemed like he'd done all the right things.

Papa Joe had worked his ass off so Baker would have the opportunity to travel and see the world. He did it because he wanted his son to know that there was life beyond the City of Angels. Baker hadn't only traveled the United States, he sent him to London, Dubai, China and Japan so he would understand international markets.

When Baker turned seventeen, Papa Joe doled out thousands of dollars so he could study business with the sons of top executives at Stanford and later at Harvard for his MBA. Baker had been driving a Mercedes since the day he had the legal right to drive. For his 21st birthday, Papa Joe rented a yacht and hired three freaky ass girls to give him and his friends the night of their lives. This was the thanks he got.

Joe wondered why if Baker had to flow like that he couldn't at least be on the down low like other gay men who played sports or held high-powered positions in corporate America. All he had to do was marry some fine ass lesbian and keep his male friends out of sight. It was a damn shame that Baker had let that freaky-deaky shit happen two doors down from where Joe made million-dollar business deals.

Maybe he should've offered to get Baker some counseling. After all, he was still his son. He just didn't understand how his baby boy could be into dudes. He damn sure didn't get that shit from him.

"Ungrateful ass bastard!" Papa Joe yelled before he hurled his glass into the fireplace.

ANY HEART OPEN

He prayed to God for understanding and comfort. “Father God, don’t that boy know I’m an old man? This kind of shit could make me go and have the big one. I gotta find a way to get through to this fool. Show me the way, Lord.”

Papa Joe took off his robe, walked down the hall and slid into a Spanish-tiled Jacuzzi. He sat his replacement drink to the side and laid his head back on an inflatable pillow.

Truth was Papa Joe wasn’t concerned about Baker being the CEO. He knew Pure Platinum inside and out. He was worried more about how Baker would be perceived in the business world if it got out that he was gay. And what if he got AIDS? What if those gay bashers got him like they did that boy Matthew Shepherd?

Papa Joe decided to try and talk some sense into Baker’s dumb ass. He picked up the phone and started punching in digits. He would call his baby boy, tell him how much he loved him and ask if he wanted help to get over this—this disease called being gay.



IN ANOTHER PART OF THE CITY, A PSYCHIC NAMED VIOLET BROWN tossed and turned in her sleep. Images of an aging man with a heart of a buffalo danced in and out of her dreams. Beside him was a stately woman whose class and elegance calmed the beast she had married.

The dream shifted. Violet felt a sinister energy float into the dreamspace. When the buffalo’s wife turned around, she was wielding a knife. In a split second, her expression went from a doting wife to a killer. The spirits of a hundred ghosts flooded the room and surrounded the Buffalo and his wife.

The wife raised the knife above her head and brought it down onto the chest of the Buffalo. Violet jerked herself awake right before the tip of the blade pierced his flesh.



Chapter

Ten



Baker

Baker was stretched out on an ivory colored leather couch with plush pillows stacked beneath his head and back. His partner, Curtis, was asleep in the bedroom. They'd had a passion-filled night of erotic sex. After Curtis fell asleep in his arms, Baker got up and went into the living room to strategize on a way to win the war against his father.

As he sat brainstorming, an endearing memory came to his mind. Back when Baker was a bumpy-face teenager, his Grandma caught him reading a porno magazine. She spanked him good for that sinful act. What Grams didn't know was there weren't

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any women on the pages of that magazine. She would've had a coronary if she found out.

Baker's Grandma, Betty May Wainright, had been his favorite person in the whole wide world. When Grandma Betty was alive, she used to always say, "What's done in the dark will be brought to the light. Be careful what you do when you think nobody's looking."

He didn't have a name for it but Baker knew what he was back then. Eventually, Grandma Betty figured it out too. It took her a minute but she got over it. She loved him so much he guessed it just didn't matter.

She reminded him every day that it was okay to be different from other people. He could still hear her preaching to him from the porch while he played with his toys on the front lawn.

"If God had wanted everybody to be the same he would've made us that way. Be yourself, Baker. Remember, you're perfect in the eyes of the Lord. Who is anybody to complain about God's handiwork?"

Her words never left his heart.

He remembered how she had loved him even though he liked dolls *and* race cars. Even though he wanted to play house *and* play with his red Tonka truck. Grandma Betty used to pick him up in her big old flapping arms, hold his little face against her torpedo breasts and say, "You grandma's baby boy and I love you. Don't change to please the world Baker 'cause in the end, the world ain't gon' give a damn."

Baker might've been confused about toys as a child, but he'd always been sure about the curve of a man's back, the broad width of his shoulders and what it did to him inside. For the most part, he kept his desires under a tight control. He figured if he kept his lustful thoughts to himself they would go away.

Baker focused on being a high-achiever and achieving what he thought was the American dream. He would have two perfect

ANY HEART OPEN

kids, a beautiful wife and a three, maybe four-bedroom estate, plus a house in the Hamptons. Unfortunately, neither ignoring his lustful thoughts or being the best at everything was enough to outweigh what he felt in his soul.

When Baker was in high school, girls used to throw the punanny at him like footballs. By the time he was in the twelfth grade, every pimple-faced feline in the school had given him a taste of the funky stuff. Papa Joe congratulated him on his prowess with the ladies. Little did Papa Joe know it was all a big charade.

He learned to kiss the girls just right and put the right amount of pressure on that pearl between their legs to make them throb with contentment. He got a little pleasure out of the deal. He'd be lying if he said he didn't. But there was always something missing from his relationships with women.

As he got older, the women he dated wanted more than good sex, a great friend, and regular companionship. They wanted commitment. They wanted a ring on their finger. They wanted him to be their escort to the marriage wonderland.

By the time he was nineteen, Baker had started hanging out at clubs where it was known that gay and bisexual men frequented. The Catch One Disco on Pico was one of the hottest spots in L.A. to meet Black gay men. That was where he met Chauncey, his first lover.

Chauncey was a personal trainer and minister in training at Unity Fellowship Church, one of the largest and most well known Black gay churches in the country.

Chauncey's skin was the color and texture of Beryl wood. His abs were so tight you could put a tablecloth on them and eat your dinner without spilling one drop. His perfectly shaped ass looked like one of those butts in Muscle magazine. Baker had fallen hard for him after a weekend on one of those gay cruises.

Chauncey had been crazy about Baker too. But back in those days, Baker was extremely secretive about his other life. He made

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

Chauncey pretend he was his cousin whenever they went out in public.

Even when they were in gay settings, Baker didn't let Chauncey touch him. After almost a year of living in Baker's closet, even with all the perks and bennies he offered, Chauncey threw in the towel. Baker was heartbroken, but he wouldn't take a chance on his father finding out about his secret life. All that sacrifice and his Father had turned on him over one slip up.

Everything Baker did was about making his father proud of him. He lived for Papa Joe's stamp of fatherly approval. It seemed like no matter what he sacrificed or how hard he tried to be the man his father wanted him to be, it was never enough.

Baker decided it was father's turn to sacrifice. Hell, Papa Joe wasn't perfect. If he could accept his father with all his flaws, surely his father could learn to love and accept him for who he was.

Baker loved the music business. He'd proved he could handle the pressures of a cut throat industry. He had an ear for hit songs and his artists had raked in millions of dollars in profits for Pure Platinum.

In the process of mastering his craft, he'd learned how to walk like his father, talk like his father and close deals like the King of Music. But there was one part of Baker that would never be like his father: Baker loved men. He loved his Black sisters and would kill to protect one of them if the need arose. But he was and always would be, as the sisters called it, strictly dicky.

Baker had no idea what he was going to do about Papa Joe. He didn't want to do anything that would upset the old man, but he couldn't let some ass-kisser who had only been with the company a few years take his job.

The CEO position was his. Everybody in the company, including his Daddy, knew it. He had to convince his Father that he was capable of running their company, gay or not. If that didn't work, he'd destroy the whole damn operation.

ANY HEART OPEN

Baker fixed himself a Negroni Sbagliato and went back to the couch. He clicked the remote, turned on the huge wide screen TV in his living room and scrolled mindlessly through the channels.

The more he thought about it, Baker couldn't believe his father had the nerve to judge him as much as he'd cheated on his mother over the twenty-something years they'd been married. His Daddy could screw half of the women in America and cheat on his wife three hundred days a year, but that wasn't sinning in his book. Papa Joe called that immoral ass behavior just "being a man."

Baker came up with what he thought was a brilliant idea. He would prove Marcus was ill-equipped to run the company. Maybe he could find some dirt on Marcus and leak it to the press.

He hated to dog out another brother but Papa Joe had put him in a position where he had to do something drastic. It wasn't personal, it was business. He'd make sure Marcus got a helluva parachute on his way out of the door.

Just as his strategy came into view, the phone rang. Baker glanced at the caller ID.

It said *Pops*. That was the code for his father. What in the hell did he want?



Chapter Eleven



Delilah

How in the hell had Delilah Winters gone and gotten HIV? In an emotional fog, Delilah got up, unlocked her front door and left it cracked for Velvet who should be driving up any minute now. She went back to her bedroom, slid underneath the thick, warm comforter fully dressed and continued her internal banter.

To her knowledge, Delilah Winters hadn't slept with junkies or down low brothers. Every one of her last six partners had at least a Master's degree. How could this have happened to her?

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

She took a piece of paper from her nightstand and wrote down the names of the men she'd slept with over the last six months.

Barry.

Thomas.

Terrell.

Anthony.

Charles.

Marcus.

Which one of those bastards infected her with this fucking disease?

She grabbed her little black book, flipped through the pages, picked up the phone on an impulse.

First, she called Barry Edwards, a tall, slender ball player from Oaktown. She had dumped Barry after their second date because he was a slower learner in the bedroom. Surprisingly, he seemed genuinely happy to hear from her.

“Delilah Winters, is that you? Shit, I didn't think I'd ever hear from you again. Whassup, baby? Why'd you pull that disappearing act on a brother?”

“Yeah...it's me. I been...really busy. You know, with school, work and everything else, I barely have time to go to the gym. How you doing these days? You feeling alright?” Delilah asked Barry carefully.

“Yeah, a nigga doing good. Got picked up by a new team. Playing for Sacramento now. Got me a sports agent and everything.”

“Congratulations. I...uh...bet they made you take a physical before you started playing for them. Yep, you gotta pass that physical first.” Velvet said, trying to ease into what she really wanted to know.

“Hell yeah. They checked a brother out thoroughly. I'm as healthy as a horse. Sperm count so high I can make a ton of babies. And I'm HIV nigga-tive!”

ANY HEART OPEN

Delilah breathed a sigh of relief.

“So when you coming to see me, Delilah? I ain’t never forgot those two nights we spent together. You had me doing shit I never did. Even that anal shit. Ain’t no woman never had me screaming like that. You wanna hook up or what?”

Delilah cringed at the thought of sleeping with Barry’s no-pussy-eating ass.

“Oh damn, look at the time. I gotta run. I’m late for work. I’ll call you later, Barry. We’ll get together soon.”

“Wait, I need your number again. That number you gave me didn’t work and I...”

“Gotta go, that’s my mother calling.” Delilah said hanging up on him.

She crossed Barry’s name off the list. Dialed the number of the next name. Thomas.

A woman with a soft voice and a southern drawl answered the phone. Velvet had to think quick.

“Good Afternoon, this is Miss Sterling Jackson from the organizing committee for Franktown High School’s ten-year reunion. Is your husband at home?”

“Has it been ten years since he graduated already? Okay, hold on a minute. Thomas! Thomas, some woman is on the phone for you!”

Couple of minutes later, Thomas picked up. Delilah heard a baby screaming in the background.

She tried to disguise her voice by putting a Spanish lilt on her words. “Thomas, thees is Sterling Jackson. I’m calling from the High School Reunion Organizing Committee. We’re polling graduates to see if they will attend the next reunion. Oh, I’m being rude. Como esta-how are you papi? I see you’ve gotten married?”

“Uh, yeah...I’m doing alright. What reunion you talking about? We just had our ten-year reunion three years ago and we’re not due for another one for seven years.”

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“This is a special reunion...a networking event to help set up a resource bank for graduates. We want to do a profile on you. Let’s see, you have children, right?”

Delilah figured if he had children, they had to have given him or his wife an HIV test.

“Yeah, I got a kid. But...I don’t remember you? What’s your name again? What year did you graduate?”

“Thomas, deedn’t your Mother tell you never ask a woman her age?”

“Nawl, it’s just that your voice—your voice sounds familiar. You remind me of...”

Delilah had to think fast.

“Let me just finish the last question, Papi. I’ve got a long list of people to go through.”

She flipped through some papers. “We’re starting a health and wellness team to get graduates together to work-out every now and then. What I need to know is do you consider yourself to be in good shape? I mean, are you feeling healthy these days?”

“What kind of question is that? Yeah, I’m in good shape. A brother might’ve gained a couple of pounds here and there but I can still handle my own. Since I stopped partying at the clubs I put on a little weight. Wait a minute, I just figured out who you sound like. Delilah Winters, is that you?”

“Well, thank you, Thomas, uh papi. That’s all the information I need. You’ll get your invitation in the mail. Good luck with your marriage and your new baby.”

“Yeah, that’s you. I know that voice anywhere. What kind of scam are you running? And why’s you have a brother spend all his money buying you dinners and gifts and shit and then you dump him without even saying goodbye?”

He lowered his voice so his wife wouldn’t hear him.

“Wait a minute, you trying to hook up? We could do a little sumpin’ sumpin if you down for it. I always did wanna taste

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that sweet stuff of yours one more time. I know you were liking a brother—I didn't understand why you kicked me to the curb." Thomas whispered.

"Thees is not, Delilah. And you're a low-down, dirty playa with no scruples. I wouldn't sleep with you again even if Jesus came down from heaven and unzipped your pants. Hope you learned how to eat coochee muchacha."

"Oh it's like that? You ain't shit anyway."

Delilah heard his wife's voice in the background.

"Thomas, who is that on the phone? You bettah not be cheating on me again."

Delilah slammed down the phone.

She was picking up the phone to dial the next number when she heard the front door open and heard Velvet call her name.

"Delilah! Delilah, where are you?"

"I'm back here. In the bedroom. Close the door and come on in."

"This better be good, Delilah. I have to take off a whole day of work."

When she saw her friend's face, she knew something was very wrong, Delilah's hair was always done and her make up was never anything other than flawless.

Velvet sat down on the edge of the bed. "Talk to me, homie. What's going on?"



Chapter

Twelve



Velvet

Delilah was crying hysterically. Velvet scooted close to her friend, wrapped her arms around her and started praying.

“Lord, whatever it is that has your child upset like this, please bring your comfort to her heart. Let her know you can handle it, Lord. Keep her faith in you and let her know that you can carry her through whatever comes her way. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.”

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

Delilah sat up on the bed, blew her nose and looked deep into her friend's eyes. She thought about how much they'd been through together. She wondered if they could weather this storm.

"You may not wanna be my friend after I tell you this."

"Delilah, after all the crazy stuff you've done—girl, what could you possibly tell me that's worse than what I already know?"

"This is bad. Real bad."

"What is it? Unless you got AIDS or something...."

"That's what it is, Velvet."

"Girl, stop playing. Don't even play with me like that."

"I'm serious, Velvet. The doctor called and said my HIV test came back positive."

"Oh my God, Delilah!"

Delilah started crying again. Velvet cried too. After a few minutes, Velvet pulled herself together. She climbed up in the bed, got under the covers and pulled her BFF over to her.

"We'll get through this. I'm not going anywhere, you hear me? They're making a lot of great strides with finding a cure. People aren't dying from HIV anymore, Delilah. If you take care of yourself, you can live a long time and have a quality life."

"But what about the baby? My baby might be born with HIV!"

"You don't know that. They have all kinds of treatments now. A lot of babies born to mothers with HIV are born negative. The important thing is to get treatment early."

"You sound like a commercial for an HIV agency."

"My agency did a campaign for an HIV/AIDS organization. I learned a lot. The first thing we need to do is get you a second test. Just to make sure."

Velvet knew she shouldn't give Delilah any false hope, but that was all she had. She was acting calm on the outside, but inside she was scared as hell.

"I didn't know they could do a second test. Kind of like getting a second opinion, huh? I wanna get it right away. What if those

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idiots at Dr. Waverly's office made a mistake? If they did, I swear, I'll sue their asses for everything they have!"

"Have you eaten anything today?"

Delilah looked at herself in the mirror. Realized she looked like death warmed over. Mascara running down her cheeks. Lipstick smeared. Hair in a pile on top of her head.

"Why should I eat when I'm dying?"

"Stop it, Delilah. You ain't going nowhere no time soon. Like I told you, HIV isn't a death sentence. I want you to get up, wash your face and comb your hair. We're gonna get something to eat. Then I'm taking you to a clinic in West Hollywood for a second test."

Delilah felt a ray of hope sliver into her heart.

"Okay. I'm getting up. But I have one more confession."

"Damn, Delilah. What now?"

"I messed up Marcus's car real bad. I mean, I went over there and did a number on his vehicle."

"Damn, Delilah. Does he know it's you who did it?"

"I don't think so but it won't take him long to figure it out."

"Let's not worry about that right now."

Delilah got up from the bed and headed toward the bathroom.

"I called Thomas and Barry to see if they were sick. Both of them were fine. Healthy as hell. Both of them tried to hit on me."

"I'm glad to hear that, but you know people can go years with no symptoms of HIV, right?"

"Really?"

"You need to turn off those damn soap operas and read something besides law books and Bronze Thrills magazine."

"You're about to get on my nerves."

"Anyway, let's get you something to eat and go get that test. I gotta stop by my office and pick up a file on the way back. Pack an overnight bag. You're staying at my place tonight."

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“This is one time I’m glad that you’re bossy as hell. I really want to call my mother but I already know she’s gonna go off on me. I can’t do Reverend Felicia right now.”

“Don’t worry about that either. Maybe you’ll feel strong enough to talk to her after you get the results from the second test. Go get dressed, lady. I gotta make a few client calls before we go.”

Chapter Thirteen



Marcus

When Marcus got home he parked the SUV, got out and pulled the large plastic cover off his Jaguar. He'd been driving the jeep for the last few days and wanted to take a ride in his baby. He pressed a button on the console to slide the convertible top back so the sun and wind could calm his spirit. When he sat down in the driver's seat he looked up at the windshield. That's when he saw her angry words scrawled across the glass in red lipstick.

PREGNANT. HAVING YOUR BABY. THAT'S RIGHT, YOUR BABY.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“No this bitch didn’t!”

He knew without a shadow of a doubt who was behind it. Delilah Got-Damn Winters.

He jumped out of the car and took a walk around his expertly restored vehicle. In addition to the writing on the window, the hood of his beautiful car was full of honey, powder and some other gooey substance. A pair of red thong underwear were hooked underneath the windshield wipers. He snatched them off and threw them in the trash.

Marcus ran around to the other side of the car. More honey, lipstick, egg yolk and powder. More anger-filled words.

“Damn! She wrote a whole letter!”

YOU SAID YOU CARED ABOUT ME. I BET NEXT TIME YOU’LL SHOW A SISTER MORE RESPECT. KISSES. XOXOXO

Marcus heard something scrape under his shoe. He looked down at the ground. There were dozens of long nails under his feet but no scratches on the car. She must’ve changed her mind at the last minute.

He walked around to the back of the car. Egg yolk was splattered and dripping from the trunk.

“I’m gonna kill her ass.”

Marcus tossed the car cover in the trunk, jumped in the car and headed straight for the car wash.

He pulled up to a red light next to a car full of young brothas. When they saw Delilah’s artwork they started pointing and laughing. The driver rolled down the window.

“Man, she got your ass!” The young brother said, laughing so hard tears rolled down his face.

“Mind your business, playa.”

He could hear them howling with laughter as they drove off.

Outraged, he dialed Delilah’s number. She answered on the first ring. When he heard her voice, Marcus remembered that she

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was pregnant. He also remembered that he had a lot riding on his reputation right now. That calmed him down a tad.

“What do you want?” Delilah answered coldly.

“That’s real fucked up what you did to my car.”

“You should’ve called me back. No, scratch that, you should’ve answered your phone and your door after you boned me all night.”

Marcus heard somebody in the background telling Delilah to get off the phone.

“I’m coming, Velvet. Just a second.”

“You’re gonna pay for the damage you did to my car.” Marcus told her.

“I’m not paying for shit! I’m sick of you dog ass brothas. You take the love we give you and then treat us like whores!”

He fought to keep his anger in check. “It ain’t even like that, Delilah. We just weren’t a good fit.”

“A good fit? You know what, Marcus? You wouldn’t know a good fit if it hit you in the head. Yeah, I might have a couple of problems, but I’m still a down ass, brilliant, gorgeous woman. And you don’t deserve me!”

Marcus was a little confused by her anger. Seemed like she was angry about something totally unrelated. He tried to cool her fire by talking in a low voice.

“Look, I’m trying to be here for you. I understand your situation, but you didn’t have to mess up my car. I said we’d deal with this together.”

“We might be dying together too. How you like that! You better get your shit checked. Goodbye, Marcus!”

She slammed down the phone.

Marcus sat there staring into space. The light turned green. People behind him started honking and screaming at him to go.

What the hell did she mean by they might be dying together?

Marcus pulled over and called her back. When she answered, he didn’t even greet her, just went to his question.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“What do you mean we might be dying together? You ain’t gave me no shit did you?”

“Gave *you* some shit? Motherfuckah, if anybody gave anybody anything it was you!”

“Hold up, you’re scaring me. Whatchootalkingbout Delilah?”

“Look, I can’t talk right now. Just go get your shit checked. I suggest you don’t sleep with anyone else until you get the results. I’ll call you later.”

She hung up again. Marcus slammed his fist into his steering wheel.

“Bitches!”

His next call was to his doctor. He made an emergency appointment for that afternoon.

He thought about it, called back and canceled. If something was wrong, he didn’t want the doctor connected to his health insurance at work to have the information. He’d go to one of those off the wall clinics that did anonymous STD testing. First, he had to get this shit off of his car before the paint was ruined. After that he’d make sure the family jewels were in tip-top shape.



ABOUT TWENTY MILES FROM WHERE MARCUS WAS HAVING HIS CAR washed, in a small metaphysical store near Redondo Beach, the psychic Violet Brown had her second vision of a woman with hair the color of fire. Rain, sleet and hail poured from the sky all around her. Violet knew this was a metaphor for the kind of trouble the woman was in.

In another sequence, a tall, shapely woman fought hard to pull the red-headed sister out of the storm. At first Violet thought the tall woman was the red-head’s mother. Then she thought maybe she was the red head’s sister. Spirit confirmed that they weren’t connected by blood in this lifetime but had been sisters in previous lives.

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Violet clapped three times to bring herself out of the vision. Before the ancestors departed, they told her that the last two women were somehow connected to the husband and wife who'd come in her dreams a few days ago. Other players would soon be arriving. There would be a total of six and, later, a couple of walk-ins who would come for a brief stay.

The visions were intense but Violet had to hold on until she figured out why her and these particular humans were destined to come together. She lit a candle on the altar and said a prayer for them all. She intuitively felt that they were going to need all the light she could send and prayers strong enough to move mountains.



Chapter

Fourteen



Papa Joe

“**S**on, I need to talk to you.”
“I’m listening.” Baker said in an irritated tone.
“I know you’re listening but I need you to hear me. Can you do that for me, son?”

“Not if you’re gonna start preaching to me about my personal life.”

“Just hear me out.”

“I said I’m listening.”

“Have you thought about how this lifestyle is going to impact your career?”

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

Baker let out an exasperated sigh. “Pops, I admit the shit I did at Pure Platinum was irresponsible. It wasn’t planned. It kind of just happened. I was wrong and for that I take full responsibility. Like I said, it’ll never happen again.”

Papa Joe exhaled, “At least you’re sounding like my son.”

“I *am* your son. The same son that helped you build Pure Platinum from the ground up.”

“That could’ve really hurt our image. Two men having sex during work hours. Right down the hall from my office.”

“Would it have been different if it were a man and a woman? How many times did I bust you in your office with some woman on her knees taking care of business? I need you to be understanding of me the same way I was understanding about that and about you cheating on my mother.”

Those words made Papa Joe become indignant. “My life is no different than any other man in this business. I never disrespected your mama. None of those bitches called our home or interfered with your upbringing. I made sure your mama lived in a mansion, wore mink coats and drove a Bentley. I gave her a life other women dream of having.”

“And Mom would’ve given all of that up for you to be faithful to her. She would’ve traded in every single mink coat for you coming home at a decent hour and not be smelling like some other woman when you walked in the door. You think she didn’t know her husband was fooling around?”

That sent Papa Joe over the edge. “You prideful bastard! What goes on between me and my wife, ain’t none of your business. I worked my ass off to give you and your mother the best of everything. Like I said, those bitches didn’t mean shit to me. Your mama knows that unlike your selfish ass.”

“Daddy, I can’t do....”

ANY HEART OPEN

“Don’t *Daddy* me. You gonna throw that shit up in my face when I’m talking to you about letting some man suck your willie in my place of business?”

“I already apologized for being unprofessional.”

“I’m sorry Baker but it ain’t natural for two men to be together. It’s against God’s law. I don’t know who you are but you ain’t the boy I raised to be a man, a real man.”

The conversation had taken a turn for the worse.

“And your infidelity and mistreating women—was that against God’s law, too?”

“This conversation is over.”

“Daddy, can you listen to me for a minute?”

“What? Ain’t nothing you can say that’ll restore my faith in you except that part of your life is over.”

Papa Joe didn’t want Baker to hear the tears in his voice. That was his number one taboo. No tears ever. He’d told Baker all his life that real men didn’t cry, but he couldn’t stop the salty water that was filling up his eyes.

Papa Joe didn’t know it, but Baker’s eyes were getting moist too.

“Daddy, I love you. You’re my hero. All my life, all I ever wanted to do was make you happy. But I need a little happiness too. And if this is what makes me happy why can’t you just let me be myself? I ain’t hurting nobody.”

“The mental picture of you and some man doing the do makes me sick. Man, I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Daddy!”

“I gotta go, Baker.”

After he hung up, Papa Joe got dressed, scrolled through his phone for the number to one of his young honeys. Just as he was getting ready to call her, his wife strolled into the bedroom.

Cordelia was wearing a lilac-colored silk robe over a matching nightgown. Her breasts stood up firm, round and full. Her womanly hips filled out the robe in all the right places. Her shiny

black hair that had a touch of gray at her temples hung just above her shoulders. Her make-up was light, natural and perfect as usual.

“What’s wrong Joe? You and Baker fighting again?”

Papa Joe glanced up and down at the woman who had supported him all his life. The woman who bore his child and sacrificed her entire life so that he could have the freedom to build his company.

“Cordelia, our son...our son is saying that he’s gay.”

“So he’s finally dealing with it, huh? Your mother told me about him being that way long time ago. Told me not to worry—that he would be just fine. Joe, you didn’t do anything wrong. Baker’s just being Baker. Lots of parents have gay children. Biologically, some people are drawn to people of the same sex. But that’s only a tiny fragment of who our son is.”

“If you knew why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t Mama tell me?”

Cordelia stroked his forehead and kissed him lightly on the lips. “She didn’t want you to worry about something that doesn’t need to be worried about.”

“You’re saying I should just accept this?”

“I’m saying he’s still your son. I’m saying don’t let this destroy the love you two have for each other.”

Papa Joe sat there quiet for a minute.

“I had dreams of retiring, turning the business over to Baker. Was looking forward to seeing him marry a nice girl and grandchildren playing at my feet. He’s ruining all that. I keep trying to figure out what I did wrong.”

“I told you, it doesn’t have anything to do with you. He was probably born that way.”

“He seemed like a normal child.”

“Define normal.”

“I mean, he liked boy stuff. He played sports. He liked girls. He liked sex with girls.”

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“Is that what you know, or is that what he did to please you?”

“I never thought about it. Maybe he was just acting.”

“Joe, come to bed with me. I miss you.” She stroked his back, ran her fingers over his strong chest.

“I can’t right now, Cordelia. I got too much on my mind.”

He saw her eyes get misty. She knew he was on his way out of the door and into the arms of another woman. He thought about what Baker said.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m just upset over this mess.”

“Whatever, Joe. There’s always some reason you have to leave this house to get what you need.”

“I can’t take no bitching right now. First Baker. Now you.”

“Any excuse to leave will do.”

Papa Joe walked out of the room, went to the closet, and packed an overnight bag. “I’ll be at the beach house. Call me if you need me.”

He trudged down the steps to his Mercedes, looked up and saw his wife standing in the window staring down at him. As he drove off he dialed the number to his office.

His secretary answered on the first ring. “Peggy, forward my calls to the apartment in Hollywood. If my wife calls, send her calls to the beach house.”

“Yes Sir.”

“I have any messages?”

“Just one from some woman named Delilah Winters. I asked her what it was regarding. She said she needed to talk to you about one of your employees. I asked her who. She said she’d only speak to you about the matter and that it was very important.”

“She say which employee this was about?”

“No, Sir, she didn’t.”

“Probably some groupie trying to start some mess. Tell her I’ll be out of town for a while. Don’t give her any specifics but let me

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know if she calls back. We don't want any little problems turning into big ones."

"Yes, sir. I'll let you know immediately if she calls back."

Papa Joe's next call was to Tiffany. Tiffany was a young chippie he'd met in New York at the Urban Hip-hop Convention. Tiffany was twenty-six and had the brain power of a mosquito. A fine, no-thinking sistah was just what he needed to take his mind off things. She answered on the first ring.

"That you, Big Papa?"

"Yep. How long it'll take you to get dressed."

"I'm already dressed. Wearing your favorite outfit. Bra and panties. The ones with the leopard print."

Papa Joe visualized Tiffany sitting up in her bed in the leopard print underwear he bought for her. He could see her breasts stacked up under her chin. Her firm waist with that silver ring in her belly button. That silky-soft vee, coiffed and steamy and waiting for him to stroke it.

"Keep that thing hot for me. I'm sending the limo over. I'll have my chef prepare a nice lunch."

"Thanks Big Daddy. Don't forget I'm a vegetarian. See you soon."

"You don't need no teeth to eat this beef." Papa Joe said with a naughty chuckle.

With the punanny in place, Papa Joe decided to check on his new CEO. The phone rang three times before Marcus answered it. Papa Joe thought Marcus sounded a little nervous when he answered the phone.

"Yeah."

"Marcus?"

"Oh...Whassup, Papa Joe. What can I do for you, boss man?"

"You done forgot how to answer the phone when you get a call from P.P.? I'm just checking on you. Peggy said she gave you your

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new job description and set up the date to begin the hand off of my duties. You got any questions for me?”

“No, sir. It’s all good. Everything was real clear.”

“You alright man? You sound a little preoccupied.”

“Just a couple of things I gotta take care of. Nothing to worry about.”

Papa Joe pulled up to the liquor store around the corner from his secret getaway. He called it the freakcave because that’s where he brought his freaks.

“Don’t be letting these skeezers get to you, man. Check the bitches, don’t let them check you.”

“You know I keep my game tight. Trying to be like you when I grow up.”

“Don’t be like me, man. Be better than me.”

“Aaight, Papa Joe. You got the best hand.”

“Hollah at me if you need anything, youngblood. You have a problem that needs solving, let me know. We got the best attorneys and muscle men in the country on our payroll. Don’t let nothing snowball on you.”

Marcus laughed nervously. “It...it ain’t like that, man. Not yet. But thanks anyway.”

“Keep your head up and your eyes open.”

Ten minutes later, Papa Joe strolled heart-heavy into his three-thousand square foot apartment that overlooked Hollywood Hills. Thirty seconds later he heard the buzzer ring. Dessert had arrived. Xavier, Papa Joe’s butler, came out of the parlor with a tray full of sandwiches, cut up fruit, chips and drinks.

“Xavier, let the lady in and escort her to the master suite. Let her know I’ll be up in a couple of minutes.”

For some reason, Papa Joe’s mind went to the phone call Peggy had told him about. He called Peggy back and got the number. He’d call later, after Miss Sweet Thang tasted his lollipop.



Chapter

Fifteen



Velvet

“**Y**ou vandalized that man’s car. You’re blaming him for a pregnancy that might have nothing to do with him. There’s a possibility that you gave him an STD. I think you need to chill and think things through.”

A sullen Delilah crossed and uncrossed her legs and took a bite of her food. They were eating at *Simply Wholesome*, a Black-owned health food restaurant off Slauson and Overhill on the outskirts of an inner city burb called Inglewood.

Velvet sipped on her strawberry-banana-kale smoothie while Delilah forced a few bites of her Island Delight plate, one of the

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

restaurant's signature dishes. Velvet thought being in a positive atmosphere would lift Delilah's spirits.

"I just found out I'm about to give life and might be losing my life all in one day. I think I'm doing good under the circumstances."

"Hurry up and finish your food. I wanna make it down to Weho before the traffic gets bad."

Weho was L.A. slang for West Hollywood. Marian Charles, a college buddy of Velvet's was director of the Highland Avenue Clinic. That's where Velvet was taking Delilah to get her second HIV test.

They zig-zagged up La Cienga until they hit Santa Monica Blvd. and hung a left. As Velvet turned into the parking lot, Delilah started acting funny.

"Velvet, I'm scared. This...this second opinion is gonna confirm or deny the first test. What if it confirms I'm positive?"

"Delilah, we gotta find out for sure. It's the only way."

Velvet got out of the car and started walking toward the door of the clinic. Delilah followed slowly behind her.

Velvet saw the fear in her eyes. "I tell you what. I'll take the test too."

"I don't know what for. Your vagina hasn't had any traffic since computer files were stored on floppy disks. Part of me doesn't want to know if the first test was right. Not knowing gives me something to hold on to."

"Knowing for sure whether you're positive or not gives you options that not knowing doesn't."

Delilah turned around and started walking back to the car.

"Delilah! I know you didn't make me drive all the way down here for nothing? Let's get this over with."

"I can't do it!" Delilah was starting to create a scene and that was the last thing they needed while standing outside of a STD clinic.

ANY HEART OPEN

“Delilah, I know you’re scared. But this is the only way we can be sure. They have this new test where they just swab your mouth with an oversized Q-Tip. It only takes five minutes. You get the results right away. We’ll be in and out.”

Delilah looked at the ground. “We’ll do it together?”

“Absolutely. And you’re right, it’s been so long since I had some wood up in Bernita I might just go for the gusto and get a GYN exam too. I need to clean the cobwebs out.” Velvet said, trying to make Delilah laugh.

“That’s why you’re so damn evil.”

“Me and my vah-jayjay are good. I work out my frustrations with Mr. V on a regular basis. After Michael did a number on my soul, I decided to slow the traffic down until I’m sure about the make and model of the car I’m letting drive her. That last accident darn near killed me.”

They walked toward the front door of the clinic. They were almost to the door when Delilah stopped in her tracks again.

“I don’t believe this shit. What’s this mofo doing here?”

Velvet turned around and saw a tall, Boris Kodjoe looking brother walking toward the front door of the clinic.

“Whoever he is, he’s handsome as hell. God forgive me for cussing, but that’s one fine ass Black man. He must be on the down-low if he’s here.”

“That would explain how I got this shit!”

Delilah stormed toward Mr. Handsome. “Marcus! What the hell are you doing here? Don’t try to play this shit off with your booty-busting ass!”



Chapter

Sixteen



Baker

Baker was on a mission—a mission to find some dirt on Marcus Middleton.

He was also late for an appointment with Harold D. Woods, managing partner of the Woods & Jacobs Detective Agency.

Baker exited the elevator and looked for the suite number. He eased into a dusty, third floor office of a downtown high rise. A thick-bodied receptionist greeted him from behind a long counter while chomping on a few of those hot, red Cheetos.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“Good Afternoon...how can we help you?” She chomped and swallowed between sentences.

“I have an appointment with Mr. Woods.”

Mr. Woods, a slightly bald, fifty-ish brother with solid arms, tight abs and a graying mustache walked out of a small office in the back.

“Come right on in, Mr. Wainwright.”

After Baker sat down he said. “Can Vanessa get you some water, soda, or anything?”

“I’m good. I’ll get right to why I’m here. I need information on somebody.”

“May I ask what kind of information you’re seeking?”

“Anything that makes him look bad.”

“I’ll need the person’s first and last name, social security and any other personal information you can gather. “

“I have everything you need in this folder. You have one week to help me take him down.”

Baker handed the man a copy of Marcus’s employee folder. The detective didn’t bat an eye. This clearly wasn’t the first time someone had come to his office with a request like this.

“Are you aware of our fees?”

“Money isn’t an issue.”

“Good. We’ll start right away. Here’s my business card. We do require a down payment. Five thousand now and five thousand when we complete the assignment. If you need more time, we’ll have to do another agreement.”

“You take credit cards?”

“Yes, we do. I have a couple of questions. Do you want to take him down just a little temporarily or do you want to destroy him?”

Baker thought about the man’s question. Marcus hadn’t really done anything to him personally. He was just a pawn his father was using to hurt him. But pawn or not, he had to be eliminated.

“Temporarily is sufficient. I’ll let you know if that changes.”

ANY HEART OPEN

“Where would you like me to send the information?”

Baker gave him a dummy email address that couldn't be tracked to him.

“Don't worry, we'll have this taken care of in a couple of days.”

On that note, Baker stood to make his departure. Vanessa was still chomping on hot Cheetos when he left. He glanced left and right before stepping into the hall.

As the elevator doors closed, a short older man with a graying mustache stuck his cane between the doors. They popped back open and the man stepped inside. Baker wondered where he had come from since he hadn't seen anyone in the hall when he left the detective's office. The two men rode the elevator to the lobby in silence.

Downstairs by a little coffee shop near the entrance of the building, a fit-looking man rocking a Kango hat and a black Nike sweatsuit took a picture of Baker leaving the building. He nodded at the older man before heading for the elevators.

Ten minutes later, the Kango hat wearing man was sitting in front of Harold Woods offering to triple the price if he told him what Baker was there to talk about.



Chapter

Seventeen



Marcus

As Marcus exited his and walked toward the clinic, he saw a tall, voluptuous sistah jogging behind a hysterical woman. As the pair got closer, he realized who the hysterical one was.

Delilah Winters in the flesh.

The wrath of God on high heels. Punishment for how he'd treated women in his wayward years.

Delilah was screaming to the top of her lungs. Initially, he was unmoved by her display of emotions. One word stopped him in his tracks. She called him a *fag*.

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Fag was a word that had the power to revoke a Black man's player card and his manhood all in one swoop. How she had come to that conclusion was beyond him.

"I should've known you were a damn fag! I'm contacting the media and trust that I'll make sure they tell the world about your downlow ass!"

Marcus decided to ignore her. He sped up his pace toward the clinic to a semi-trot. His body reacted when he felt something wizz past his left shoulder. The object she'd thrown—which he later found out was a rock—slammed into the side of his car leaving an angry dent behind.

"You're damaging my car again. And to clarify, I ain't on no down-low."

The woman who Delilah was with ran up behind her and tried to wrangle that psycho back toward the clinic. Delilah went right on telling the whole ass world their personal business.

"You told me I was yours. We even talked about marriage and babies. How could you do this to me?"

"*You* talked about marriage and babies. I said the *punanny* was mine. There is a difference. You knew what the risks were when we got down without a jimmy on. Told you I would take care of all the expenses to make the problem go away."

She was up on him now, her finger wagging in his face. "Fool, I'm not talking about being pregnant. I'm talking about you giving me HIV!"

"Whaaaa...what did you just say?"

"You heard me right."

"That's some bullshit right there. I don't have no HIV." Marcus said, shock overriding his normally good grammar.

"Why don't we go in there and find out? We can clear this up right now."

Her friend stepped up and tried to calm the fire a bit.

ANY HEART OPEN

“Delilah, let’s go inside. You’re making a scene out here. And that’s not cool for a whole bunch of reasons.”

Delilah pushed Marcus’ right shoulder like they were on the schoolyard about to throw down.

“Come on, Marcus. Let’s see what’s up. You say you didn’t give me this mess.”

“Alright. Might as well get it out of the way. Cuz’ I know I don’t have that shit. I’m super careful.”

“Clearly you slip up here and there. I wouldn’t be pregnant and infected if you didn’t.”

“Jury’s still out on who the daddy is and if I gave you anything, counselor.”

“Whatever.”

The three of them headed toward the clinic. In an hour or two, they’d all be sure of the hand fate had dealt them.



Chapter

Eighteen



Delilah

Delilah and Velvet were in a small treatment room talking to the nurse.

“The man who gave it to me is in the next room. Marcus Middleton. I’ll be needing a copy of his results.”

The nurse gave Delilah the textbook answer. “The medical records of all patients of this clinic are protected by the HIPPA privacy act. That means we can’t share information with anyone other than the patient. We can’t even disclose that you were here.”

“Don’t make me tear this place up. I need to know if he’s the one who gave it to me.”

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The woman ignored Violet's threat and attempted to redirect the conversation. "So you've already been tested?"

"Yes, but I think they made a mistake."

"These tests are pretty accurate. But we'll do a second one just to be sure."

"You do that." Delilah said, wiping away hot tears.

The nurse handed her a tissue. "I need to ask you some questions about your sexual partners."

"Fuck them all. Every last one of them! I'll never have sex again!"

Velvet intervened. "Delilah, stop acting silly and let the nurse ask you the questions."

"I need you to calm down, Miss Winters and check your language. No matter what happens, it's going to be okay. I need to ask you these questions so I can do your test."

"Ask away."

Velvet headed for the door. "Delilah, I'll be back to check on you as soon as I'm done with my examination. I'm two doors down if you need me."

Down the hall, Velvet put on the white tissue paper robe and inched up onto the examination table. After a barrage of questions about her sexual activity, the nurse jotted a few notes on her chart. Velvet was as nervous as a virgin on prom night but she didn't know why. There was no way she had HIV--her shop hadn't been open for business in years.

"Um....it's been a while since I had a GYN exam. Are you able to make sure everything is still good down there?"

"We can do a full work up but there might be an additional charge. Is that okay?"

"Absolutely. You take American-Express?"

"I'm sure we do. The doctor will be in shortly."

Chapter

Nineteen



Marcus

Nervous as a pig in a slaughterhouse, Marcus answered the nurse's questions about his sexual activity with a simple yes or no. He was embarrassed as hell when she asked him if he'd ever had unprotected sex.

"Most of my partners are professional women who don't sleep with a bunch of different men."

"Mr. Middleton, you don't have to sleep with multiple partners to contract HIV or any other STD. You can get a disease from sleeping with just one partner."

"But none of them looked like they were sick."

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“People can look totally well and have HIV. They can also pass the virus to other people. The only way to protect yourself is to use a condom. And even that isn’t foolproof. The best way is to have your partner get tested.”

“What if they won’t do it?”

“Then you have a decision to make. But if somebody refuses to get tested, that means either they don’t care about their health or might know they have something.”

Marcus just wanted the nightmare to be over. The pregnancy part he could figure out but HIV was a whole other story.

The nurse pulled a swab out of a plastic package.

“Just relax and open your mouth. I’m gonna swish this swab around for about fifteen seconds to collect the specimen.”

Marcus’ heart was pounding like he’d been running a marathon. He nodded, opened sesame, and let the nurse do her thing.

After she was done he asked, “So I’ll get the results today?”

“Yes. Just wait outside in the hall and we’ll call you back when the lab sends the results. Did you sign the consent form?”

“Sure did.”

“We’ll call you shortly.”

Almost in a daze, Marcus exited the room into the hall. His HIV test-induced PTSD was broken by the sight of Delilah and her friend sitting in the waiting area.

Soon as she saw him, Delilah issued more threats about the outcome of the test.

“Your faggoty ass better pray my test comes back negative. You’re gonna wish you were dead already if it isn’t.”

Already stressed to the max, Marcus was getting ready to go in on her ass. Thankfully, the nurse behind the counter spoke up and checked Delilah about her language which saved her from his wrath.

ANY HEART OPEN

“Excuse me, mam. We have zero tolerance for the use of oppressive language in here. One more outburst and you will be removed.”

Delilah’s buddy stepped in to cool things down.

“We’re so sorry, mam. She’s just upset. It won’t happen again.”

Delilah chimed in, “You got that right. Never, ever again. And for the record, I don’t have any problem with somebody being gay. I do have a problem with a man who pretends to be straight.” she said, turning her eyes toward Marcus.

“I told you I’m not gay.”

Marcus took a seat at the far end of the row of chairs and scrolled through the first content that loaded. Anything to take his mind off the results of his test.

In what was actually about thirty minutes but felt like thirty hours, the nurse started calling them back for their results. Velvet was first.

“Miss Chandler, the doctor will see you.”

Velvet turned to Delilah and Marcus as she headed into the office.

“Act your age and not your shoe size.”

Neither of them said a word. Both were knee deep into the fear of what the doctors were going to tell them.

Marcus was running through the names of women he’d slept with before and after Delilah. There were four he could remember and a fifth he was unsure if the sex really went down. He was sure he’d worn a condom with three of the four, but he had let one of them perform oral sex on him without protection. She was a church girl who said she didn’t sleep around but a lot of women falsely made that claim.

The unsure one was a guest at a private party held by one of his Pure Platinum artists. He was drunk as hell that night and had started pushing up on some stripper chick. He must’ve passed out

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under the cabana because he woke up wearing nothing but his boxers.

When he woke up, the stripper, who went by the handle Chocolate Kitty, was lying next to him naked except for a thong. He'd grabbed his clothes and slithered from the couch. He tip-toed through the house and made a dash for his car. He was sliding into his pants when he saw the torn condom hanging from the waistband of his shorts. He tossed it on the ground and sped down the driveway away from the scene of the crime.

Sitting in the hallway in that dusty Hollywood clinic, he made a vow to God. If his test came back negative, he would never take a chance with his life and his health again.

Delilah sat a few feet away thinking about the baby in her stomach. She didn't want little Helena or Gordon to grow up with sick parents or worse, with no parents at all.

She had a sobering thought about Marcus Middleton. What if she had been the one who gave him the virus?

Truth was, she'd had unprotected sex with other men before and after they'd hooked up. Most of them, except for one, were guys she hooked up with on a regular basis. The one new guy was a one night stand she met while traveling on business to ATL. Doing the ultimate freak move, they'd gotten busy in an elevator.

When she missed her period, Delilah had made an appointment with the doctor to have a pregnancy test. She didn't trust those grocery store kits and had several friends whose tests came back negative that were actually pregnant. Based on the date of her last period, it was too late for her to do the abortion pill. Her concerns about being pregnant took a back seat when she got the second call from her doctor's office.

Delilah wondered if anyone really knew how they got HIV and when? Unless you were a nun and slept with the same person your entire life, how could you be sure?

ANY HEART OPEN

She felt tears bubbling in her eyes but choked them back down. She refused to let Marcus see her cry. Besides, if he was the father of her child, she might have to sue him for child support. She wanted him to think she was a beast so he would give her what she asked for without a fight.

The hands on the clock were moving so slow Delilah felt like screaming. She started pacing back and forth in front of the receptionist desk.

Marcus had bitten his nails down to the quick and was chewing the skin from his cuticles. He had to go to the bathroom but was afraid to move until he got the news.



Chapter

Twenty



Velvet

A young Black woman wearing a white coat walked into her room carrying a clipboard. She didn't waste time relaying the results of Velvet's tests.

"Hello Miss Chandler. I'm Doctor Atkins. Your HIV test was negative. We also ran a barrage of tests for standard STD's. All came back negative. You are good in that area. We encourage you to continue practicing safe sex and getting your partners tested."

"Praise His holy name! That's not a problem. I'm waiting until I get married."

Velvet started gathering up her things to make an exodus.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“There was one test that we’re a little concerned about. Your GYN exam revealed some suspicious cells on your cervix. We’d like to send you to our sister clinic for a specialized test where they insert a camera into your uterus to take a closer look inside.”

“What kind of cells?”

“We’re not sure. Right now, we call them abnormal cells. I don’t want to alarm you—it could be nothing. But we want to check it out and get a definitive answer.”

Velvet fought back the tears. “This won’t interfere with me having children will it?”

“We need more information before we can answer that question.”

“What’s the address to the sister clinic?”

After Velvet got the address, she walked down the hall to Delilah’s room to support her bestie. As she walked, her mind drifted to the mystery cells that the doctor had found on her cervix. She sucked it up and thanked God that whatever it was, she was finding out early. And at least she wasn’t pregnant, unmarried and dealing with a positive HIV test.

Delilah was crying which made Velvet’s heart do somersaults. She wondered if the doctors had already given her the results.

“Have they gotten your results back?”

“Not yet. I’m scared as hell. They just called me back here a few minutes ago. I’m waiting for the doctor to come in. I really want to call my mother but I know she’ll judge me, cuss me out and write me off. I can’t handle that right now.”

“Let’s just find out what we’re dealing with.”

They heard a knock on the door. The doctor announced herself. Delilah’s heart was darn near beating out of her chest. Velvet was unconsciously holding her breath.

“Come on in.” Velvet answered for her bestie.

“Hi. I’m Dr. Patricia Stevens. I’m here to talk with you about your results.”

ANY HEART OPEN

Delilah burst out crying and sobbing.

“I have it, don’t I, Dr. Stevens? How long do I have to live? Is my body going to be covered with those horrible purple lesions? Will I have to take 25 pills a day to stay alive? Will my baby be born with HIV?”

“Uh, you’re a little ahead of yourself. Please allow me to explain the results then we can talk about next steps.”

Delilah blew her nose. Velvet exhaled.

“Go ahead. I’m listening.”

“Your test was negative. But that doesn’t...”

Delilah jumped off the examination table, dropped down on her knees to the clinic floor and started screaming.

“Thank you, Jesus! Praise God! Thank you, Lord. Never, ever again, Lord!”

“Ms. Winters, I wasn’t finished.”

“I...I’m so sorry. Please go ahead, doctor.”

Velvet was crying tears of joy too. She handed her bestie a tissue and pulled out one for herself.

“I was saying that your test came back negative. But because you already had a positive test, there’s a chance that this test is a false negative. We need to do a third test in about two weeks to be sure. Please don’t have unprotected sex until after we get the results from the third and final test.”

“I...I trust your test. I’m sorry, but I can’t...I can’t go through this again. I thought about killing myself today.”

“We have counselors that can support you through the process. Even if it turns out that you have HIV, you can still have a great life.”

“I’m pregnant. My child could get it. I might die and my child will become an orphan. I won’t...I can’t live with a positive HIV result.”

“Your third test might come back negative, Miss Winters. But a false positive HIV test is rare. Let’s not jump to any conclusions either way. You’re gonna have to wait this out.”

Delilah jumped up and off the table. “This is some bullshit! They said I would get the results immediately. Now I have to wait two long ass weeks to find out for sure? What the hell is wrong with you people?”

“Miss Winters, I need you to calm down and watch your language.”

Velvet stepped in. “Delilah, a negative test is really good news. This is where your faith comes in. Remember, God’s word is stronger than the words of mere humans. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over...”

Delilah clasped her hand into prayer position.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leads me to a path of righteousness for His name’s sake.”

The doctor joined them in prayer.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

“Amen, Dr. Stevens.” Velvet said, walking over to Delilah and helping her up off the floor.

“Trust God, Miss Winters.” Dr. Stevens told them before leaving the room.

Delilah put her clothes back on in silence. Before they left the room, she turned to Velvet and said, “I need to find Marcus and see what his results were. If he’s negative, that’s three down and three to go in terms of sexual partners over the last few months.”

“Let’s see if he’s still here. Don’t act a fool.”

ANY HEART OPEN

“If he’s the one who gave me this crap, my baby might be born in jail.”

“Ain’t nobody going to the pokie on my watch. That baby is gonna need its mother to not be behind bars.”

“Point well taken. I’ll just whoop his ass. How about that?”

“That’s assault and battery. Did you forget that putting your hands on somebody is against the law, counselor?”

“I’ll make it look like self-defense.”

“You have no sense. Get your purse and come on.”



Chapter

Twenty-One



Marcus

Marcus felt like he was hovering over the stage at a theater where a movie was playing about some man's tragic life. Whoever the guy was, he had messed up big time. God's wrath had closed all the doors and nailed the windows shut. When the credits started rolling, Marcus saw the name of the director of the film. Delilah Winters. Seeing her sobriquet brought him back to his reality. He started truth telling—speaking out loud to himself and whatever entity might be listening.

“Broh, where did you go wrong? You went from being offered a job as CEO at one of the biggest music labels to sitting in a

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

doctor's office waiting to find out if you have HIV! You really messed up.”

His mind went back to the director of that horrific production. “Delila. That’s where I made a wrong turn.”

The logical Marcus kicked in and started playing out different scenarios.

In scenario one, he went down the hall and choked the living daylights out of Delilah. He stopped right before she quit breathing. The only reason he didn’t kill her was because of the baby—his baby—that she was carrying in her womb. The scene ended with the SWAT team dropping in through the roof. They hog-tied him like a wild pig and carted him off to prison for assaulting his child’s mother.

In scenario two, the doctor told him his HIV test was negative. He leapt off the examination table shouting praises to God and promising to change his ho-ish ways. If he did ho around a little, he committed to always wearing a condom. Hell, maybe two condoms. At the end of scene number two, he went down the hall and told Delilah he was negative. Then he told her to never, ever contact him again for any reason other than their son or daughter. If she called him, he would plaster her face all over the internet as the woman who almost gave him HIV.

As the nightmare faded to black, Marcus heard a faint knock on the door. The moment of truth had arrived. He sucked in a mouthful of air and said, “Come on in, doc.”

An older, nice looking Black woman with an old-school salt and pepper hairstyle eased into the room. Her make-up was flawless. She had the grace and class of that actor, Phylicia Rashad, from the TV show, *The Cosby’s* that Marcus used to watch when he was a kid.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Middleton. My name is Dr. Atkins. I’m here to give you the results of your HIV test.”

ANY HEART OPEN

Marcus subconsciously closed his eyes and silently started praying again. The three-minute span between her introducing herself and giving him the results of his HIV test felt like years.

He just wanted his old life back. To be a young, single, hella-handsome Black executive who worked at Pure Platinum music label. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Doc, please....please don’t tell me that I have this....this virus.”

“Mr. Middleton, you’re very fortunate that your test results came back negative. But if you’ve been recently exposed to someone who...”

Before she could finish, Marcus stood up and shouted, “Yes, Jesus! Lord, my God!”

It was at that precise moment that Velvet and Delilah arrived outside the door of his examination room.

Delilah froze when she heard his voice. “That doesn’t sound like good news.”

Velvet tried to calm her down. “Don’t jump to conclusions, Delilah. Let’s just wait for him to come out.”

A nurse walked down the hall in their direction and saw them standing at the door eavesdropping.

“I’m sorry but you two will have to wait in the lobby.”

Delilah spun around to face the nurse. “I’m not going anywhere until I find out if this fool gave me HIV!”

Delilah banged on the door of the treatment room.

“Marcus, I know you’re in there! I need to know what your results are. Now!”

Dr. Atkins scanned Marcus’ face for a clue on what was going on. When he didn’t respond, she cracked the door open, peeked out, and closed the door. Her face wore an expression of confusion and a touch of scared.

“Um, do you know the women outside in the hall?”

“Yeah, one of them is my...kind of an ex but not really.”

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“I see. We have very strict laws around privacy. I can’t share anything about your test results. I can’t even say why you’re here.”

“No worries, doc. I got this. Am I free to go?”

The banging started up again. Delilah was going crazy.

“I didn’t finish giving you your results. What I was going to say is, if you were exposed to someone who got a positive test result, you need to get a follow up test in seven to ten days.. In the meantime, be careful out there. Next time you might not be so lucky.”

“There won’t be a next time.”

“That’s what they all say until I’m prescribing meds to help them stay alive and healthy while living with HIV.”

That made Marcus swallow hard.

Three more hard knocks rang out from Delilah along with more shouting and demands for him to come out and talk to her.

“That bitch is crazy.”

“Watch your words, Mr. Middleton. Disrespecting women isn’t tolerated at this clinic.”

“What if she’s the one disrespecting me?”

Dr. Atkins didn’t answer. She just raised her eyebrows and told him, “Pick up some condoms on the way out. They’re free and they not only protect you from HIV, they help you avoid drama like this.”

Marcus grabbed his cell phone and keys and exited the examination room like it was Friday at quitting time on a payday. If he wasn’t so grateful for finding out he was HIV negative, he would’ve blessed Delilah out on the spot. When God gives you a pass back into the world of the living, it’s time for praise not complaints.

Delilah, on the other hand, hadn’t gotten good news. It would be two long weeks before she knew the fate of her entire life. Fourteen days felt like an eternity.

Chapter

Twenty-Two



Delilah

Marcus opened the door of the examination room and stepped into the hall. When Delilah saw his face, she imagined slapping him so hard that his diamond earring popped out and rolled across the marble floor.

She intuitively felt that Marcus was the one who gave her HIV *and* knocked her up. As angry and afraid as she was, she still had love for him. She had no idea if the feelings were mutual or if she was just another notch in his belt.

Delilah was in his face, almost nose to nose. “You have single-handedly ruined my life. You men think you can drive through our

bedrooms like an In & Out burger joint. I'm a person, Marcus. How would you feel if someone treated your mother or sister that way?"

Marcus put his index finger on Delilah's chest. "You brought your dusty ass to my bedroom, not the other way around. I didn't put a gun to your head. You wanted to get busy just like I did. I never promised you a ring or a picket fence."

"You're gonna pay for how you treated me."

"I'm not paying for a damn thing."

"Oh yeah? We'll just see about that."

The nurse tried to calm them down.

"That's enough. You and your friend are gonna have to take this mess outside."

"Gladly!" Delilah said, storming toward the exit with Velvet trailing behind her.

When they were outside in the parking lot, Delilah started raging again.

"Don't play with me, Marcus! Do you have HIV or not?"

"For your information, my test was negative. I didn't give you anything but some good sex and a baby. And the jury is still out on whether that child is mine."

"Oh you *are* the father of this child."

"How would you know? I'm not the only man you opened that freeway of a kitty cat to."

"You can go straight to hell, Marcus. But in the meantime, let me make myself clear. I'm having this baby. With you or without you."

The words *having this baby* sucker-punched him. He took a step back, regrouped and attempted to deescalate the conversation.

"Look, having a kid is serious. If we decide to keep it, just know that I'll do my part."

"We? This is *my* body. I'm the one who has to carry this baby for nine months. I'm the one who has to push it out my vagina."

ANY HEART OPEN

“There wouldn’t be a baby in your vagina if it weren’t for my little swimmers. That’s why I should have a say in how this thing goes down.”

Marcus promising to be present for her and the baby lowered the flames between them a few notches.

“I get it. Neither of us planned to be parents this soon. But I think it’s important that our child has both parents in their life.”

Velvet added her two cents to the conversation to expedite closure.

“At least you two are finding neutral territory. It’s been a long day and it’s getting late. Can we circle back to this discussion after we get Delilah’s test results?”

“You just had to bring up the test results.” Delilah said, rolling her eyes at Velvet.

“Well, until you know your health situation, it’s hard to plan for the future.”

“Fine. After I get my results back, we’ll do a DNA test. Will that work?”

Marcus jingled his keys. “Yep. Works for me. Until then, not a word to anyone outside of this circle.”

“I might have to talk to my mother. But other than that, I agree.” Delilah said before flipping her red-brown mane in the wind and sashaying off toward Velvet’s car.

In the car, Velvet took her friend’s hand. “I’m proud of you for going through that again. Sooooo, when *are* you gonna tell your mother?”

“I’m gonna need a day or two to get prepared. My mother—she’s a special human being. Mama thinks her poop doesn’t stink. Sometimes I think she lives and breathes to find fault in me and my life choices.”

Until then, Velvet hadn’t understood how tender of a subject Delilah’s mother was.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“Well, you’re a grown woman and you’re gonna have to set some boundaries with Miss Felicia. Respectfully.”

“You make it sound easy. When she whacks me upside the head with her bible for getting pregnant without a husband, you’ll get what I’m talking about. She calls herself a Christian, but I swear she’s working for the devil. That woman is evil as hell.”

Delilah refreshed her lip gloss. “You know what—just drop me off over there. I guess today is just as good of a day as any other. Can we stop by the dispensary first so I can get a little something to steady my nerves before I talk to her?”

Velvet made a u-turn and whipped into the dispensary parking lot. “Maybe having grandchildren will soften her up.”

“Not unless a husband with a six-figure salary is attached to it. What she doesn’t get is that unlike her, I don’t need a husband. I can take care of myself.”

“Everything’s gonna to be alright, Delilah. No more vandalizing men’s cars, okay? And stop talking crazy to Marcus. This isn’t *just* his fault. You did some irresponsible ish being with two men on the same day. Without a condom. What the heck were you thinking?”

“I was thinking about doubling the orgasms. When men do it, they’re lauded for their prowess. But when we as women do anything that’s just about our pleasure, we’re a ho. But I hear you. I should’ve protected me and them.”

“I’m just glad you got the lesson.”

“If God gives me another chance, I’ll never go through this again.”

Chapter

Twenty-Three



Felicia Winters

Reverend Felicia Winters lived in a posh condo that overlooked the Marina where expensive yachts and fancy boats lined the docks. Velvet dropped Delilah off for a long overdue visit after they left the clinic. As expected, Delilah's mother was upset about the news her daughter gave her but not for the reasons a normal mother would be.

Reverend Winters was upset because her daughter's mess might shine a bad light on her and the family. She didn't even attempt to comfort her daughter, nor did she ask how she was

doing after receiving such devastating news. Instead, she blasted Delilah with insults laced with shame and degradation.

“If you’d have kept your legs closed and your mouth shut, you wouldn’t be in this predicament. I told you a thousand times, men want what they can’t have. Now you’re trying to get this man to see the value in you. He already milked the cow, so why would he want to buy the milk?”

Delilah exhaled and sucked up the hurt from her Mother’s callous words. “I’m human, Mother. I have desires. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying sex.”

“If there was nothing wrong with it, why are you sitting up here waiting to find out if you have the nasty woman’s disease?”

Delilah’s stomach did two somersaults, yanked her heart up through her tonsils and tossed it on the floor. She instantly felt ashamed and worthless. Hot tears welled up in her eyes and spilled onto her cheeks.

“That’s why I didn’t tell you. I came here today because I needed my mother. Needed you to be compassionate and caring. When I told Delilah, she prayed for me, held me and promised we’d get through this together.”

“I’m your Mother. My job isn’t to coddle you. I’m here to tell you the truths no one else will. I suggest you put on your big girl panties and learn how to be a decent woman. I don’t want you to make the same mistakes I did.”

“We all need to be coddled sometimes, mama. Being coddled is better than being judged and thrown away. I need unconditional love from the one person who should always see beyond my imperfections.”

“Get out of here with all that unconditional love crap. My daughter was whoring around and got knocked up by some man she’s not even married to. She might have the disease God assigned to sinners as a way to punish them for their wrongdoing. Out there

being fast. It's the same reason you got abused when you were a little girl."

Those words broke Delilah in ninety-nine pieces. She stood up, grabbed her purse, and headed for the door. Before she exited, she turned around and screamed at her mother.

"There are kids with HIV! What sin did they commit, Mother? Do you ever listen to the hateful crap that comes out of your mouth? You call yourself a Christian? I neither believe in nor will I ever worship a punishing God!"

With tears pouring down her face Delilah said, "And I did nothing to cause a grown man to abuse me. I was a child. His ass should've gone to jail."

"You're right. What he did wasn't your fault. I would've reported it but I thought the embarrassment would make it even harder on you."

"That's a load of crap. You didn't say anything because *you* didn't want to be embarrassed."

"You better lower your voice."

Delilah was on a roll. "You know what else? My God is compassionate and loving. The bible says God has no respect for persons. That means He loves everybody. Including whores. Including gay people. Especially people with HIV. That's the God who not only loves me but a God that will never abandon any of His children."

"Watch your tone young lady! I brought you in this world and God is my witness, I'll take you out! Don't yell at me in my house."

Delilah found it hard to believe this dark soul was who her spirit had chosen to be her birth capsule. She decided at that moment that she would never allow her Mother to treat her grandchildren the way she had treated her.

"I'll be praying for you, Mama. But hear me when I tell you—the baby in my stomach is going to grow up around love. He or she will only know the compassion and kindness of Christ. I will

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never let you batter and beat my child down with your hateful beliefs. The bible says God is love. That'll be the religion practiced in my home."

"You would deny me my grandchild?! Get the hell out of my house right this second. You remind me of your father. So darn selfish."

"I was just waiting for you to say it. All my life that's what I've heard. You look like your father. You act like your father. You remind me of your father. You transferred your hate for him onto me. But today, mama, I'm giving it all back. I'm gonna be happy. HIV, baby and all. I'll never deny you your grandchild, but I won't let you dump your toxic views about God on little Marcus or Daisy."

"I said get out of my house and don't ever come back!"

"You don't mean that, Mama."

"Yes, I do! Right this minute! Get the hell out of..."

Before she could get the rest of her words out, Reverend Felicia grabbed her chest, stumbled, and fell to the floor.

"Mama! Mama, what's wrong!"

Delilah rushed over to her side. She watched her mother's eyes roll back into her head.

"Mama! What's going on?"

Delilah whipped out her phone and called 911. Then she clasped her hands and slammed them down into the center of her mother's chest.

Thankfully, she still had a pulse but was totally unresponsive. The operator confirmed that the ambulance was enroute. Ten minutes later, the EMT was hooking her mother up to a machine and putting in an IV. Velvet stepped out of the way so they could work on her.

When she was stable, they got her on the gurney and carried her down to the ambulance.

ANY HEART OPEN

While they strapped her in Delilah asked, “What happened to her?”

“We think your mother had a massive stroke.”

“Oh my God. It...it’s my fault. I was arguing with her.”

“Mam, heart disease, not arguments, causes people to have strokes. Stress can elevate your blood pressure but a stroke only happens when there’s a blockage somewhere in the arteries.”

“Is she going to pull through?”

“We’ll do our best, but it’s touch and go right now. I’d call the family if I were you.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll meet you over there.”

Delilah went in her purse to get her car keys then realized she didn’t have her car with her. She called Velvet who didn’t answer. Delilah left her a voicemail and sent her the second 911 text message of the day.

Delilah and her mother had no other real family in Los Angeles except for a few distant cousins. Her mother’s sister lived in New Orleans, but she was way too old to be of help.

On a whim, Delilah dialed Marcus’s phone number. He answered on the first ring.

“Marcus, this is Delilah. Can you...can you meet me at the hospital?”

“Did something happen to the baby?”

Delilah was a little taken aback by his immediate concern for the baby.

“No...it’s my mother. My mother had a stroke.”

He almost told her that didn’t have anything to do with him. Then he remembered, her mother would be their child’s grandmother.

“Text me the address.”

“I’m sending it now. They’re taking her to Mercy Hospital in Inglewood”

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On the way to the hospital, Delilah got a call from an unfamiliar 310 number. She wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone so she let the call roll into voicemail.

While she rode to the hospital in an Uber, another 310 call came through from a different number. She hit the decline button again and let the person leave her a message.

Her baby daddy's bosses' son, Baker Wainwright, had been the first call. Baker wanted to drill her for dirt on Marcus so he could prove he wasn't fit to run the company.

The father, Joseph Wainwright Sr. was the second call. He wanted to know what Delilah had left a message with his secretary about.



IN A SMALL BUT COZY HOUSE NEAR THE OCEAN, VIOLET BROWN, THE psychic, was struggling to wake herself up from a horrific nightmare.

In the dream, Violet had some kind of superpower that allowed her to see inside of the well-preserved body of an older woman. The woman's heart was frozen solid, like an iceberg in Alaska. The blood inside of that critical organ had become crystallized.

In the vision, Violet saw the woman clutch her chest, stumble and fall to the floor. The woman with the red hair from a previous dream rushed to the fallen woman's side and started pounding on her chest like she was beating a drum.

Violet screamed out to wake herself from the dream. Eyes wide open, she bolted to a sitting position in the bed. She immediately knew that another of the six players had arrived to the station. It was hard to know if this player would be alive or deceased when their roads came together on the physical plain.

Chapter

Twenty-Four



Baker & Papa Joe

The detective Baker hired to find dirt on Marcus called with some juicy intel. The detective had trailed Marcus to a STD clinic in West Hollywood and recorded him and some woman arguing in the parking lot. According to the detective, things had gotten pretty heated. He was pretty sure that what he overheard was enough to take Marcus out of the running for CEO. He promised to email Baker a full report later that day.

While the detective was searching for dirt on Marcus, Baker had given him the passwords to access company financials. The detective had a hacker who could get into their accounting system

without being tracked. If he found mistakes that were being consistently made, Baker could say his father was incompetent and have him removed from his post.

After the change of power was complete, Baker would make sure his father was taken care of. He'd give him a salary for the rest of his life and pay out his shares in the company. His dad and mom could travel the world and enjoy together whatever remaining time God gave them.

Baker heard the chime on his phone alerting him that an email had arrived. He hit the download button and read what could be classified as a detective's gold mine. Baker watched a video of Marcus and some chippie. The woman claimed to be knocked up and infected with a STD. She swore Marcus was the culprit. She was threatening to go to the media if Marcus didn't pay her off.

"That's the prick my father wants to put in charge of our company. He's mad at me for being gay but doesn't mind putting a straight, disease passing man-whore into power," Baker said under his breath.

Baker had also instructed in-house security to send him transcripts of Marcus's emails and voicemail messages. Now he not only had a picture of the woman who was after Marcus, he had her name and phone number, too. He had left a voicemail message with his new best friend, Delilah Winters, to see if they could team up and take Marcus down. He would, of course, make it worth her time financially. She was going to need money to take care of her little crumb snatcher.

What Baker didn't understand was that his father was an old-school gangster who was always three steps ahead. He already knew his son had hired a detective. He also knew somebody from the outside had tried to access the company's financial records. He'd had his controller upload dummy reports so he could track where the leak had come from.

ANY HEART OPEN

Nobody who did Papa Joe wrong lived to tell the story. The GOAT was expecting his own detailed report from Harold Woods in just a few hours. If he found out that his son was attempting to do him dirty, there would be hell to pay.

He wouldn't snuff out Baker's light but he'd never spend another dime of Pure Platinum's money.



PAPA JOE AND HIS WIFE CORDELLA WERE ON THEIR WAY TO DINNER TO have a heart-to-heart talk. For the umpteenth time in the twenty years they'd been together, Joe was going to beg his wife not to leave him and promise to be faithful going forward. Neither of them had any idea that a random meeting with a neighborhood psychic was going to change their lives forever.



Chapter

Twenty-Five



Kelvin

Kelvin had dreamed about Velvet's smooth cocoa skin and hypnotic smile. In his dream, they were walking along a beautiful beach holding hands. They sat down on a thick blanket, fed each other fruit and cheese, and sipped on honey wine. Velvet leaned over and kissed him. Left her fire on his lips. He woke up from the dream pleasantly aroused and craving Velvet's flesh in real time.

Since their meeting at his bookstore, Velvet and Kelvin had been communicating by email. Lately, Velvet had been slow to respond. He figured she was busy with work and being there for

her friend. He wondered what had happened, but knew it was too soon to ask. Determined to be in her presence, Kelvin invited a b-list author to do a book signing at the store just so he could send Velvet a personal invitation.

He'd put his google voice number on the invite because calls there rolled directly to his cell. When he saw the three-ten area code come through on the caller ID, he knew it was her.

"Hey. Velvet. It's Kelvin from the bookstore. I sent you an email about a booksigning we're having. Tendra Levy. She's a hot new writer."

Velvet loved the sound of his deep, sexy voice.

"I got the email. Looks interesting. Not sure I'll be able to attend but I'm gonna do my best. Just a lot going on right now."

Kelvin thought her voice sounded as smooth as the strum of Tracy Chapman on guitar. He also heard a note of worry in her voice.

"You sound a little stressed."

"Yeah. I am."

Kelvin felt the conversation fizzling out. He knew it was now or maybe never for them to hook up. He dove in, head first.

"Well, you gotta eat in between all that work you're doing. Can I take you to dinner? Might help you come down a little."

"That would be good. I had some avocado toast this morning. Ended up eating a granola bar out of the vending machine for lunch. I'm pretty hungry. Pcking up a file from work then I can meet you."

Kelvin shot his fist in the air and thanked the man above.

"That's perfect. Six p.m. work for you?"

"Yes, six is on point."

Things were going so smooth he almost felt high.

"You like Ethiopian food?"

"I love Ethiopian food. That's one of my all time favs."

"There's a spot over on Fairfax. One of the best in L.A."

ANY HEART OPEN

“I know exactly where you’re talking about. I’ll meet you there.”

“Good deal. See you then, Velvet.”

After Kelvin did a short victory dance around the store, it dawned on him that it had been a while since he’d been out on a date. His last two soirees were with women he met on one of those online hook-up sites. Both dates were a nightmare.

One of the women showed up with a nine-month-old baby because her sitter canceled at the last minute. He ended up with the task of finding somewhere to dispose of a soiled, stinking diaper. He deleted that baby mama’s cell number as soon as the date ended.

The other woman arrived thirty minutes late to the upscale Thai restaurant he’d chosen. She wore what looked like stripper garb—a firetruck-red mini dress with matching platform stilettos. His date had an Oakland booty, an L.A. face and way too much makeup for his taste. Her dress was so short that the apple-shaped imprint of her butt cheeks said hello every time she took a step.

Kelvin had overlooked her inappropriate choice of clothing because the sister seemed intelligent. She’d told him she was in medical school and had only one semester left before graduating. During dinner, he found out she was going to school to be an x-ray tech. It was a good-paying job but a far cry from being an M.D.

When the bill for dinner came, she—her name was Coco—insisted on paying for the meal. After going back and forth, Kelvin agreed to let her pay. When the waiter came back with her declined card, Kelvin took care of everything and prepared to say goodbye forever.

Even though there was a valet, Coco had parked her car a block away. Kelvin walked her to her vehicle like the gentleman he was and turned to go on his way.

A few steps later, he felt a tap on the shoulder.

When their eyes locked, she asked, “Don’t I get a kiss goodbye?”

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Before he could decline her offer, she pounced on him like a wild cheetah. Kelvin was speechless when her warm tongue flickered across his lips and face.

As he was recovering from that shock, he felt her petite, manicured hand graze his family jewels. She started squeezing and massaging his manhood while breathing her hot breath on his neck. He felt Sampson easing out of hibernation.

He gently swatted her hand away and told her, “Hold up, queen. I’d like to get to know you a little better before we...”

“Before we what? You shy, big boy? Don’t worry, I ain’t gonna bite you. I just wanna make you feel real nice. Let’s take this party to the car.”

She turned around, put her plump backside up against him, bent down and touched her toes.

Kelvin backed up before Sampson voluntarily reacted again. Embarrassed by the rejection of her advances, Coco jerked upright and rolled her eyes at Kelvin.

He quickly made up an excuse to leave. “I hate to tell you this, Coco. But I got a text from my brother while we were at the restaurant. My mom is sick. I have to get over there right away. If it weren’t for that, we could chill.”

Thinking she still had a shot at hooking up with him, she said, “A mama’s boy, huh? That’s cute. I could go with you if you want. Afterwards, we could stop by my place.”

“Maybe next time. Moms is real private about her illness.”

“I’ll give you a raincheck on these sweet cookies,” she told him, smiling like he’d uncovered a hidden treasure.

“Cool. You have a good night. I’ll hollah.”

As Kelvin said the words he thought, *not even if baby Jesus floats down on a cloud and tells me to, will I ever call this woman.*

“Don’t make me wait too long, daddy.”

“I got you.” He gave her double deuces and trotted down the street.

ANY HEART OPEN

He had never been so glad to put a woman in his rearview mirror. She started blowing up his phone as soon as he drove off. He pulled over and blocked her calls. Then he went on social media, deleted and blocked her. The phone was quiet after that.

Kelvin hoped Velvet wouldn't be another disappointment. She seemed like her package was well put together. She was the first woman in years he'd been interested in pursuing. Kelvin had been celibate a long time and was determined to hold out until he met the woman that would be his wife. Waiting was getting harder every day.

Time felt frozen and six p.m. seemed like it would never come. Kelvin bathe, shaved and slid into his gear and finally it was time to go meet Velvet. Kelvin felt like a schoolboy on his first date. He had no idea why Velvet made him so nervous.

Kelvin's white Rolls Royce glided up to *Buna's Ethiopian Restaurant*. He parked his whip near the front door and checked his appearance one last time. He felt good in his blue Ralph Lauren blazer, white shirt, tan slacks, and basic brown loafers. His beard and hair was trimmed to perfection. His Nautica cologne seasoned the air. He popped a breath mint under his tongue in case he got lucky.

He exhaled when he saw Velvet sitting in the foyer of the restaurant. He thanked God for no baby-mama-drama and no stripper clothes. Velvet was the epitome of class and elegance. He took a double take when he saw what she had on. She wore a navy-blue skirt, white blouse, and Ralph Lauren blazer. Her blue leather pumps highlighted her shapely, perfectly toned legs.

"Thank you, Jesus." Kelvin muttered under his breath.

Velvet stood to greet him. He walked over to her and reached out for her hand. He darn near shouted hallelujah when her warm, soft hand slid into his.

They walked up to the maitre d' together.

"I have a reservation for two under Kelvin Parsons."

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“Yes, sir. I’ll show you to your table.”

Kelvin had a bouquet of yellow roses waiting for her at the table. Yellow was a friendship color. He wanted her to know that he intended to take things slow. Velvet’s face exploded into a huge smile when she saw the roses.

“That’s really sweet. Thank you.” She said blushing.

After they were seated, had ordered drinks and an appetizer, Kelvin opened up the conversation with a few light-hearted questions.

“So where’d you go to business school? You have an MBA, right?”

She chuckled and asked him, “Is it that obvious? I’m a Bruin. I went to UCLA but I did undergrad at Spelman. I wanted an HBCU on my resume.”

Kelvin put a *check one* in his mental calculator for her being highly educated.

“And where’d you go to school for marketing?”

They both laughed at her intuition.

“I have red and yellow Trojan blood swimming through my veins. Went to school for business and branding at USC. Went to Morehouse for undergrad for the same reasons you went to Spelman.”

“So we were across the mote from each other.”

“A knight and his damsel in distress.”

“O Romeo, Romeo. Wherefore art thou Romeo?”

They fell out laughing at their silly jokes.

“You do some pretty good Shakespeare.”

They laughed again. Both of them were thoroughly enjoying the other’s dry humor.

Warm rolls and sweet butter arrived at the table along with green salads and calamari. They chomped and laughed and got to know each other a little better. Then the date took a wrong turn.

ANY HEART OPEN

Kelvin asked her a question that clearly triggered some not so nice memories. He knew he'd messed up as soon as he said it.

“So how come a broh hasn't snatched up a good woman like you?”

Velvet's face took on a pained expression. She stuffed a piece of bread in her mouth to put off responding. After chewing for what seemed like an eternity, she took a sip of water and attempted to answer his somewhat invasive question.

“The short answer is, I've met a lot of frogs but haven't found my prince. I'm a little picky now because....well, Kelvin...I had my heart broken. I believed in and trusted someone and ended up being used, deceived and left behind.”

He was instantly sorry he asked the question and searched for a good comeback.

“I'm sorry....man—that's hard.”

“Yeah, it *was* hard. But I'm over it. I guess most of us have gone through a heartbreak at least once in our lives.”

“True.” He tried to change the subject to something lighter.

“You into competitive sports?”

Velvet flowed with the shift.

“I love b-ball. I'm decent at understanding football. I get my golf on every now and then with my EWGA group. Venus and Serena were my reason for watching Tennis. The jury is still out on what I'm gonna do if they aren't on the court.”

“Well, I guess we're gonna be good friends then. I have season tickets for the NBA and box seats for the NFL. Wimbledon's on my bucket list. So maybe we can go to a game next time we hang out.”

Velvet was impressed but she played it cool. “You're balling out of control, playa. Season tickets and box seats. We are gonna be *best* friends.”

Kelvin wasn't sure if the playa label was a down-low jab at him. He let it go but lightly checked her.

“I ain't no playa. I'm looking for quality, not a quickie”.

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Those words were music to Velvet's ears. Smiling, she told him, "If it's a local game, I can make it work. Too much going on at work and with my friend to leave town."

"I understand. And I'll be praying for your friend."

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

Thankfully, their dinner arrived. Kelvin was terrified of putting his foot in his mouth again and was happy to have a good reason to shut up.

While they ate, Kelvin thought about Velvet sharing something so personal about her past. On one level, he liked that she had been transparent. On another level, he wondered if her past hindered her ability to love again.

They avoided delving into any other deep topics for the remainder of the night. Stayed in the safe zone with celebrity news, so-cal real estate developments and the latest on crypto currency.

As they were finishing dessert, he asked her a mildly personal question.

"What's a scripture that you live by?"

Velvet answered without hesitation. "John, chapter fifteen, verse twelve—*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.* What about you?"

"Song of Solomon--chapter three, verse four. And chapter six, verse three. *I have found the one whom my soul loves...I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.*"

Velvet's heart did a flip or two when Kelvin quoted that scripture. Her mind started racing.

This man is too good to be true. Quoting scriptures, looking for quality not a quickie—all of it has to be a facade.

"Kelvin, this was...this was really nice but I better get going. Have another early day tomorrow with long hours."

He signaled the waiter for the check.

"Cool. I'll send you some dates and times for local games."

ANY HEART OPEN

Kelvin felt Velvet shut down. Seemed like the scriptural references triggered a bad memory.

He really thought Velvet could be everything he wanted in a mate. But if she was stuck in pain from the past, that could be a deal breaker. He didn't have the time or energy for a wounded soul. He needed a woman who was healed and ready to love.

Still, there was something about her that moved him. Like he had known her before, in another lifetime.

Outside, Kelvin took her hands in his and looked her in the eyes.

"I had a really good time. I hope we can get together again soon. If I don't see you at the book signing, maybe we can hook up at T.D. Jakes Conference?"

"That would be really nice, Kelvin. I had a good time too."

Inside, Velvet was thinking, *He's too darn perfect. That's how things started with Michael. Until the day he hooked up with another woman, ghosted me and never looked back.*

Kelvin made the prayer hands before walking off toward his car.

Velvet watched him get into a white Rolls Royce with a customized license plate that read, *Gdswill*.

Violet turned on the car, shook her head in disbelief and said, "Uh, huh. I ain't stuck on stupid this time. And as mama used to say, I'm born again but I wasn't born yesterday."

As Kelvin drove away, he was thinking, *I wonder what it'll take to get her to fall in love with and trust me?*



Chapter

Twenty-Six



Cordelia

Papa Joe and Cordelia sat at a table watching the sun disappear over the ocean at *Tony's on the Pier*, a legendary seafood restaurant in Redondo Beach. It was the same place they had their first date 20 years before.

Cordelia looked across the table at the man she had fallen head over heels in love with and married six months after they met. When she met him, he had nothing but pipe dreams. He told her he wanted to be a music producer and that he had a catalog of hit songs written by a couple of indy artists. On their third date, Cordelia handed him her credit card so he could pay

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for studio time. Six months later, three of the songs made it to the top ten. That summer, one song went platinum with over three million sold.

Her Joe used the profits to build a recording studio and pay an advance to the next two acts. A chunk of the money went to buy them a modest home in a buppy suburb called Ladera Heights. They were young, happy and uber successful. *Pure Platinum* was quickly becoming one of the hottest music labels in the country. The following year, Cordelia gave birth to their son, Baker. Their relationship changed after Baker was born.

Papa Joe's work schedule and extracurricular activities—which was code for his side chicks, left little time for Cordelia or their child. Family time happened on four occasions—Cordelia and Baker's birthday, Easter Sunday and Christmas. Thanksgiving was a maybe. After the sun went down, Joe was always in the streets.

Cordelia had almost raised Baker by herself. At first, the pain and loneliness was unbearable. She often cried herself to sleep. Cordelia considered divorcing him. But that would've let him off the hook with being a husband to her and father to their son. Instead of leaving, she threw herself into taking care of Baker. She thought Joe was going through a phase and things would get better with time.

Between the PTA, being a chaperone for school dances and transporting Baker to and from games, Cordelia was able to stay busy enough to feel like she had a purpose. When Baker turned sixteen and didn't want his mommy showing up at every school function, she started feeling lost again.

The day came when Cordelia had enough of her husband's disappearing acts. She got in her Lamborghini, drove down to Pure Platinum headquarters, took the elevator to the third floor and stormed into her husband's office. She caught him with some bimbo who was perched on his lap.

“Get your ass off my husband's lap, slut!”

ANY HEART OPEN

Joe actually laughed when Cordelia slapped the woman so hard, her cheap wig flew off. The woman was ready to throw blows but Joe put her in her place. He had security escort his little hoochie out of the building and she was never seen again. Cordelia knew what she did was wrong. It wasn't the woman's fault. She should've slapped her husband instead of his mistress.

Slapping Joe's girlfriend hadn't changed a thing. Cordelia caught him with one after another of his sordid side pieces. After that, Joe became a pro at dodging his wife's surprise visits. He started renting apartments for his women and going to visit them after work hours. There was no way Cordelia could keep up with where they lived or which one he was spending time with.

She gave up trying to stop him from fooling around and started drinking booze to soothe the pain. She got so drunk one night that she fell asleep at the wheel. She woke up with an airbag pressed against her chest and paramedics prying her out of the car with the jaws of life. While she was laid up in the hospital fighting for her life, her husband was lying in bed with one of his women. That was the night she died to the lies and was reborn in the ugly truth.

When they wheeled her out of the hospital, Joe was standing there smiling and holding a bouquet of red roses. She smiled for the cameras but inside she wanted to spit in his face. He was oblivious to the hurt he'd caused her all those years. All he cared about was having his ego stroked by women who didn't give a damn about him. If he ever lost the title, money and mansions, they'd be gone like Shelly Fraser-Pryce taking off for the 100 yard dash.

Cordelia started going to 12-step meetings and even got herself a sponsor. She found a therapist who helped her with her codependency. Bit by bit, she faced the shame of the abuse she'd tolerated and put her life back together. By the time Baker went off

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to college, she had a few years of sobriety and a new perspective on life.

She still wasn't ready to divorce her husband but she stopped waiting for him to change and started living her life. She went on cruises, took trips to Paris with her new 12-step friends and started investing the money Joe made in low risk stocks and cryptocurrency.

She donated some of the profits from her investments to charity. She also volunteered at homeless shelters and counseled women in domestic violence programs. After two decades of living in a bubble, Cordelia felt free.

She had finally gotten the courage to end her marriage and move on. That night, she planned to tell her husband that their public relationship was over. But as the saying goes, if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans. And that night would go nothing like Cordelia imagined...

Chapter

Twenty-Seven



Violet Brown

Violet had always dreamed about the people God wanted her to help. As a child, recurring dreams of strangers would terrify her. Over the years, she'd learned to patiently wait for the people to arrive in the flesh to get confirmation of what they'd come together to do. What astonished her was the ways God would orchestrate events to ensure she and the strangers connected. Christians called it divine intervention. The Shamans called it destiny.

Violet crossed paths with the people from her dreams in the most random places. The grocery store, a beauty salon and even

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the laundromat. When their eyes met, there was the undeniable feeling they had known each other before. Then the awkwardness of reintroducing themselves in the present lifetime.

Over the last couple of months, six souls and three travelers had been drifting in and out of Violet's dreams. Travelers were humans who had multiple missions with different people. Souls were the people who had karmic debts they were clearing.

There was one soul who visited most frequently—an older man with salt and pepper hair. Violet called him, the *Aging Buffalo*.

He had come with his devoted and beautiful wife who was one of the travelers. Violet called her, *Mrs. Beautiful*.

In another dream sequence, there was a handsome young man who lived a double life. Violet had named him *Young Buck*.

The Young Buck's secret lover was a traveler with character and grace. Because of his calm demeanor under great duress, Violet had given him the name *Man of Steel*.

One night, two women who moved like sisters but weren't connected by blood arrived to the dreamscape.

One of the sisters had a blazing red-brown mane of hair and always manifested beneath a cloud of torrential rain. Violet called her *Storm*.

Storm opened her suitcase and out popped a traveler with ageless genes. Violet nicknamed her *Miss Good Black*.

Storm's spirit sister was wholesome and clean cut. She reminded Violet of the Joan character from that sitcom, *Girlfriends*. Violet named her *Joan of Arc*.

In the dreams, Storm was crushing hard on a man whose looks could make a woman give up her entire paycheck. Violet called him the *Heartstopper*.

Joan of Arc was slowly falling in love with the man of her prayers. Handsome, spiritual and brilliant, Violet had given this traveler the name *Bookworm*.

ANY HEART OPEN

Together, they represented a tribe of living souls who were coming together to fulfill a promise they'd made in another lifetime. And Violet Brown was the compass that would lead them to each other and help them complete their mission.

To an outsider, the mission might appear to be simple. Heal, atone and reset. But in the spiritual realm, where humans had free will and character flaws that could jeopardize the mission, anything could go wrong.

A perfect example was the Aging Buffalo. On the outside, the Aging Buffalo's body seemed solid and muscular, almost impenetrable. On the inside, he was like a boxer whose mid-section had taken one too many punches.

Aging Buffalo had a shameful legacy of laying up with women young enough to be his daughter. He thought collecting panties made him a man. Violet could see that his spirit was tired of the masquerade but it was all he knew.

Mrs. Beautiful, the Aging Buffalo's wife, loved him with every fiber of her being. Mrs. Beautiful was just about at the end of her rope with her husband's cheating and lying. If he didn't change his ungodly ways, he was going to lose the best thing that ever happened to him.

Then there was the Young Buck who during daylight hours, made sure the media captured him with a bouquet of pretty young women. When the moon rose, Buck would tiptoe into exclusive nightclubs where men on the down low hung out. When the sun met the pavement, he would retreat back into the darkness of his facade. Violet had a feeling the buffalo and buck were somehow related.

Joan of Arc was the guardian angel of Storm. There would be wind, rain and sometimes hail falling all around them. But Joan—or whatever her name was in real life—rescued Storm every single time.

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To Violet, the scenes that played out in her dreams and visions felt like a tragic, old black and white movie.

The most recent tragedy involved Miss Good Black, an older Black woman who had clearly been a knockout in her heyday. Miss Good Black had the money to keep her outsides together but the bitterness in her heart was aging her in dog years. She had a special affinity for Storm that Violet hadn't figured out yet.

Storm was in love with the Heartstopper. But he was one of those men who had been taught he was God's gift to women. If he survived what would become a bloody battle with the Storm, he would align with the blessings and gifts God had planned for his life.

If he survived.

It was work keeping up with all the moving scenes, storylines and secrets that would bring them together. But that was the work Violet had been born to do.

Back in the real world, Violet sat on a patio chair outside the entryway of *Sacred Trees*, her metaphysical store. The spirits had told her to go there that night and she had been obedient.

Violet liked being near the ocean. She loved the sound of the waves crashing against the shore and the lull of seagulls clapping their wings in the evening wind.

A few blocks from the store, a married couple who were once each other's entire world left a restaurant in painful silence. That evening over dinner, the man's wife had spoken four fatal words that shattered everything he'd worked so hard to build.

I want a divorce.

He tried all his old tricks. Told her how much he loved her, said all those side chicks meant nothing to him and that she was his everything. As always, he promised his cheating days were officially over. She'd heard it all before and knew the routine like the back of her hand.

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She'd take him back. They would have utopia for a couple of weeks. Romantic dinners, flowers, diamond jewelry and maybe even a trip somewhere exotic. Then it was back to his scamming, sexing and texting.

Cordelia had prayed and asked God to close her heart to him. Then she packed up the love she had for her husband in a cardboard box, added twenty years of memories and taped it shut. After the divorce was final, she planned to take their mementos to the cemetery and give them a proper burial.

Papa Joe knew she was serious when she slid the five-carat diamond ring he gave her off her left finger and pushed it across the dinner table. He hadn't seen her finger without his ring in decades.

He pleaded for forty-five minutes. Even let a few tears roll down his face. When that didn't work, he demanded that Cordelia put his ring back on. She didn't budge. Neither had she cried or argued with him. After he paid the bill, he begged her to give him one more chance. She answered with a two-word sentence.

I'm done.

The walk from the restaurant to the car reminded Joe of one of those New Orleans funerals where the family two-stepped behind the casket. Joe had just lost the one person in the world who loved him without an ulterior motive. It was nobody's fault but his own that his wife was leaving him. The future of their marriage seemed bleak until God intervened by placing one of His angels directly on their path.



Chapter

Twenty-Eight



Papa Joe, Cordelia and Violet

When Violet saw his face, she immediately knew he was the Aging Buffalo from her dreams. And the woman with him was Miss Beautiful, the devoted wife of a no-good husband. Violet stood to greet them.

“It’s a lovely night for an evening stroll. Weather’s just perfect, isn’t it? You two have a good dinner?”

Cordelia dropped her head in an effort to hide the tears brimming the corners of her eyes. When she looked up, she gasped. The woman standing before them was a spitting image of

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her mother's mother who they called Lady Dee. Cordelia thought seeing Lady Dee might be a sign from God about their marriage.

"Forgive my manners. My name is Violet Brown. I'm the proprietor of this establishment."

Papa Joe greeted Violet with his usual southern boy charm.

"Evening, Miss Violet. Yep, California weather is some of the best in the nation. My name is Joe. This here is my wife Cordelia. We just had dinner at the place I took her after I proposed over twenty years ago."

Without a doubt, Violet knew that the Spirits had sent the first two of six souls from her dreams. She flipped her seer switch on and let the ancestors drift in. It was time to activate the purpose of this spiritual reunion.

Violet heard a message.

Two hearts. Two broken people. They're lost. Need to find each other again.

Violet thought about the best way to transmit that message.

"Twenty years. That's beautiful. Marriage is one heck-of-a-journey. I once heard a woman who'd been married for sixty-five years say that marriage has seasons. And that sometimes, you have to bundle up to make it through a cold winter. If people hang in there, spring and summer always rolls back around. She said that some couples make the mistake of abandoning ship during a rough season."

Papa Joe and Cordelia looked at each other and turned back to Violet. The tears Cordelia had been holding back flooded onto her face.

Violet put her hand on Cordelia's shoulder. "Why are you crying, my sister? Maybe y'all ought to come in for a minute and talk. I have some chamomile peach tea, there's a nice wood-burning fireplace. Maybe I can help...."

Cordelia lost it. "I did everything a wife was supposed to do! I cooked, cleaned, made love to him and never let my appearance

go. I darn near took care of our son by myself while he ran around screwing other women. He takes better care of the people who work for him than me, his wife and the mother of his child.”

Papa Joe said, “How you gonna stand there and tell our business to a complete stranger? But since you started, I’m gonna finish where you left off. You forgot to say that I gave you a beautiful home, took you on fancy trips. What about those mink coats, diamonds and a new car every year? I paid for our son to go to the best schools. Where’s my appreciation, Cordelia? Give me some credit!”

“All you talk about is what you did for us. What about tending to my heart, Joe? What about being there for Baker’s football games and when he graduated from college? It’s not just about the money.”

Violet tried to nudge them toward the door to the store. “Why don’t we go inside and talk where there’s a little more privacy? “

Still mad as hell, Cordelia answered, “Fine! I’ll come in. But it’s not gonna change my mind. I still want a divorce!”

Papa Joe trailed behind her into the store.

Violet poured each of them a cup of tea in beautiful herringbone china tea cups, put on a little John Coltrane jazz on a low volume, picked up her medicine bag and sat down across the table.

When she spread her divination tools out on the table, Joe said, “Hold on a minute. I don’t fool with no voodoo.”

Violet chuckled and told him, “Good. I don’t either. This isn’t Voodoo. It’s an ancient oracle used by our ancestors 6000 years ago.”

“So it’s an antique? How’d you get it?”

“That’s a long story. You’re gonna have to buy the book I wrote about it. But right now, right here—this meeting is about saving your marriage.”

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Cordelia looked up at her and said, “I want to hear what the bones have to say. I wanna know if they agree that I should leave my husband and never look back.”

Violet turned to Papa Joe for permission to continue.

“You ain’t gonna put no curses on me?”

“Sir, I don’t do curses. People usually put curses on themselves with the bad things they do to other people.”

“Okay, I’ll try it. Wait, how much does this cost?”

Cordelia leaned forward and said, “You spent thousands on your whores. Now you’re worried about paying for something that might save our marriage?”

Violet shut their arguing down again. “You can give a love offering of whatever amount you want at the end of the reading. Let me have your full names.”

Violet wrote their names down on a piece of paper. Then she sprinkled some water on the table and did a series of prayers in her mother tongue. She cast a wooden chain down on a straw mat and used four shells to ask a few questions. After about fifteen minutes of throwing the bones, casting the shells and taking notes, she lit a stick of sweet incense, took a sip of tea and exhaled.

Eyes the size of golf balls, Papa Joe asked. “What’s going on Miss Violet? Is it something bad? I aint gonna die am I? Come on and tell us what the bones have to say!”

Cordelia swatted him on the shoulder. “Shut up, Joe. She isn’t finished yet.”

Violet took a deep breath and let the ancestors speak through her.

“Joseph, your daddy says to tell you, hello. He says he’s sorry for leading you to believe that a man can find his worth in the number of women he conquers. He says to tell you that the person who shot and killed him wasn’t a police officer, a bookie or a client. It was a woman.”

ANY HEART OPEN

Cordelia poked him in the chest and said, “You told me your father died of a heart attack.”

In shock, Joe stood up and said, “Who...who told you about what happened to my Daddy? My wife doesn’t even know about my father being shot.”

Cordelia yelled, “Sit down, Joe! Let her finish.”

Speechless, Joe slumped down into the chair.

“When your father rejected and abandoned that woman, she was pregnant by him. She lost her job, her apartment, and ended up homeless. She had their baby in a tunnel under the freeway. Her and the baby almost died. If it wasn’t for a stranger who took her in, they wouldn’t have made it.”

Joe shook his head in disbelief. “Daddy used to tell me I might have a sibling from another mother out there.”

“You’re gonna find him. Your baby brother. In fact, the ancestors say he’s been right under your nose.”

“Now that don’t make no sense but keep talking.”

“While her and the baby were living on the street, she called your father repeatedly asking for help. He ignored her. The police ended up arresting her for stealing diapers and baby formula.”

“All because my sorry ass daddy didn’t help her.”

“Child Protective Services took the baby away from her. That was when she lost it. When she got out of jail, she got a hold of a gun and went looking for him. She’s the one who shot and killed him.”

“Lord, God. My mother had teams of detectives investigating what happened. None of them could find out a thing.”

“She left town after everything happened. She left the baby on the steps at a police station in the middle of the night.”

“What happened...what happened to the baby?”

Violet was quiet for a moment as the next series of messages were downloaded.

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“He—it was a boy—was adopted by a family right here in Los Angeles. He’s doing good. His name is...it starts with an M. He’s almost thirty years old. I’m not sure if the mother is still alive. If she is, she’s not well.”

Papa Joe couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Don’t you worry, I’m gonna find him. My little brother. Nowadays, we got computers that can find anybody. But what about us? Me and Cordelia. Can we fix this?”

“With all due respect, sir. First, you need to fix yourself.”

“What you saying? I need to see one of them shrinks?”

“Mr. Wainwright, you’re here on this earth to break a generational curse on the men in your family. Mistreating women is a serious violation before God. Marriage is a sacred union. And to answer your question, a little therapy couldn’t hurt, that’s for sure. Do you go to church?”

“Only when somebody dies. I’m a member of Crenshaw Christian Church. Our pastor, Frederick K. Price, passed away from that damn virus. I ain’t wanted to go to church since the Good Lord took him home.”

“Well, they must have other pastors there who you could talk to.”

“I like that idea better than talking to some psychiatrist.”

Cordelia asked, “What are you saying, Miss Brown?”

“I’m saying God brought you two together for a reason. Whatever y’all agree on within your marriage is your business. But the lies and cheating have to stop today.”

“My daddy cheated on my mother the entire relationship. I watched her soul die right there in front of me. Daddy told me there was no such thing as a faithful man. He said a husband is obligated to provide for his wife and children. I thought because I provided and provided well, that was good enough.”

Cordelia raised her hand to speak.

“People need more than things to feel loved.”

ANY HEART OPEN

“Yes, they do. Look, I’m willing to help you two heal. But I need a commitment from you, Joe, that the dishonesty in your marriage ends today. And Miss Cordelia, you have to agree to put the divorce papers on hold for the next thirty days. One moon cycle focused on doing the work to transform your marriage.”

Joe turned to his wife. “You already filed divorce papers?”

“Yes, I did.”

Violet took both of their hands and placed them between hers. “Do I have a commitment from the both of you?”

Joe nodded his head in agreement. “I’ll do whatever it takes not to lose my wife.”

Cordelia piped up, “This is not just about not losing me. I’ve been gone for years, Joe. You just didn’t notice. This agreement is about us healing the past and starting over in our marriage. If he agrees to no more lies, I will stay in this marriage. I find out he’s even looking at another female, we’re done.”

Violet clasped her hands in prayer position. “Perfect. We start tomorrow. Meet me here and we’ll go to the ocean to make offerings to the ancestors. Sometimes you have to go back to the beginning to fix the present. In the meantime, Joe, I want you to start looking for your little brother. He needs you.”

“Okay. I can do that. Miss Violet, I have one more question for you. It’s about my son. I found out that he’s...he’s gay. I have a real problem with that. I mean, that’s a sin and against God’s law. Plus, it makes me look like I failed as a father.”

“Mr. Wainwright...”

“Call me, Joe.”

“Joe, you’re in no position to judge your son’s moral compass. Not now, not ever. That’s between him and God.”

“Okay, I get that.”

“Your job is to guide him in being an honorable man, a good human being, and to teach him how to succeed in life. There’s so

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much he can learn from you. But who he loves is his choice, not yours. And one day, he's gonna save your life."

Cordelia was crying again.

"What you mean he's gonna save my life one day?"

"I don't know what that means. But that was his agreement when his soul came from heaven to occupy a body."

Cordelia spoke up. "What time you want us here tomorrow, Miss Violet?"

"Seven. I'll have tea and coffee ready. Please wear all white from head to toe. Bring white flowers and some watermelon."

Joe agreed but added, "Can we eat something else? I don't really like watermelon."

Violet clarified. "It's not for you, Joe. It's for the ancestors."

"What—they gonna come down from heaven and eat some watermelon?"

"It's an offering, Joe. I'll explain more in the morning. See you then."

Chapter

Twenty-Nine



Rev. Felicia, Delilah, Marcus and Violet

Delilah had never seen her mother that quiet or still. Reverend Felicia was always moving, always telling somebody what to do or what they shouldn't be doing. Seeing her lying there helpless was a devastating blow.

Her mother's vitals were stable but she was still in a deep coma. The doctors confirmed what Delilah already knew—her mother had had a heart attack. Years of eating low vibration food had finally caught up with her. The doctors nor her surgeon could make any promises that she would survive.

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Delilah tried to ignore the daunting beep of the heart monitor. The sound of that machine was a constant reminder that their battle was far from over. On an impulse, Delilah leaned down and kissed her lifegiver on the forehead. She reached over to hold her mother's hand and was shocked to find her fingers were ice cold. She knew that wasn't a good sign.

"Mama, I love you. Please don't die. I...I'm sorry I said I wouldn't let you see your grandchildren. I'd never keep them from you. Please come back, mama. I'm gonna change. I promise."

Delilah sat in a rickety chair next to her mother's bed, poured herself a cup of that nasty hospital water and tried to quiet her nerves. A call came through on her cell. Marcus was at the visitor check-in desk and needed her mother's name and room number.

Marcus had shown up to support Delilah but the truth was, hospitals made him nervous. The bleach-smelling floors, the sight of grieving relatives loitering in the hallway—it took him back to the day he walked in a hospital room and saw mother on life support. Then the heart-breaking memory of what followed. His adopted mother, Diane Pauline Middleton, died from complications of heart disease.

He was all alone in the world and had to figure out how to fend for himself. The emotional burden of losing his birth mother and his adopted mother in a single lifetime had almost broken him.

Marcus snapped himself out of those painful memories. Forced himself to be present for the woman who one day might become his child's mother.

He walked into the hospital room and asked, "Is your mom gonna be okay?"

"I...we aren't sure."

"Sorry you're going through this. Is there anything I can do?"

"I just...need a little support. Didn't want to call Velvet because she already took a day off of work for my drama. Thanks for coming. It's been hard."

ANY HEART OPEN

Delilah started crying. Without thinking about it, Marcus pulled her into his arms and started comforting her.

“It’s gonna be okay. Your mother...she’s gonna pull through.”

Marcus had never been an emotional person. To survive being orphaned at a young age, he mastered keeping his feelings at bay. After his mother died, he was placed in foster care. It was a horrible experience. He was sent to a home with a hoarding foster mother and her drug-addicted husband. He stayed there until he was eligible for emancipation.

At sixteen, he enrolled in the Job Corps. A year later, he moved into a small apartment with two other guys. One of his roommates told him about a program where he could learn how to produce music tracks for budding artists. He applied and got in.

The school gave him a stipend of a hundred and twenty-five dollars a week and let him eat lunch for free in their cafeteria. That was the reason he didn’t starve that year. After he graduated, he got a job at *Broadcast Music*. They taught him everything he needed to know about the music business. The company hosted an annual music conference for upcoming producers and artists. That was where he met Papa Joe.

From the day he left the foster home until now, Marcus had stayed focused on two things-chasing paper and getting women. That kept him from being eaten alive by a world that preyed on the souls of young Black men. Especially ones who didn’t have a mom or dad to fend for them.

Marcus looked over at Delilah and noticed how beautiful she was. Even without make-up, her skin was flawless. She reminded him of that image of Beyonce’ when she wore the costume of Oshun, the Yoruba Goddess. For a moment, he wished they’d come together under different circumstances.

Delilah felt Marcus staring at her. She could tell he was attracted to her. She was feeling him too. She was also deeply grateful to

him for not only showing up, but for being compassionate during one of the darkest moments in her life.

They'd only known each other for a few months and most of their time together was spent in the bedroom. Now their connection was under the cloud of an unplanned pregnancy and the possibility of having a deadly disease. Delilah knew that was no way to start a relationship but it was the hand they'd been dealt.

Marcus tapped her lightly on the shoulder. "Looks like your mom is sleeping. You wanna take a little break and go grab something from the cafeteria?"

Delilah nodded, grabbed her purse, and kissed her mother on the forehead one last time.

"I'll be right back, mama. I love you."

In the cafeteria, Delilah grabbed a cup of hot cocoa and blueberry muffin. Marcus got a tuna sandwich, chips, and lemonade. They sat together and ate in silence until Delilah asked Marcus a question.

"Marcus, are you close to your Mother?"

"I was. She died when I was really young."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you think about that."

"It's all good. That was a long time ago. How's your muffin?"

"Alright. I just ate it because...I know I need to eat. Marcus, I'm sorry for what I did to your car. I'll be sending you a check to cover the damages."

"What I did wasn't cool either. I apologize for not calling you back. Guess God put both of us on notice."

"Yep. And I got the message. Change or die."

"Damn. You ain't gotta put it that way."

"If God lets us out of this contract, we had better change. Ain't no second chances when you're the reason for your own suffering."

"No lies detected with that statement. Either way, we're gonna be connected for the rest of our lives. Next year this time, we'll

be parents. What happens between us doesn't matter. What's important is that our child has two parents to look after him."

"Oh, you're claiming this is a boy swimming around in my uterus?"

"Having a son would be a blessing. But if it's a girl, she'll be daddy's little princess."

Delilah couldn't contain the small grin that spread quickly into a wide smile with full teeth exposed.

She checked her watch. "I better go check on my mother. Can you stay a little longer and drop me off at home?"

"I can do that."

When they got back upstairs, Delilah saw an older, well put together woman with neat dreadlocks was sitting by her mother's bed. She assumed the woman was a nurse even though she was dressed in street clothes.

"Greetings, I'm Delilah. Is my mother okay? Are you a nurse?"

"She's as okay as someone can be in her condition. My name is Violet Brown. I volunteer at the hospital weekly. I keep the patients company when their families can't be here. Sometimes I pray for or with them. The nurse told me what happened to your Mother. I've been sitting here praying for God to heal her. I hope that's ok."

"We need all the prayers we can get right now. Mama loves the Lord and the bible is her best friend. Actually, she's a reverend."

Violet stared up at the woman standing before her. Took note of the reddish-brown streaks in her hair. Saw the model-fine man who walked in with her. Violet shivered as a familiar chill came over the room and the goosebumps popped up on her arm. Whispers from the spirits began in a low pitch and got louder until she acknowledged them.

"Okay, okay. I hear you." Violet said out loud accidentally.

Delilah looked over at her. "Hear who? Um...nobody was talking, Miss Brown."

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“Call me, Violet. Everybody calls me Miss Violet.”

Violet knew things had to be dire for the ancestors to come in without permission from her guides. Before she could switch her intuition button to off, the ancestors started speaking again.

A woman spoke first.

The storm is here. She thinks she's expecting a baby. She is not with child. There is a soul waiting to come down from heaven through her portal. But it's not time yet.

A man spoke next.

Death has a hold on this girl's mother. His grip can be broken but not with their medicine. You need some egg shells and a little tobacco. Three must stand in a circle near her bed. Recite Psalm 23 over her while holding a bible in your left hand.

The first spirit who spoke came back to tell Violet what was out of balance.

All three of them are caught in the web of their transgressions. So many lies and secrets between them. They've been mistreating God's children. It has to stop.

Violet laughed in disbelief. “How in the hell do you expect me to pull that off?”

Delilah looked at Violet like she had just escaped from a mental institution. “Um, Miss Brown, I want to thank you for sitting with my mother. But I think we got it from here.”

After a crazy day, Violet was low on patience and short on compassion. “Yeah, about that. I need to tell you something, Miss Delilah. It's gonna sound a little crazy. You're going to have to trust God and know that He, the Master, doesn't make any mistakes.”

Marcus lifted his right index finger in the air like he was asking for permission to go to the bathroom during church service.

“Hey...um...look here, Delilah...I'm gonna take off. You and um, Miss Violet...”

ANY HEART OPEN

Violet turned to face him. “Hold on, Mr. Heartstopper. Does your name start with an M? How many women have you laid with one night and acted like you didn’t know them the next?”

“Yeah...my name starts with an M. It’s Marcus. How’d you know that? Never mind. Uh, Delilah, call me when you’re ready to go. I’ll get you an Uber.”

“Young man, you’ve been running all your life. You got it honest though. Your daddy was a runner too.”

Shocked and insulted, Marcus got ready to put her old ass in check.

“Look, I’m trying to be respectful, but you don’t know me. You weren’t even invited here. Whoever sent you—whoever has been telling you my business — this isn’t the time or the place.”

Delilah had his back. “Marcus is right. I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.”

“Not before I tell you about that baby.”

Delilah gasped, took two steps back and almost lost her footing. The plastic water pitcher she was holding dropped to the floor and cracked open. Water spilled everywhere and splashed on their ankles. Violet knew it was the spirits cooling down the heat in the room.

“Look, there’s no easy way to say this. I’m just gonna snatch the band-aid off because we don’t have much time.”

“Much time for what?” Delilah asked, still stunned by what Violet said about the baby.

“To save your mother’s life.”



Chapter

Thirty



Saving Reverend Felicia

Violet dropped a wad of paper towels on the rapidly spreading puddle. The nurse walked in, saw the spill and returned with a mop to sop up the remaining water. After they got it cleaned up, the nurse made an announcement.

“Just want to let everyone know visiting hours will be over in about forty minutes. Delilah, I hope you’ll go home and get a little sleep. I promise we’ll call you if anything changes.”

Still in shock from Violet’s psychic revelations, Delilah didn’t answer.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

Violet told the nurse, “We were just about to join in prayer and head on out.”

“Prayer is always good.”

After she was gone, Violet closed the door so they could talk.

“Okay, let’s start over. My name is Violet Brown. I’ve been a volunteer at the hospital for two years. I own a little metaphysical store in Redondo Beach. I’m *not* crazy. I’ve been knowing things before they happen since I was a little girl.”

Delilah exhaled and told her, “I do believe there are people who were born with a gift. But I don’t understand how you knew to come here and talk to us?”

“They--the ancestors that is--tell me to go places sometimes. I usually come to the hospital on Thursdays but they specifically told me to come here tonight. As I passed by your Mother’s hospital room, they instructed me to go in. I sat down and started praying for her. The nurse came in to check her vitals and told me what happened. Ten minutes later, you walked in.”

Marcus had a question too.

“You said my father was a runner. What else can you tell me about him?”

“I don’t know a lot. And most of what I know, I can’t tell you because of client confidentiality. What I can share with you is what I heard in Spirit. That he was shot and killed by a woman he was cheating on his wife with. He’d abandoned her when she told him she was pregnant with his child. She ended up homeless and forced to steal food to survive. Not long after she gave birth, she left the child on the steps of a police station.”

Marcus thought his heart was going to stop beating.

No one—not one person in his life knew he was adopted. And no one except the adoption agency knew his mother had abandoned him on the steps of a police station.

What Marcus hadn’t known until that very moment was who killed his father and why. He also now knew the reason his

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mother had given him up. She was young, pregnant, and out of options. Hurt and outraged over being tossed aside like a bottle cap, after she gave birth to Marcus, she shot and killed her lover. She abandoned her baby somewhere she thought he would be safe and disappeared like a plane over the Bermuda Triangle. It had taken twenty years and a random encounter with a psychic for him to put the puzzle pieces together.

Violet was digging in her purse, pulling things out and laying them down on the utility tray next to Delilah's mother's bed.

Delilah was curious. "Miss Brown, what is all that?"

"The spirits told me I need to do a ritual for your mother. If I don't do this, she's not going to make it."

Delilah semi-rolled her eyes and said, "Um, did I mention that my mother is very Christian?"

"Yes, you did. This is going to have to be our little secret. Like I said earlier, we don't have a lot of time and I need your help."

Marcus headed toward the door. "I'm out. I don't do seances."

"Get your behind back over here! There has to be three of us for this to work."

Marcus shook his head back and forth. "I'm a basic brother. Me and God have an understanding. Well, we used to have one."

"This might be your child's grandmother one day."

Marcus was quiet for a minute then he said, "Alright! What do you want me to do?"

"Delilah, I need you to go to the nurse's station and ask them if they can get you a boiled egg. It has to be one with the shell on it. Tell them to check the staff refrigerator. They always put extra breakfasts in there. When you get it, I need you to take the peels off the egg and crumble the shells up as small as you can. Put them in a bowl or cup or whatever. And Marcus, I need you to go to the third floor, into the chapel and steal a bible. Y'all have ten minutes."

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“You want me to steal a bible? That’s the kind of ish you go straight to hell for.”

“They have tons of them and we can take it back when we get done. Now go!”

After they left, Violet tore open a pack of cigars she kept in her purse for when she needed to connect with the ancestors in a hurry. She pulled out her travel size bottle of Florida Water cologne and sprinkled it around the room.

She took the tobacco out of the cigar and put it into a cup. She did a prayer to the ancestors and called them into the room.

Eight minutes later, Marcus came back with a bible. Two minutes after that, Delilah walked in huffing and puffing with the eggshells.

“The nurse looked at me like I was out of my tree. I told her my sugar was low and I needed to eat some protein in a hurry.”

“Good job. Let me have the eggshells.”

Delilah and Marcus watched Violet do her priestly work.

After the tobacco and crushed egg shells were in a perfect circle around the bed, Violet called them over to where she was standing. She placed the bible on the utility table and opened it to the page with Psalm 23.

“We need to hold hands while I pray. Close your eyes and help me call on the Lord.”

Violet picked up the bible with her left hand and put her right hand in Delilah’s hand. Delilah held Marcus’ hand with her free hand while Violet prayed.

1. *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*
2. *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*
3. *He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.*

ANY HEART OPEN

Violet's voice grew stronger. Her voice started to rise and fall like a Pentecostal preacher on the verge of getting filled with the holy ghost.

4. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*
5. *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*
6. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!*

When Violet stopped praying, Marcus and Delilah opened their eyes. Delilah's eyes darted to her mother.

"It was a beautiful prayer, Miss Violet, but I don't think it worked."

"Prayer always works. Even when we don't see the results immediately." Violet told her.

As if on cue, the lights in the room started flickering. The TV turned itself off.

Marcus dropped Delilah's hand. "What the hell was that? I'm getting out of..."

"Quiet!"

Delilah's mother started coughing.

Her eyes popped open and she looked around the room.

Her sight landed on Violet.

"Who the hell are you? Am I in heaven?"

Delilah ran to her. "Mama! You're back! Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Lord!"

Violet turned to Marcus. "Go get the nurse. They're gonna need to give her something to calm her down."

After the doctors and nurses did their perfunctory examinations on the Reverend Felicia Winters, Violet bid Marcus and Delilah goodbye in the hallway.

"Before I take off, there's one more thing you two have to do."

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“After what you did for my mother and for us, you name it Miss Violet,” Delilah told her, choking back the tears.

“You don’t owe me anything. What I’m referring to is something you have to do for each other.”

Marcus logged a reality check. “Miss Violet, Delilah and I are up against a big obstacle. In addition to her being pregnant with my child, somebody might’ve given one or both of us a very serious illness. The doctors are doing tests to confirm or deny our status.”

“Rest assured, you both will be cleared of that.”

“With all due respect, Miss Violet, that’s something only a lab and somebody with an M.D. can confirm.”

“Call me when you get the good news,” Violet told them confidently.

Delilah started hyperventilating. “Are you saying that the Spirits or whoever that is who be talking in your ear—is saying we don’t have HIV?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. But I understand if you need the doctor to confirm my insight.”

Marcus spoke up. “That would be a miracle from God if it’s true. Miss Violet, there’s no doubt that you’re very gifted, but some things are beyond our human capabilities. Just saying. Don’t get your hopes up, Delilah.”

Delilah stared at Violet like she was looking straight through her. “After what happened in this room today, I’m a believer. I’ll call you when the doctor confirms that good news.”

Violet thought about telling her about the baby but the Spirits said it wasn’t time yet.

“Good. The last thing is, I would like for y’all to meet me on the beach tomorrow morning at 7am. I’m doing a prayer service for a lovely couple. I want to offer up some special prayers for the two of you.”

ANY HEART OPEN

“Yes, Mam. We’ll be there. Let me give you my number so you can text me the name of the beach and where we’re gonna meet,” Delilah said, smiling.

“Marcus, can you be there?”

“I’ll call my boss and see if I can take off. I have a meeting tomorrow afternoon about my promotion. Can’t miss that. Plus, we’re gonna need those chips for the baby.”

Delilah hid her happiness over him, referring to them as *us*.

“Perfect. I’ll see you two then. Get some rest, Delilah.”



Chapter

Thirty-One



Velvet and Violet

After the drama at *Sacred Tree* and the hospital debacle, Violet was dog tired and as hungry as a pack of wolves after a winter snow. She cruised the streets of Los Angeles looking for some plant-based, late-night food. Nothing fancy, just something to help her ground. When she saw the lit open sign on her favorite *Crystal Soul Vegan Restaurant*, her taste buds perked up.

When the traffic light turned green, Violet whipped a U-turn, slid into a parking spot and trotted inside. Since she had an hour and some change before they closed, she took her laptop in hoping to finish typing up a few notes. After she put an order in, she posted

up by the window and people watched. For Violet, fantasizing about the lives of strangers was not only therapeutic, it was a way to cope with the stress of being who she was.

She had just dug into her plate of delicious vegan soul food when a tall, statuesque Black woman strolled through the door. The woman was yacking on her cell. Based on her animated hand gestures, somebody had real life ish going on. Violet half-listened while she typed and chomped on her food.

“You’re with Marcus? What in the entire hell—how did that happen? Thought you hated the ground he walked on. And what did moms say when you told her about your situation? What?! Your mother had a stroke? When? Oh my God, Delilah. Is she ok? Where are you?”

Violet looked at her again. Her height, skin color, hair texture. Could it be? Joan of Arc had arrived in the flesh?

When she said the caller’s name again, Violet’s brain went into overload.

Lord, please tell me I didn’t just hear what I think I heard. I can’t do another meeting at the crossroads.

Violet knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, but she had to find out if God had orchestrated a soul connection between her and someone from the dreams.

“Girl, sorry I didn’t get your call. You want me to come over there? I was on a date with Kelvin--remember the guy I met at the bookstore?”

Joan of Arc got quiet which meant she was listening to her caller.

After a few minutes of intent listening, she said, “Delilah, Delilah, Delilah. That’s the problem with you. You trust people way too easy. Some strange woman shows up in your mother’s hospital room and you let her do some kind of ritual. Do you think she goes to your mother’s church?”

ANY HEART OPEN

Violet slid her chair back, turned around and looked the Tall Drink up and down.

Then she said under her breath, “Lord, have mercy. It’s Joan from *Girlfriends* and she done come to save Lynn from another storm.”

Suddenly, the room temperature dropped a few notches. The hairs on Violet’s arm began tickling her skin. A female voice whispered to her.

Hello there. My name is Rose. I’m Velvet’s mother. I need to talk to my baby about something really important.

“No! I can’t do this right now.” Violet said out loud.

A couple of people in line whipped their heads around in Violet’s direction. One of them shook their head back and forth as if to say Violet wasn’t well.

Joan of Arc carried her takeout to the condiment station, grabbed eating utensils, napkins and put a lid on her fountain drink. Her hands were so full she had to set her phone down and put her friend on speaker. When Violet heard the caller’s voice, she knew without a doubt that the woman on the phone with Joan of Arc was the same person she’d met at the hospital a few hours earlier.

The spirit that had attempted to get a message to her daughter earlier returned for a second round. Her southern drawl was almost lyrical.

Miss Violet. Can you hear me? Why yes, you do hear me. My daughter, Velvet, was in love with a charlatan. He was only there to steal from and use her. He convinced her she wasn’t good enough. We think she’s finally found true love. But now, every man she meets, she sees through broken-hearted glasses. Can you fix her vision for me, Miss Violet?

Violet put her cell phone up to her ear and pretended to be talking on it so her conversation with the spirit of Velvet’s mother wouldn’t be so strange.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“I guess I can try. But y’all gonna have to give me a vacation after this.”

Violet noticed that Velvet left her LV wallet at the condiment station. Violet grabbed it, rushed back to the table, and packed up her laptop. She threw her handbag over her shoulder and dashed out of the door to catch Velvet before she drove off.

Velvet was so caught up in the news Delilah had just told her she didn’t see Violet running behind her car. In a last-ditch effort to catch her, Violet tossed the container with her remaining food at Velvet’s *Tesla*. Black-eyed peas, candied yams and collard greens splattered over her back window and slid down the trunk. Velvet slammed on her brakes, jumped out of the car and started cussing.

“What the hell? Why did you just throw that damn food on my car?”

Velvet walked around to the back of the car. “Whew! Calm me down Lord. Keep me from whooping this old lady’s ass, Father.”

“Ain’t. Nobody. Whooping. My ass. Cool your jets, li’l girl. Don’t let this turban and dashiki fool you. I’m spiritual, but I ain’t no punk. You don’t want none of this.”

Velvet started laughing so hard that she forgot all about the greasy food stuck on her back window.

“That was funny as hell. Is this some kind of game? Am I on TV?”

Velvet and Violet heard a muffled voice yelling out Velvet’s cell. Delilah had heard Violet talking and was trying to give her bestie a heads up.

“Delilah, let me call you right back. I gotta handle something.”

“Wait! I gotta tell you...”

Delilah tried to explain to her best friend who Violet was but Velvet hung up before she could tell her the story.

Velvet turned to Violet and backtracked a little, “Look, I’m a Christian. I shouldn’t have spoken to you in that way. Can you

ANY HEART OPEN

please explain to me why you threw food on my car? Wait, didn't I just see you sitting in the restaurant?"

Velvet peeked at her phone which was playing Delilah's special ringtone back-to-back like a tornado warning.

"Dang. I told her I'd call her right back! Anyway, why'd you do it? This better be good."

Violet showed her the wallet. "You left this on top of the counter by the condiment station. I figured it was important. I'm sorry about your car. I was screaming and yelling, trying to get your attention but you didn't hear me."

Velvet exhaled and said, "Thank you. My whole world is in that wallet. I apologize for cussing and yelling at you."

Violet had to think fast. "You look so familiar. I think you might know a client of mine."

Velvet grabbed a few paper towels and some sanitizer spray from the car and started cleaning her back window.

"Yeah? What's their name?"

Normally, Violet never revealed the names of her clients.

"Delilah. And her boyfriend is Marcus."

Velvet was still suspicious, but that took her caution down a notch. "Well, Marcus isn't exactly her boyfriend, but Delilah is my sister from another mother."

Velvet wondered if the woman was a scam artist. She didn't remember leaving her wallet in the restaurant. What if the woman had stolen her wallet as a setup to rob her or something? Since Michael had done his little number on her heart, Velvet didn't trust anybody.

When Violet walked in her direction to hand her the wallet, Velvet backed up.

"Just sit it on the trunk. I'll get it as soon as I finish cleaning this stuff up."

Velvet took her cell out of her pocket and sat it on top of the hood in case she needed to call 911.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“So, how do you know Delilah again?”

Violet saw the fear in her eyes and tried to reassure her. “I’m sorry, I didn’t introduce myself. My name is Violet Brown. I own a storefront in Redondo Beach and volunteer at the hospital. I was sitting with Delilah’s mother earlier today. I prayed for God to heal her.”

Velvet exhaled and relaxed a bit. She was relieved to hear the woman was a business owner, that she was a believer, and that she had been at the hospital with her bestie.

Just as she was calming down, it dawned on her that the woman who threw food on her car might be the same nutcase who did a ritual in Delilah’s mother’s hospital room.

“Thank you for bringing me my wallet. I’m gonna have to run. Long day at work tomorrow. You have a blessed day, Miss Violet.”

“Actually, I need to talk with you about something important. And let me give you a heads-up that what I’m about to say is gonna sound a little crazy. But it’s times like this that we have to trust that the Most High doesn’t make mistakes. And that everything and everyone is part of a bigger picture. Saying all to say, your mother wants me to talk to you about something.”

Velvet secretly hit the call button on her cell and tucked her earbuds in her ear so Delilah could listen to what was going on without Violet knowing. Delilah answered the call yelling.

“Why didn’t you answer the damn phone? I was trying to tell you something about the woman you’re standing there with.”

Velvet didn’t respond thinking Delilah would get the hint and listen in.

“Miss Brown, I don’t know what my mother would want you to talk to *me* about. I mean, you don’t know me from a can of paint.”

Delilah yelled, “Listen to her, Velvet! She’s a psychic and she’s the *real deal*. She saved my mother’s life.”

ANY HEART OPEN

Violet knew they were seconds away from Velvet getting in her car and driving off.

Sure enough, Velvet slid into the front seat of her car and turned on the engine.”

Violet ran over the car door. “Wait! Your mother wants me to give you a message.”

Velvet sat in the driver’s seat looking straight ahead. A few seconds later, she let the window down.

“Only because you said my *mama* wants to tell me something am I talking to you.

It’s my opinion that you so-called psychics are just scammers waiting to take advantage of gullible people. Well, I’m not one of them.”

Violet took a deep breath, turned her intuition button on and told Velvet, “Your mother was named after your grandmother’s favorite flower. The Rose.”

“Roses are a pretty popular flower. What else you got?”

The Spirits whispered something to Violet that no one, not even Velvet’s Mother or her best friend Delilah knew.



Chapter

Thirty-Two



Violet and Velvet with Delilah

“**W**hen you were in high school, you and your friend ditched class and toilet-papered your principal’s house. One of his neighbors saw what you did and threatened to tell the school if you and your friend didn’t do him a *special favor*.”

Embarrassed and ashamed, Velvet hung up on Delilah. Her facial features took on a horrified expression as she relived the sexual assault she’d survived as a young woman.

“He came after us. We would’ve been expelled in our last year of high school. The only choice we had was to let him do what he

wanted. It was...horrible. I was so ashamed. I threw up for a whole week. I had nightmares about his huge hands touching me down there for years. I don't know how you know about that because I never told anyone. And there was only one other person who knew. She passed away about a year ago. Did she—did Sabrina tell you about this?"

"Hey, I'm just a scammer, right?"

Almost in a daze, Velvet got out, walked in a circle around the car and clapped back at Violet, "I bet you have some embarrassing secrets too. While you're telling everybody else's business, why don't you turn that mirror around to you."

Delilah started blowing up Velvet's phone again.

Violet clapped back, "Honey, I already looked into the mirror of my life. In fact, I used to be just like you. Too wounded to believe God could bless me with a partner that loved me for me. And just like you, I almost blew my chance at real love. If I hadn't done the work to open my heart, I would've missed out on one of God's greatest blessings."

"You're wrong again. I'm single. I went out on one date with some guy, but there's nothing solid between us. What am I in danger of missing out on?"

Violet saw the angry spirit Velvet had walked around with for the last two years. It had attached itself to her and was spewing its toxic rage on the unsuspecting.

Now Delilah was blowing up Violet's phone since her bestie wouldn't answer. Violet picked up and put Delilah on the speaker.

Velvet continued her hate-filled vitriol. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but don't you worship idols? I see those beads around your neck. I met a couple of people in college who had altars to the Orisha. They were beautiful, but those practices go against everything I was taught."

"Well, maybe you need to unlearn and relearn the parts of our history that were falsified by the people who enslaved our

ancestors. The truth is, we were taught to worship a God that was forced on our people while we were being raped, beaten and made to work for free. That was one of the greatest sins ever committed.”

Violet’s words cooled Velvet’s fire but the flames were still lit.

“We can’t change what happened four hundred years ago. At some point, Black people need to move on. If it weren’t for Jesus, we wouldn’t have survived that atrocity.”

“We can’t move on without accountability and reparations. But we can begin to reclaim the legacy that was stolen from us and teach the next generation the truth about our history. And for the record, me and Jesus are cool. I love God.”

“I know my history, Miss Brown. I did my DNA. I’m thirty-percent Nigerian. Forty percent various regions of West Africa. The rest is European.”

“If you knew your true history, you would know that our bodies weren’t the only thing held captive during slavery. Learning where our ancestors came from is just the tip of the iceberg. Who were your people? What did they believe before they were enslaved? How did they survive the middle passage? Our names, cultural traditions and spiritual legacy were stolen too. And some of us are reclaiming it as part of the healing.”

“I’m simple. I just wanna go to heaven when I leave this earthly existence.”

“So you care more about what happens after you die than what you experience while you’re alive? What about your children and their children?”

“All I know is, I’m not living in sin. For anybody. Alive or dead. God’s love is what’s important to me.”

“God’s love, Miss Velvet, has no respect for persons. God’s love is a gift not something you can earn. That love was paid for by God’s Son. It’s called grace.”

Realizing she had lost the debate, Velvet tried to change the subject.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“Look, are you gonna give me the message from my mother so I can go? I’m tired and I have to work tomorrow.”

“Your mother said to tell you that the man you’ve been seeing is the one God sent to love you. He’s here to heal you in the places you are broken. If you can open your heart to receive it. And if you don’t allow old pain to destroy the gift God is trying to give you.”

Like a dam bursting under extreme pressure, Velvet’s tears exploded onto her face. It was the first time she’d expressed the magnitude of her hurt. She slammed her fist onto the roof of the car again and again, releasing anger she’d held onto for years.

She turned around to Violet and screamed, “God wants me to trust again? I gave Michael everything! My body, my heart and my entire savings! He left without even saying goodbye. Where was God? I didn’t want to be here anymore! Then I took that pain to someone else and hurt them like I had been hurt. She didn’t deserve that.”

Shocked by her bestie’s confession, Delilah chimed in.

“She? Velvet, were you playing for the other team? I didn’t know you got down like that.”

“Shut up, Delilah!” Velvet screamed.

“Hey! Don’t talk crazy to me. You sat up there and judged me like I was the devil’s spawn when I got pregnant out of wedlock. You were out here tipping with women. And you kept it a secret all this time. I might’ve been a mess, but I was honest about my messiness.”

“I wasn’t tipping with *women*...it was one woman. The kindest, sweetest person I ever met. Sam was good to me. The truth is she treated me better than any man ever has. She showed me what love is supposed to be like and how somebody treats you when they really care. She was the reason I didn’t give up on life. She proposed to me. Bought me a ring and everything. That was when

I stopped seeing her. Changed my number, refused to take her calls or read her letters.”

Delilah was stunned. “Damn, Bish. That was messed up.”

Violet intervened. “You did the same thing to the Sam person that your ex did to you.”

“I guess I did. I wanted to call her and ask her to forgive me, but I was scared.”

“You can start making things right by forgiving your ex-fiance. After that, you can stop judging people and leave that part of God’s job to Him.”

Velvet blew her nose again.

“She’s right, Velvet. No lies detected there. Keep it one hundred.”

“What Michael did to me, he did out of greed and being a user. What I did wrong was because I was hurt and afraid.”

Violet chimed in, “It doesn’t matter *why* people do wrong. The hurt is the same. But when a good person gets off path, there’s a different level of compassion that should be shown.”

“I still can’t believe my BFF was getting her punana handled by a little stud muffin.”

Velvet laughed a little. “Delilah, you are ghetto with a capital G. How can you be so smart and educated and still be so crass?”

“If being real is ghetto, then I’m guilty as charged, your honor.”

All three of them cracked up at that.

When the laughter died down, Violet told Velvet, “I want you and your new friend to meet me at Will Roger’s Beach tomorrow morning. Delilah and Marcus will be there. So will another couple I’m working with. Wear all white and bring some white flowers and watermelon to offer to the ancestors.”

“You’re going too far now, Miss Violet. I’m already a little scared that I’m considering the historical truths you just talked to us about.”

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“Seven a.m. sharp. Don’t let fear stop you from receiving your gifts. I gotta go home, take a bath, and eat some food. An old woman is tired. I’m sure my husband is wondering where the heck his wife is.”

Delilah laughed and said, “He knows you’re out here killing demons and talking to angels.”

“See you both tomorrow. And keep your hearts open to whatever God wants to paint on this new canvas.”

Chapter

Thirty-Three



Velvet and Delilah

Delilah blew up Velvet's cell as soon as she got on the road. "What's up, Delilah? I'm emotionally exhausted and not in the mood for any shenanigans."

"I get three questions. Answer them and I'll never bring it up again."

"Go ahead."

"So, are you bisexual?"

"No. I fell in love with *her*. It wasn't planned. Our hearts just connected. And when we were together, I didn't care what her gender was. It just didn't matter."

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“So it was more than sex?”

“That’s two questions. You have one left. I’m not gonna lie, the sex was amazing. I guess her being a woman and all—she understood things about my body that I didn’t even know. I’ve never been served like that before.”

“Dayummm. I need details. Did she strap up?”

“Is that your final question?”

“No. Scratch that. Why didn’t you just go be with her?”

“Because I’m a Christian. And I was taught that being gay is wrong.”

“You’ve basically been a nun all your life. Maybe God would’ve given you a pass on that.”

“Looking back, if I knew then what I know now, maybe things would’ve been different. One day I’m gonna find her and apologize for the way I treated her. She didn’t deserve that.”

“Do you think you could be with another woman?”

“You’re out of questions, counselor. But the short answer is that part of my life is over. I want a husband, some bad ass kids and a house with a white picket fence.”

“My mother had all of that, including the white picket-fence house. It became her prison. And you know what they say about making plans.”

“If you wanna make God laugh, tell Him your plans. It’s true. Never in a million years did I think I would fall for a woman.”

“So, do you like this new guy?”

“He’s a good Christian brother. He owns his own business. Fine as hell. He drives a Rolls Royce. And he has a good sense of humor.”

“Any kids or ex-wives?”

“I don’t think so, but it’s too early to ask.”

“And you ain’t broke him off a little something, something yet?”

“It’s called *dating*. You should learn a little more about that.”

ANY HEART OPEN

Delilah could hear her mother saying, *why would a man buy the cow when he already had the milk?*

“I have a confession. I always wanted to do a threesome with another woman.”

“Delilah, you need to keep your legs closed and your dress down.”

“Speaking of that, I didn’t get a chance to tell you that Miss Violet predicted that my HIV test will come back negative. She says I don’t have HIV and neither does Marcus.”

“Miss Violet isn’t a doctor but I pray she’s right.”

“Seven days until we get the final results and Marcus can retest.”

“Whatever happens, I got your back.”

“Love you, Velvet.”

“I love your crazy ass too. Now, go call the hospital and see how your Mother’s doing and then get some rest.”

“I will. When I called earlier they told me she was about to eat her dinner and then they were giving her something that would make her sleep through the night.”

“Good. It’s important that she stay calm.”

“I have to tell you one more thing. When you dropped me off at my mom’s and I told her about my being pregnant and having HIV, she called me everything but a child of God. Velvet, I was so angry. I told her that I wasn’t going to let her put that hate on my child. I threatened her with not letting her see the grandkids.”

“Delilah, that was a low blow.”

“She called me a whore. She said I wasn’t decent. She said my being fast was the reason I was molested by my Uncle.”

“What your Uncle did to you as a child had nothing to do with you. But you do have a little ho in you.”

“I see you got jokes. What I’m trying to tell you is, after I told my mother that I might have a deadly disease, not once did she hug me or tell me she loved me.”

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“Reverend Felicia hasn’t ever been the mushy type. You know that. It doesn’t mean she doesn’t care about you. Her love language is different.”

“She’s as mean as a snake.”

“She can be a little rough around the edges. But she’s still your mother and that wasn’t right.”

“You think I caused her to have the stroke?”

“Don’t even go there. What happened wasn’t your fault. You know your mama eats a lot of unhealthy food. She even joked with us that she wasn’t ever giving up white sugar and pork fat.”

“That’s the same thing the paramedic told me.”

“Everything’s gonna be okay. Pray and ask God to show you how to handle her.”

“Marcus told me his Mother died when he was really young.”

“That doesn’t excuse him for mistreating women.”

“No, it doesn’t. I saw a different side of him when he came to the hospital.”

“You’re feeling him.”

“I do like him. *A lot.*”

“Well, he might be your child’s father. And that could be a catalyst for you two getting together.”

“I don’t want him to get in a relationship with me for our child. I want him to be with me because he wants to.”

“Small doors lead to big rooms. Take your time and see what you have in common. The rest is up to God.”

“See you in the morning, BFF.”

“On God.”

“On God, bestie.”

After her talk with Velvet, Delilah felt better than she had in days. She had been doing research about HIV and what she’d learned had given her hope of living a good life. Not only could her baby be born without HIV, but it wasn’t written in stone that she would be dying anytime soon.

Chapter

Thirty-Four



Kelvin and Velvet

Eight hours later, the friend request Kelvin had sent Velvet still hadn't been approved. He considered withdrawing it but didn't want to come off like he was thirsty or desperate. He decided to give it another couple of days. If she didn't respond by then, he'd chalk it up as a hit and miss and keep it pushing.

He did some low-level snooping through the posts on Velvet's profile page. Noted that she had donated to six different causes. He liked that Velvet went hard for her community. Another good quality he could check off on her pros side of the checklist.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

He skimmed the photo albums he could access without them being friends. Montages of Velvet in Jamaica. Velvet on a cruise ship with her girls. Velvet at church on Easter. He was relieved not to find any pictures with her hugging and kissing any brohs. He was about to call it a night when his notification chime dinged. When he clicked the activity button, it said Velvet had just accepted his friend request.

Bingo.

He sent her a wave via messenger figuring she'd respond in the morning. He was pleasantly surprised when the little talking icon started wiggling indicating she was writing him back.

A minute later, she put a sweet message in his inbox.

Meeting you for dinner was one of the best parts of my day.

He didn't waste any time writing her back.

Me too. Looking forward to watching The Heat take down your beloved Lakers. LOL.

He waited for her answer. The little talking icon had stopped moving. He waited another couple of minutes just to be sure. He was about to shut his laptop down when the notification ding rang again.

He went to his inbox and saw a message from Velvet.

Are you asleep?

He paused for five seconds and sent a message back.

No. About to go down though. You're up late.

Can I call you?

His heart skipped a few beats when she requested to touch voices. He sucked up the fear and hit the audio button.

She answered on the first ring. "Hi Kelvin."

"Hey Velvet. How was the rest of your evening?"

"A little stressful. Found out my best friend's mother had a stroke."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. That's the one who is already going through something tough, right?"

ANY HEART OPEN

“That’s the one. When it rains, it floods.”

“I’ll be praying for her and her mother. She—your friend—is she doing better? Did the books help?”

“Yeah, I think she’s going to be ok.”

“Seems like you have a lot on your mind. You want to talk about it?”

“Not something you talk about over the phone.”

“You....you want me to come over?”

“It’s late and I’m sure you have a busy day tomorrow.”

“I work for myself. I go in when I want to.”

“Okay playa. Well, actually, yes. I do want you to come over.”

Kelvin dang near did a cartwheel in the middle of his living room. He kept the nonchalant act going in front of Velvet.

“Cool. I’m gonna take a quick shower and head your way. Wait, where do you live?”

“West Hollywood. Off Santa Monica and Robertson. I’ll text you the address.”

When Velvet hung up, she went into a panic. What the hell was she thinking inviting him over. It was almost midnight and it was too late to take the invitation back without looking like a psycho.

She hopped in the shower, dried off, lotioned down and slid into some big, roomy silk pajamas that clearly said *we ain’t boning tonight*. Just in case they got a little affectionate, underneath her bloomers she had on black lace, *Savage Fenty* designer underwear and a matching bra. The *Savage Fenty* line was designed by pop singer and fashion icon, Rhianna.

Twenty-six minutes later, Kelvin was ringing the doorbell at Velvet’s condo. Kelvin knew he had major swag in his *Ralph Lauren* sweat suit, white V-neck t-shirt and Polo beanie. He smelled like sandalwood mixed with male pheromones.

When she opened the door, Kelvin saw that Velvet had the fireplace going, jazz playing in the background and had a couple

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

of bottles of vintage wine chilling in an ice bucket on the counter. Her hair was in one of those colorful bonnets, but he thought it looked cute on her.

“Welcome to my humble abode.”

He took in her tasteful, body-hiding pajamas that sent a clear message no sex was going down.

His eyes went to her walls which were expertly decorated with beautiful paintings.

“Thanks for inviting me. I’m loving your art. Is that a *Charles White* original?”

“I see you’re a bit of an art buff. Yes, it is.”

“You have excellent taste.”

“What you talking ‘bout, Willis?”

They cracked up at her silly humor.

“Can I offer you a glass of wine?”

“Yeah. I prefer white if you have it.”

She handed him a goblet of some of the sweetest wine he’d ever tasted. It went down smooth and left no aftertaste.

“This is good.”

“From a wine company started by the daughter of Nelson Mandela along with his granddaughter and great nephew.”

“Creamy, sweet and smooth as butter. I’ll have to order a case. Velvet, may I ask...how do you spend your holidays? Do you travel, cook for family or chill and do nothing?”

“I usually help do a toy drive for the local domestic violence shelter.”

“Wow. You’re amazing, sistah.”

“Before you think I’m some kind of hero, actually, I do it because it keeps me from being depressed. Seeing what those women are up against, I get grateful.”

“What is it that makes you get depressed?”

“My mother and father are gone. Mother’s people live back east, but they...they treat me like I’m a bank, a travel agency and a

limo service. I'm not in the business of helping people who won't help themselves."

"Word."

"My friends are my chosen family. On Christmas and Thanksgiving, I usually go to Delilah's mother's house. Delilah's my bestie. Last few years, on holidays, I take trips with my girls. We plan things on their birthdays and mine."

"Sounds like you have a good life."

"Yeah, I guess I do. But late at night, when my friends are tucking in their little ones and snuggling up next to their mates, I'm here alone. I'm not complaining, but sometimes I wish I had somebody to snuggle with. I'm just not willing to deal with a loser just to say I'm in a relationship."

"Amen sister. No losers on deck for Velvet."

He made a L with his thumb and index finger and held it up to his head.

"You are so funny!"

Delilah was giggling like a teenage girl at the homecoming dance.

"I'm glad you like my goofy ass jokes. The reason I asked about what you did for holidays is because I'm planning a holiday party at the store. I'm doing a full catered dinner, giving away some product and getting an A-list author to do a talk. I would love it if you were my very special guest."

Velvet got quiet on him again. Kelvin could tell she was thinking about something from the past when she got like that.

"Kelvin, I really want to get to know you. But..."

"It's okay. You can talk to me."

"I need to protect my heart."

"From what?"

"The L's."

"That letter of the alphabet does not apply to me."

"I'm pretty sure it doesn't, but that's what they all say in the beginning."

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

He threw his hands in the air like he was surrendering to the cops.

“I refuse to take on the karma of men who failed to recognize your crown. I’ve sacrificed way too much to become husband material. I could’ve been out there dipping and slipping but I chose to work on myself. I chose to focus on building a castle for my Queen. When God places her on my path, I’ll be ready.”

He downed the rest of his wine and stood up.

“I thought you might be the one I was waiting on. I’m starting to think I need to shield my heart from you.”

He headed for the door. “Call me when you’re ready to explore this. And by ready, I mean open, when your heart is fully open.”

“Don’t leave, Michael.”

“I’m...my name is Kelvin. Is Michael the broh that broke you?”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

She got up from the couch, ran into her bedroom, dove into her plush bed, buried her head in the pillow.

She heard his footsteps as he entered her sanctuary. The space where she prayed, meditated, cleansed her body and stored her jewels.”

“Velvet, you ok?”

“No, I’m not ok.”

“Do I have your permission to comfort you?”

Chapter

Thirty-Five



Kelvin

Kelvin slid off his shoes, removed his jacket, and eased onto the bed next to Velvet. He gently pulled her to him, laid her head on his right shoulder, and let her wrap her legs around his like they were in a magical cocoon.

Closer to her than he'd ever been, he inhaled the intoxicating fragrance of her hair. It reminded him of the gardenias that used to line the walkway at his mother's house. He kissed her third eye then massaged her temples until she exhaled. As she gazed hungrily into his eyes, he lightly kissed her soft lips. Her head tilted back and rested in the palm of his right hand, exposing her neck.

He leaned in and planted his lips on her skin, tasted her flesh for the first time.

She released a sensual moan when his tongue and lips caressed her ear. The raw sound of pleasure made his entire body spring to attention and let him know if he didn't stop, his celibacy days were about to be over.

“Velvet.”

“Yes, Kelvin. The answer is yes, I'll open my heart to you.”

“Thank you for a gift I plan to cherish and protect. I'm opening my heart to you as well. But when we take it to that next level, I know that I have to honor not only you but your ancestors and chosen family.”

“I like that. I like all of that. On that note, I wanna ask a favor of you. Tomorrow, at 7am, this woman is holding space at the beach for people who need healing. Would you come with me?”

“Where else would I be than beside you when you're getting healed?”

“Thank you and...I'm sorry for what I said to you in the living room. Sorry for bringing my old garbage to our new garden.”

Velvet started crying again. And Kelvin was honored to let her use his shoulder as God's altar. Like a spiritual sponge, his arm soaked up all the hurt and betrayal she had endured. When her body stopped heaving, he slid out of bed and went into her bathroom. He took a face towel off the rack, soaked it in hot water, got rid of the excess and sprinkled it with a little of the lavender oil from her counter.

“Lay this warm cloth across your face.”

She placed the cloth over her face and inhaled. The scent immediately calmed and centered her. She let it stay there until the cloth cooled off.

“That smells so good. How'd you know that I love lavender?”

He didn't answer, just picked up her hand and laid it over his heart.

ANY HEART OPEN

“I know because He knows,” he pointed up to the sky.

Velvet climbed on top of him and kissed him on the cheek, his chin, and inched around to his lips. In that moment, his ankh and her calabash formally introduced themselves. The connection was electric.

“Shittttt...That feels...too damn good. Look...um...Velvet... baby. You’re gonna have to get off my chariot.”

He lovingly slid her from on top of him and onto the bed.

“My friend down below—he’s kind of sensitive. It’s been a while since I...Put it this way, if the wind blows too hard, he starts waving hello. You get what I’m saying?”

She chuckled and told him. “You have no sense. Yes, I get it. I’ve been celibate too. But let your friend know that he’s in my appointment book. And when his boss confirms the date and time, he better be ready.”

“Oh, he stays ready. And you better eat your Wheaties.”

They cracked up laughing at that.

“I’m gonna head on home. If I stay in this bed with you... yeah. I’m Christian, but I’m a man too. I’ll see you in the morning, Miss Velvet. 7am sharp. Text me the details.”

She laughed a teenage-girl-falling-in-love laugh again and got up to walk him to the door.

Before he made it to the end of the walkway, Velvet called him to her one last time.

“Marcus, come here for a second.”

She was standing in the doorway, hair cascading on her shoulders, pajama top on the floor next to where she stood, exposing a sexy black lace bra.

“Kelvin, I wanna give you a glimpse of what trusting God and having patience brings.”

He turned around to greet paradise in the body of a beautiful, Black, God-fearing woman.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

He licked his lips and told her, “Won’t God do it. You did good, Father. Exactly what I prayed for.”

She giggled, blew him a kiss, and closed the door.

Chapter

Thirty-Six



Delilah

When her mother hadn't shown up to Sunday service, everybody knew something was terribly wrong. Reverend Felicia hadn't missed a sermon in years. When no one could reach her mother, her mother's assistant Willamina, called Delilah to see what was going on.

Willamina must've spread the news far and wide because Delilah was being flooded with calls, texts and emails from what felt like the entire Church of God in Christ community. Delilah was forced to relive the life-changing events that had unfolded over the last few days, starting with her mother's heart attack.

Most of them just wanted to know how her mother was doing. Exhausted and craving solitude, she didn't have the energy to respond. She did text an update to Willamina and to Star, the daughter of her mother's last living sister. Star was the queen of gossip in the Winters family and would definitely share the news that her mom was stable and on the road to a full recovery. Everybody else would have to wait until tomorrow.

While her bathwater ran, Delilah called the nurse's station to see how her mom was doing. She was elated to hear that her mother had eaten most of her dinner and was napping peacefully. The nurse said her mother was a little irritated that they couldn't get Lifetime movies to play on the TV in her room. Delilah knew that her mother making demands meant she really was feeling better. She let the nurse know she would be there in the morning as she was planning to go directly to the hospital after the healing ceremony on the beach.

Delilah took a nice hot bubble bath, fixed herself a sandwich and scrolled through Netflix's two-thousand movie selections for something mindless. She settled on some old episodes of the TV show, *A Different World*. She loved listening to the Whitley character's infectious southern drawl.

She was stretched out on the couch in a big fluffy robe and thick socks flanked by a huge bag of potato chips, a bowl of sliced fruit, and a bottle of Pellegrino. She looked down at her phone and saw a reminder about unread voicemail messages. She remembered her phone had a feature that allowed her to read a transcript of the first few lines of a message and save it to review in full later on.

"I guess I can check out the preview and make sure there's no emergencies."

The first message was Stacy, her study partner for the bar. Stacy had heard about what happened to Delilah's mother and wanted her to know she was praying.

ANY HEART OPEN

The second, third and fourth messages were all family and church members checking on her mother. Delilah fast-forwarded through them with a plan to listen in full the following day.

Delilah read the first few lines of the fifth message. *Miss Winters, this is your doctor. I'm sorry to call you after hours...*

“Jesus. What now?”

As soon as Delilah got the results from the final HIV test, she had plans to fire them and get a new doctor.

She was about to press the delete button but something told her not to.

“Maybe I’ll just listen to it once so when I cuss their asses out, I’ll have all the information.”

She clicked the speaker button on and let the message play while she munched on a few more chips and scrolled through Netflix for something else to binge watch.

“Miss Winters, this is your doctor. I’m sorry to call you after hours but there has been a terrible mistake. The results our office gave you were actually someone else’s. You are *not* pregnant and you do *not* have HIV. Again, all your test results came back clear. We already fired the nurse who was involved. I am very sorry for this mix-up. If you have any questions, call...”

Delilah’s face, mouth and mind were frozen like a prehistoric dinosaur in ice. To make sure she wasn’t imagining things, she played the message again and one more time after that to be sure.

You are not pregnant and do not have HIV.

When her tongue came back to life, she called Velvet.

Velvet was standing at the kitchen sink washing out wine glasses and reminiscing on the date with Kelvin. She couldn’t stop thinking about his words, his lips, or the enticing smell of his manly body.

When Velvet saw Delilah’s number light up the caller ID, her stomach sank and her joy immediately dissipated. It was after

midnight and there could only be one reason why her bestie was calling so late. Something had to have happened to her mother.

Velvet didn't know if she could handle bad news this time of night. Plus, she kind of wanted to stay in the romantic bubble of the visit from Kelvin. One more unanswered ring and the phone would go to voicemail. She pushed aside her self-indulgent thoughts to support her bestie once again.

"Hey Delilah. It's after midnight. Is everything ok?"

"Are you sitting down?"

"Should I be?"

"Girl, yes. Jesus just gave me my life back."

"What are you talking about, Delilah? Is your mom ok?"

"The doctor's office left me a message informing me that they gave me the wrong test results. Velvet, I am not pregnant and I do not have HIV!"

"What?! Praise God! Wait—so they gave you someone else's test results by mistake?"

"Yes, girl, yes!"

"Wow. Did they tell you how it happened?"

"No, and I don't give a damn. I'm just happy as hell that I'm ok. I'm gonna sue their asses later, but right now, I'm just grateful I don't have HIV!"

"Girl, that's the best news I've gotten all day. Have you told Marcus yet?"

"Not yet. I wanted to tell you first."

"I think he'll understand if you wake him up for this."

Delilah thought about how she would break the news.

"Well, to be honest, I'm elated to tell him about being cleared of HIV. But I have to admit, I'm feeling some kind of way about telling him I'm not pregnant. We were starting to bond around being parents."

"Listen, you don't want to spend your life wondering if he's only with you because you got pregnant. Trauma bonds are not a

healthy foundation for any relationship. Tell him the truth and let fate take its course.”

“I was thinking, maybe I should tell him about my doctor’s office giving me the wrong results for the HIV test and wait a few months to tell him about the baby.”

“So you’re gonna establish a relationship with this man on lies and deception? What do you think he’ll do when and if he ever finds out?”

“He’ll be so in love with me by then it won’t matter. Maybe I’ll just get pregnant and pretend the gestation date was incorrect or that the baby is a little late coming.”

“Best friend, I thought you had grown. This is the kind of unscrupulous ish the old Delilah would do. All I have to say is, God doesn’t like ugly. And he ain’t too fond of cute. And this right here is ugly with a capital U.”

“There you go being judgmental again. It’s just that...Marcus had referred to he and I as *we* at the hospital. What if—when he finds out I’m not pregnant, he changes his mind?”

“You need to figure out why you don’t believe you’re worthy of a man being with you for you.”

“I do think I’m worthy. It’s just that there’s a lot of competition. There’s four women for every one man.”

“But there’s not one woman like you.”

“Maybe God used the baby and the wrong test results to bring us together.”

“Did you hear anything I just said? Delilah, as soon as we hang up the phone, I want you to send that man a text and tell him to call you immediately. And when he calls, tell him what the doctor told you. Not some of the message but all of it.”

“Okay, okay! I know you’re telling me right but sometimes I feel like even when I win, I lose.”

“Get your ungrateful ass down on your knees and start praising the Lord. God has given you a second chance on life.

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

Remember that prayer we did at the doctor's office? Well, God not only answered, He intervened."

"Yes, He did. And I guess I am being ungrateful."

"Get down on your knees, Delilah. Let's praise His name together."

Delilah got down on her knees in front of the couch. Velvet went down the hall to her prayer room. Velvet started shouting and praising as soon as her knees touched the carpet.

"Father, we thank you for your unwavering favor and grace! Lord, we know you have a lot of people asking you for help, but you saw fit to bless us and put us on a path of restoring joy in our lives. I thank you, God, for not only helping my sister, Delilah, but for bringing a man like Kelvin into my life! We claim victory over anything that interferes with us serving you, Father. In Jesus' mighty name we pray! Amen."

Delilah was next.

"I thank you, God, for loving an imperfect soul like me. When I wanted to give up, you gave me the strength to keep going. When my mother was ailing, you healed her and gave her back to me. I thank you for my sister from another mother, Velvet, who helps me be a better human being."

Delilah thought about the psychic that had saved her mother's life.

"And Lord, thank you for sending one of your saints, Violet Brown, to show us that God's love and mercy can manifest in many ways and people. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

"Amen." Velvet said, almost in tears.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Velvet."

"You'd keep breathing and find something to laugh about every day. Now go call Marcus. I'll see you in the morning at the beach."

ANY HEART OPEN

“Wait a minute, homegirl. Don’t think you’re getting off this phone without telling me about Kelvin. I heard you praising God for him. What happened?”

“He came by tonight.”

“Y’all did it? Did Velvet finally get her some new-new?”

Velvet fell out laughing.

“You are so crazy. No, we didn’t *do it*. I did let him kiss me, though. And girlll, that man’s lips—oh my God. He had me lit. I almost had to reset my celibacy date.”

“The brothah is gonna need some oxygen after you pop all that backed up coochie on him.”

“Girl, you are crass with a capital C.”

When they hung up, Delilah started texting Marcus. She was about to hit the send button when she got an idea.

“Maybe, I should tell him about getting the wrong HIV test and then have sex with him without a condom so I *will* get pregnant.”

She heard Velvet’s voice. *God don’t like ugly and he ain’t too fond of cute.*

She put the phone on the charger and said, “God doesn’t like ugly but He isn’t the one living down here without a man. I’ll tell him tomorrow at the healing ceremony. I just want to spend one more night feeling like he’s my man.”



Chapter

Thirty-Seven



Baker, Marcus and Papa Joe

Baker's plan was in motion and working to perfection. The detective had found several discrepancies in the company's accounting reports. The remaining proof of his father's incompetence was on a couple of flash drives stored in the company safe. He would present the documentation and the flash drives at the upcoming board meeting and request his father be relieved from his duties pending evaluation by a doctor.

Baker intentionally waited until one a.m. to make the trek over to Pure Platinum's business offices to retrieve the flash drives from the safe. He didn't want to chance running into any employees.

As he was leaving, he overheard someone talking on the phone in Marcus' office. He tipped down the hall, cracked open the door and saw Marcus sitting at his desk.

When Marcus saw Baker he put the call on hold. "Hey Baker. Can I help you with something?"

"Matter of fact, yes you can."

Marcus went back to his call, "Steve, something just came up. Go ahead and send me an email with full details. I'll call you back later to discuss it. Great. Thanks."

"What's up, Baker? That was kind of an important call."

"What's up is, you and my father thought that after all the work I put in, he could just give you the CEO title instead of me. Well, I got a surprise for both of you. And when it goes down, you'll be out of a job and standing in line at the unemployment office."

"Look, man, I never had any beef with you. I do understand you being pissed about how things went down. But your father came to *me* with the proposition to be CEO. Your dad has been good to me and I felt obliged to do whatever I could to support the company while you and him worked things out."

Baker hadn't known that Marcus getting the CEO title was temporary. If what Marcus said was true, he wondered if his father was just making a power move and had plans to give him—the fruit of his loins, the job later on. It could also mean his father might put Marcus or someone else in the permanent position. Either way, Baker was sure there was no one in the world who would be a better CEO than him. Pure Platinum was the blood that flowed through his veins.

Baker hated that he and his father's drama had caused a rift between him and Marcus. Not only had he always liked Marcus, he did good work for the company. If everything worked out, Baker might consider keeping him on board after his father was removed.

ANY HEART OPEN

“I know my father put you in the middle of this war between him and me. After everything calms down and the new structure is in place, maybe there will be a spot for you in my organization.”

“What new structure? Man, like I said, your dad has been good to me. I won’t be part of any plot to harm him.”

Baker’s voice trembled with hurt. His eyes traveled to some invisible zone where the pain and angst about his father lived.

“I appreciate that you’re loyal. And that you have honor.”

Baker lost the battle with his tears and decided to just let them come.

“I lived my whole life trying to please my father. I denied who I was and the way I love. I hurt so many women trying to fit the mold of what my dad and the world says is normal. I stood by him while he disrespected my mother. I pretended the person I’m in love with was just a friend. After all of that, for him to give the CEO position to someone else, that almost broke me. I’m gay, but I ain’t no punk. That’s why I decided to fight for what’s rightfully mine.”

The two of them turned to the sound of approaching footsteps. Baker expected to see the security detail checking to make sure everything was okay. Instead of guerilla boots, he saw size fourteen black crocodile skin shoes stroll into the room.

The Aging Buffalo said, “It takes a real man to stand up for what he believes in.”

“Daddy, what you doing here this late?”

“I could ask you the same.”

Marcus got up to leave. “I’m gonna excuse myself so you two can talk.”

“Actually, Marcus, I want you to stay. I need to talk to both of you about the future of this company.”

“That discussion should be between family. If that can’t be respected, I’m out.”

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

The Aging Buffalo stepped in front of his son and blocked him from leaving.

“Marcus *is* family, son.”

“Dad, I need you to move out of my way and let me leave this office. Marcus is part of the Pure Platinum family, but he’s not our blood.”

“Actually, yes he is.”

Baker chuckled sarcastically and asked him, “You been drinking, old man? You’re acting like you’re not in your right mind. I think we need to have you evaluated by a professional.”

Papa Joe clapped back like the original gangster he was and told him, “That won’t be happening. And I’m sober as a jaybird. Mind never been clearer. By the way, I know all about your little plan.”

Marcus headed toward the door. “Joe, with all due respect, I think you and Baker need to sit down and talk.”

“Have a seat, Marcus. You too, Baker.” Papa Joe spoke in a tone that let Marcus know he meant business.

Papa Joe took out his phone and pressed a green button.

Everybody who worked at Pure Platinum knew about the green button on Papa Joe’s cell phone. When he pushed that button, the security gate at the front entrance locked and armed security arrived wherever Joe was in minutes. Guns were drawn and might be discharged on whoever was present.

Baker asked nervously, “What little plan are you referring to?”

Three minutes later, security walked into the office and stood behind Papa Joe. Their guns were drawn and they were ready for anything.

“I know all about your plan to have me removed on the grounds of incompetence. What I want to know is when did you start thinking you were smarter than me? Huh, son? You came from *my* loins. I fed and clothed you. I taught you everything you know—well, almost everything.”

ANY HEART OPEN

Baker started licking his lips like he always did when he was nervous or lying.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I have cyber security on all my accounting systems. If anybody tries to access our financials before we make them public, I get notified.”

Baker swallowed hard.

“That’s how I found out my son was setting me up.”

Baker jumped up and got in his face. Joe’s security detail jumped in front of him and pushed his son back.

“You left me with no choice! But I was going to make sure you and Mama were taken care of.”

“You were going to try to put me out of my own company.”

Baker wiped his tears away and told him, “I just...I just wanted you to see that I could run it and do a damn good job.”

Papa Joe looked over at his son and saw the good boy and the strong man he had raised. He knew right then what he had to do. He pushed a button on his watch and spoke into a microphone.

“Security, eleven eighteen fifty-eight. Y’all are clear.”

He pressed the green button again. The security detail exited the office.

When they were gone, Joe said, “Baker, this was never about me doubting your ability. Hell, I trained you. I know what your strengths and weaknesses are. Me putting Marcus in the position—I thought I was protecting the company. I was wrong as two left shoes. I have no right to tell you what’s best for your life. Nor am I in any moral position to judge you or any other man.”

Baker started crying. “What...what are you saying, Daddy?”

“I’m saying, as wrong as it was for you to try to put me out, that showed me that you have the strength and the heart it takes to lead this company. You’ll fight for what we built. And you’re not gonna let anything or anyone, including me, take you down without a battle.”

LOVE TASHIA ASANTI

“Does that mean...you’re giving me the job?”

“Yeah son, that’s what it means. I want Marcus to have your current job as COO. He’ll be your right hand.”

Marcus walked over to Papa Joe and did a Black power hand shake to seal the deal and the new understanding.

“I got you, Joe. On everything. Word is bond.”

“I know you do, youngblood. I heard what you said and I appreciate your loyalty. What I told you when we talked stands. The condo, the Lambo and your bag is secure.”

Baker walked over to his father. “I won’t let you down. And with Marcus as my right hand, we’ll make sure Pure Platinum continues to rise to the top. And my personal business will remain just that.”

Papa Joe nodded his head and told Baker. “Come here, boy. You done finally became a man, son. I’m proud of you.”

Papa Joe hugged Baker then extended his hand so they could shake on everything.

The Aging Buffalo and the Young Buck were at peace, and the war was over. But Papa Joe still had a stick of dynamite to deliver.

“Now, with that said, I have one more thing I need to tell you. I need both of you to sit down for this one.”

Baker and Marcus exchanged concerned glances, took a seat and gave Papa Joe the floor.

“You heard me say earlier that Marcus is family?”

Baker and Marcus nodded.

“Well, it’s a long story but since it’s late, I’mah tell y’all the short version. And later, you can ask me questions if you have ‘em. But right now, I need y’all to just listen. Can you do that for me?”

They nodded again.

“Me and Baker’s mama, we’ve been going through some things. My behavior caused her a lot of pain. I almost lost my wife acting a fool out here in these streets. And when you have

ANY HEART OPEN

a woman that's as good as my Cordelia, the worst thing that can ever happen is for you to lose her."

Papa Joe fought back the tears and continued.

"Instead of talking to one of them shrinks to find out why I would jeopardize something so valuable for something that don't mean nothing, me and Baker's mama went to see this lady. At first I thought she was a fortune teller but Cordelia said she's a prophetess. She see things in the future, past and the present. She told me and Cordelia exactly what we need to do to work things out."

Marcus did something he never, ever did while Papa Joe was speaking. He interrupted.

"You gotta be shitting me. I can't believe this."

"What you trying to say, youngblood? Spit it out. Must be something important. You haven't ever interrupted me when I was talking."

"Sir, by any chance, is the name of the prophetess lady you're talking about, Miss Violet Brown?"

Papa Joe's eyes bucked open like golf balls. "How you know her name, boy?"

"It's a long story, but she was at the hospital with...with my lady friend's mama. She ended up talking to me about some things... things I always wondered about."

"That's what I want to talk to you 'bout. She mentioned you to me. At first, I didn't know it was you she was referring to, but the more I thought about it, I knew it had to be you. The good Lord reunited us long time ago!"

"Reunited us? How...you told her about me?"

"Boy, be quiet so I can finish telling you the story."

"Yes, sir."

"I didn't *tell* her nothing. She saw it all in a vision. She was explaining why I've been chasing these chippies all my life when I already had a queen on my throne. She said I was following in my

daddy's footsteps but they wasn't leading me anywhere good. My father taught me a lot of things that wasn't true. Things like, men don't have to be faithful to their wife as long as they're bringing money home. That was a bald-faced lie. Women need more than things to be happy."

Papa Joe did his best to comfort Baker who was crying uncontrollably.

Marcus was sitting there in disbelief. He seemed like he had an inkling of where Papa Joe was going with his story, but it was too much for him to take in at one time.

"Ain't nothing wrong with a man shedding tears, son. It's good for you to let it out. I tried to keep the pain of losing my daddy inside all these years. Pain turns to poison when you don't give it a name. My daddy was killed when I was a youngin. He told me before he died that I might have a little brother out there. One of them young girls he was fooling with got pregnant. He didn't want my mama to find out, so he broke all ties with the baby's mama."

Marcus jumped up and out of his chair. "Papa Joe, are you getting ready to say what I think you are?"

"Marcus, you my baby brother. My daddy was your daddy. We kinfolk."

"Oh my God." Tears streamed down Marcus' face. "Your daddy was the coward that abandoned my mother when she was seven months pregnant. She had to steal and prostitute herself to survive. She left me on the steps of the police station because she couldn't afford to take care of me. I ended up in foster care with some bad people."

"I know, son. I know the whole story. But our father atoned for his wrongdoing. He took her life away when he got her pregnant and left. She took his life when she pulled that trigger."

Baker turned to Marcus and told him, "So you're my Uncle? I got to call you Uncle Marcus now?"

"Baker, now is not the time for jokes."

ANY HEART OPEN

Marcus shook his head in disbelief.

“Fate put me on the path to come here and work for you. Man, God got jokes don’t He.”

Baker chuckled and said, “This shit is a Lifetime movie.”

“You got that right.” Marcus agreed.

“From today on, you family, Marcus. You ain’t out here by yourself no more. You with the Wainright clan. We ride hard for each other.”

Marcus shook hands with Baker and then with Papa Joe and said, “You’re really my big brother? Should we get a DNA test to be sure?”

“Marcus, I got one more thing to tell you. I already have proof that you’re my brother. My detectives—the same ones my son hired to take me down—got a hold of your original adoption papers. Your mama put my daddy’s name on your birth certificate. I’m betting she had plans to send a copy of it to my father’s wife who was my mother. After she shot and killed our father, she had to disappear. And now we done found her. We found your mother, Marcus.”

Marcus couldn’t breathe. “What did you just say?”

“I said, we found your mother. It wasn’t easy. She’s been living in Canada. She changed her name. That’s probably why you couldn’t find her.”

“Where is she? I want to talk to her.”

“We had to pull some strings to get her here. Had to get her a phony passport and bring her in on a private plane. She wasn’t doing too good so we had to get her medical attention. But she’s better now and she’ll be here in the morning.”

“Man...this...to get my mama back. To find out I got family. How can I repay you, man?”

“You don’t owe me nothing. This is for *us*. Me, you, Baker and our daddy.”

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Marcus looked away and said, “I ain’t ready to call him my father yet. But maybe one day.”

“I understand. Any man hurt your mama, it’s gonna take some time to forgive that. Maybe seeing your mother will help.”

“What time is her plane coming in?”

“Not sure. Depends on if everything goes smooth with customs. I got my people in place. That’s all you need to know. We got this event in the morning at the beach. That lady—the prophetess—got me and my wife doing some kind of healing.”

“Yeah, me and my lady friend, we’re supposed to be there too.”

Baker chimed in, “I see I’m the only one that hasn’t met the prophetess. Guess I’ll have to be there too. God knows I need a reading.”

Papa Joe laughed. “I’ll let her know you coming, son. You gotta wear all white and bring some flowers and watermelon.”

“I don’t really like watermelon.” Baker said, sounding like his daddy.

“It ain’t for us. It’s for the ancestors.”

Chapter

Thirty-Eight



At The Beach

The beach was quiet except for the sound of waves caressing the morning shore. Violet had found a spot on the sand where there wasn't much foot traffic. The group could enjoy a spectacular view of the ocean while they did their healing work. After they left their offerings, each would cast their burdens to Yemoja, the Goddess of the sea.

Violet inserted eight white candles into mason jars and wedged them deep into the sand. She created an entranceway to the circle by planting yellow and white flowers along the path. Three thick

blankets occupied the center of the circle along with sparkling crystals, seashells, folding yoga chairs and an assortment of masks.

Violet's husband, Darryl, had come along to help with the ceremony. His tall, caramel-colored frame moved quietly about inserting scrolls bearing a unique message under each chair. Fate would determine who chose which chair and thereby the message that was channeled specifically for them.

Violet glanced at her watch and saw they had just a few more minutes before the people started arriving. She uncovered a bowl of herb-infused cleansing water and positioned it at the entrance to the circle. Each participant would be asked to purify themselves before they entered.

Violet walked over to her husband and kissed him on the lips.

"Thank you, my love. I couldn't do what I do without you."

He placed his large warm hand on her cheek, kissed her two more times, and quietly moved away. He knew she didn't like to talk too much when she was doing a ceremony. She spoke to him as he continued the task he had been assigned.

"I got a message that two more travelers are coming today. The ancestors say I don't need to do anything special to prepare. Just let it happen. There are also secrets that will be revealed today. One of them is a little sensitive."

Darryl nodded his understanding and said, "If they get out of line, they have to deal with me."

Violet was grateful for his protectiveness. "Don't worry, honey. Everything will be okay."

Delilah and Marcus were the first to arrive. Both of them seemed a little stressed. Delilah was stressed because she hadn't yet told Marcus the news about them not having HIV or that they weren't expecting a baby.

Marcus was anxious because he was going to see his mother after nearly thirty years. Also, he wasn't so sure he was ready to start a serious relationship with Delilah or anyone else.

ANY HEART OPEN

Delilah had her beautiful reddish-brown hair down and wore a white baseball cap to hold it in place. Violet could really see how the Spirits had given her the name *Storm*. And her friend Marcus, aka the *Heartstopper*, looked like he'd just stepped out of *Vogue* magazine.

Violet greeted them at the entry point of the circle. "Alafia and blessings, good people. Please, if you would, dip your hands in this purifying waters to start the process of releasing."

First Delilah and then Marcus bent down and dipped their hands in the warm water.

"It smells delicious. May I ask what's in it?" Delilah asked, smelling her hands.

"Not too many questions, beloved. I want you to go inward. There will be time to talk and ask questions later on. Go ahead and brush your body with your hands like you're fanning something away."

Each followed suit.

"After I smudge you with this sage, I want you to walk to the center of the circle, pick a mask and then choose a seat for the duration of the ritual."

Violet got a psychic hit that Delilah was one of the people who had a secret to tell. The Spirits said that if Delilah faced the truth, it would align her with her deepest desires. If she ran from the truth, it would destroy the progress she'd made in changing her life.

While Marcus and Delilah were choosing their seats, Violet saw Kelvin and Velvet, aka *Joan of Arc*, pull up in separate cars. Kelvin parked and walked over to Velvet's car. The consummate gentleman, he opened the door, took the bag with Velvet's offerings and walked beside her to the entry point of the circle.

Violet recognized Kelvin from the dreams as the *Bookworm*. Velvet told her his real name.

"Violet, this is my...my friend, Kelvin Parsons."

“Greetings Miss Brown.”

“Nice to meet you, Kelvin. Welcome.”

Violet introduced them to Darryl, then explained the process for entering the circle. She watched quietly as they followed her instructions to the T. When Velvet was inside of the circle, she went over and hugged her friend, Delilah, nodded her respect to Marcus and took her seat next to Kelvin.

Baker and his partner, Curtis, were the next to arrive. Curtis could see Baker was not only nervous but stalling getting out of the car.

Papa Joe and Cordelia arrived seconds later in a sleek black limousine. They rolled up to the curb right behind Baker and Curtis.

Curtis took Baker’s hand. “Are you okay? If you aren’t ready to do this, we can wait.”

“No. I have to do this today. It’s time for my parents to know the whole me.”

They got out of the car and walked toward the circle hand-in-hand. Violet greeted them at the entrance with a hearty welcome.

Violet immediately recognized Baker as *Young Buck* from her dreams and his well-dressed partner was definitely the *Man of Steel*.

“Welcome, gentlemen. My name is Violet Brown. And this is my husband, Darryl. It’s good to meet you, Baker. And you too, Curtis. So glad you could join us.”

Baker asked her, “How’d you know who I was? Wait, did the spirits tell you?”

Violet laughed a little and told him, “You look just like your daddy and he told me y’all were coming. I put two and two together.”

“I do favor that old buzzard don’t I.”

Violet explained what they needed to do to enter the circle and left to go prepare to open the ceremony.

ANY HEART OPEN

As she turned to walk away, she paused and told Baker, “Everything will be fine. Just be you.”

He nodded, smiled and walked with Curtis to the bowl of purifying waters.

Darryl welcomed Papa Joe and Cordelia into the circle. He explained what they needed to do before entering the space.

Papa Joe walked over to the bowl. “Good to meet you, son. So I just dip my hands in this water and brush off the bad spirits?”

“Yes, sir. That’s all you need to do.”

Cordelia followed suit. Then they made their way into the circle, picked up a mask, chose their chairs and settled in.

Joe glanced at Baker and his male friend. He had seen the man come by the office but hadn’t known he was the one Baker was involved with. Joe thought he looked like a decent fella. He wondered what his story was and if his parents agreed with his lifestyle.

Once everybody was seated, Violet lit a large bundle of sage. She walked around the circle clockwise, then counter-clockwise, smudging and praying. She recognized the *Aging Buffalo* and his wife, *Mrs. Beautiful*, had joined the collective. When she finished praying, she cleansed herself with the sage.

“Alafia everyone. Alafia means blessings or peace in Yoruba, the language of my ancestors. I’m glad you all have come to take part in this special day of holy endings and new beginnings.”

Violet took a sip of her ginger tea from her thermos and continued.

“In my tradition, it is believed that every human being is born to fulfill a spiritual purpose. To fulfill that purpose, God sometimes aligns us with His helpers here on earth. Some of them may have no earthly ties to us, meaning they will not be connected by blood or marriage. My ancestors called these people our *Egbe*.”

Delilah, being her normal inquisitive self, asked, “How do you spell it?”

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Violet told her, “Beloved, do me a favor and hold the questions, okay?”

Delilah nodded. Velvet cut her eyes at her BFF and mouthed words, *be quiet*.

“A few months ago, I began to dream of a group of people. I had no idea who you were or how we would come to be connected. One by one, you started to arrive. It was then I began to understand the reason for our connection.”

Papa Joe glanced over at Marcus and said, “Marcus is one of my e-bays.”

Cordelia cracked up laughing. “She said, egg-bays not e-bays, Joe.”

Joe had told her the unbelievable story about him and Marcus being siblings. Joe had also told her about his detectives finding Marcus’s mother. Cordelia was deeply happy for them.

Violet dipped her fingers in the bowl with the purifying waters. “What that said, we have some ground rules for today’s healing ceremony. Rule number one, everybody must agree to our confidentiality policy. We’re going deep today. To ensure the protection of people’s privacy, we ask that you please nod your head to indicate consent to our policy.”

Everyone in the group nodded. Darryl looked around the circle to ensure each person had made the agreement.

“Okay, we’re good. Delilah and Marcus please come to the middle of the circle.”

Delilah’s fear kicked in. “Can someone else go first?”

“Rule number two, I run the circle. Are you coming or not?”

Marcus nudged her elbow. They rose and walked to the middle of the circle.

Violet looked past them, off into the distance as messages from Spirit began to flow.

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“You two came together as the result of a tragic event. But your destiny is bigger than that. You came to teach each other an important lesson. Do you know what that lesson is?”

Marcus answered first, “Forgiveness. Respect for women. Unconditional love.”

Violet nodded her approval.

“And you, Delilah?”

“My worth is not defined by my outer appearance or what I do for a man in the bedroom.”

“Very good.”

Violet looked off in the distance again. “Delilah, I’m told that there is something you need to tell Marcus.”

“Now?”

Violet didn’t answer, just stared into Delilah’s eyes.

“I was going to talk to him later. In private.”

Velvet spoke up. “Tell him, Delilah. Tell him what you found out last night.”

“Oh God. Do I have to do it now? Here?”

Violet got a little impatient. “Honey, we don’t have all day. Speak your truth and get free!”

Delilah turned to Marcus. “I finally checked my voicemail messages last night. When I did, there was one from the doctor’s office.”

“You got your results?”

“Not exactly.”

Every eye in the circle was on Marcus and Delilah. Marcus started getting nervous and a little embarrassed.

Papa Joe saw Marcus was getting agitated. “Maybe the boy should talk to his woman privately when they get home.”

Cordelia reminded him of the rules. “Miss Violet said, this is *her* circle and *her* rules.”

Delilah turned around to face Marcus. “The doctor called last night to tell me that they had mistakenly given me somebody

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else's results. I don't have and never had HIV. That means, you probably don't either."

Marcus shot his fist in the air like a canon and said, "Thank you, God! I guess that's why my first test came back, negative. I ain't got it. Thank you, Lord"

Papa Joe shouted, "Praise the Lord!"

Delilah could feel Velvet's eyes on her pushing her to tell him about the baby. If he didn't ask, she wasn't talking. She didn't want to tell him about that in front of everybody.

"Okay, you two can go back to your seat. Velvet and Kelvin, please come forward."

Delilah hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath until she exhaled as they left the middle of the circle.

Velvet's stomach felt like it had butterflies in there doing somersaults.

Kelvin took her hand as they walked to the center of the space. Instantly, she felt safe and protected.

Violet looked over their shoulders and quietly welcomed the ancestors who walked with them into the space.

"Three lessons you have learned from each other. Velvet, you go first."

"Let God choose. Love builds, not destroys. Love is love."

Violet smiled her approval. "Marcus, what about you?"

Before he could answer, Velvet screamed, "Oh God! This can't be happening. No way! Not today, Lord. I ain't ready."

Kelvin let Velvet's hand go and looked around. He saw a tall, Ellen Degeneres looking woman with a scruffy dog walking along the beach.

Violet saw her too. She got the download about who she was at the same time. Another traveler had arrived.

"Call her over here, Velvet."

Sounding short of breath, Velvet answered, "I can't...my voice won't work."

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Violet called out to the woman. “Excuse me! Miss! Yeah, you with the dog. Can you come over here for a minute?”

The woman picked up her dog and started walking toward the circle. Violet turned to ask Darryl to greet her. He was already on it.

“Don’t worry, I got it.”

Darryl smudged the woman from head to toe and had her cleanse in the purifying waters. When the woman reached the entrance point to the circle, she looked at the scene they had going and said, “This seems kind of private. I don’t know if I should intrude.”

Then she saw Velvet.

Velvet said her name. “Samantha Christina Hughes.”

The woman started gasping, almost hyperventilating. Tears flooded her cheeks.

Delilah said, “Get the F out of here. I think that’s her lesbian lover.”

Papa Joe said, “This really is one of them Lifetime movies.”

Violet walked over to the entrance of the circle to greet the woman.

“Do you prefer Sam or Samantha?”

“Sam.”

“Sam, we’re holding a ceremony to help people heal. Your showing up today, at this exact time, is no mistake. Your friend Velvet shared with me what happened between the two of you. She wants to explain why she did what she did and apologize to you.”

“She’s not my friend and nothing happened *between* us. She ghosted me with no explanation. A friend would never treat another friend that way.”

Sam cast an angry glare toward Velvet then calmed herself down.

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“I...I was really led to come here. I just got back in town. I moved to Tennessee after she disappeared. I just couldn’t stay here. Too many memories.”

Violet tried to comfort her. “I understand. Would you like some water? How about your puppy—is he thirsty?”

“Yes, I’ll take some water. My puppy will too. And yes, I’ll come into the circle. It’s time for me to be happy again.”

Velvet was crying like a baby. When she saw Sam, she wanted to run over and hug her. The guilt made her feel like crawling into a hole and disappearing. She also hadn’t told Kelvin this part of what happened after her and Michael split.

Delilah couldn’t wait to chime in. Velvet had pushed her to confess her secret to Marcus. Now she was on the hot seat.

“Velvet, don’t you have a little confession to make?”

Violet intervened. “Delilah, whose circle is this?”

Delilah did a zipper motion across her lips, indicating renewed silence.

Sam’s dog relaxed and stretched out on a blanket. Sam walked over to where Velvet was standing and stood in between her and Kelvin.

Violet spoke up. “A long while ago, Sam and Velvet were connected. Velvet cared deeply for Sam but knew that her heart was destined for another path. She was afraid to tell Sam and ran away from the truth instead of facing it head on.”

Kelvin kept trying to lock eyes with Velvet but she wouldn’t look up. From what he could gather, Velvet had been romantically involved with the woman standing between them and ghosted her.

Sam cleared her throat and spoke the words to Velvet that she had carried like a bag of rocks around her neck for over two years.

“I loved you. I would’ve given my life to protect you. You led me on, made me believe we had a future together. Then you just disappeared into thin air. You treated me like I meant nothing to

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you. Like I was a piece of trash. What kind of person does that to somebody? Do you know how much you hurt me?"

Velvet turned to her and said, "Matthew 7. Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Sam asked her, "What are you talking about?"

Velvet brushed away more hot tears. "I get it now. I couldn't understand how my ex had done the same thing to me that I did to you. I hated him. Hated him so much that I allowed my brokenness to hurt someone the same way. Does that make me a heartless monster? I'm afraid not. Was what I did wrong? Absolutely. And the same way I want you and God to forgive me, is the way I must forgive him. I'm sorry, Sam. What I did was horrible. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

"I've waited almost three years to hear those words. I want you to know that yes, I would've been disappointed had you told me the truth. But I would've understood and gotten over it eventually. Nevertheless, I forgive you. For me and for you. And because I want my life back."

Velvet started crying again.

Sam told her, "I sincerely hope you're happy."

Velvet looked over at Kelvin. "Actually, I'm very happy."

Sam turned toward Kelvin. "Is this...this your partner?"

Kelvin stepped in between them. "Yep. I'm her man. Name is Kelvin. Sorry to meet like this but..."

"It's okay. Nice to meet you, Kelvin."

Sam turned to Violet and said, "God answered my prayers today. Thank you for inviting me but I'm gonna take off and let you all get back to your ceremony. Velvet, maybe we can do lunch sometimes."

Under his breath, Kelvin said, "Not unless it's the last supper and Jesus is sitting at the table."

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Velvet gave his arm a lovetap. “I would like that, Sam. You take care of yourself.”

Sam snapped her fingers twice and her little dog came running. She exited the circle as mysteriously as she had entered.

Delilah walked over, opened her arms to her bestie and whispered in her ear, “I love you, BFF. You did it. You faced your demons and slayed the dragon.”

“That was the hardest conversation I ever had in my life. Especially in front of an entire audience.”

Violet went back to center stage. “We’re almost to the finish line. Is everyone ok to keep going?”

The group nodded their head in agreement.

“Baker and Curtis, please join me in the center of the circle.”

As Baker and Curtis walked into the nucleus, Papa Joe put his finger in the air and requested a bathroom break.

“Bathroom break, Boss?”

Papa Joe was trying to be funny by coining a line from the movie, *Shawshank Redemption*. The group chuckled, but Violet saw right through his act.

“Your timing is interesting, Mr. Wainwright. Do you think you could wait until Baker and his partner finish their part of the ceremony?”

Papa Joe’s eyebrows took on a whole vibe. “What you mean by *ceremony*? They ain’t getting hitched are they?”

Cordelia gave her husband the side-eye. “Joe. Cut it out. This is serious.”

“I didn’t know Baker and his friend were gonna jump the broom.”

Baker rolled his eyes and corrected him. “Daddy, we are not getting married today. And Curtis isn’t my *friend*, he’s my life partner.”

“Okay, okay. Hi Curtis. I’m Baker’s father.”

“Hello, Mr. Wainwright. Nice to meet you.”

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“Look, when you’re my age, when you gotta go, you gotta go.”

Violet felt intuitively that there was something else going on and agreed to let him step away.

“Make it quick, Joe. We’ll wait for you to come back.”

They munched on fruit, cheese and crackers while they waited for Joe to return from the bathroom. What they didn’t know was Joe had left to take a call from his team. They had picked up Marcus’s mother from the hospital and were en route to the location.

Kelvin put his arm around Velvet which made her smile as wide as the Grand Canyon. Ten minutes later, Papa Joe was back and the group returned to the process of spiritual healing.

“Okay everybody. Let’s support Buck—I mean Baker and Curtis. Curtis, what lessons has Baker come in your life to teach you?”

Curtis stepped back, stared Baker in the eyes and told them, “Lesson number one--Baker taught me patience. He also taught me that love can be expressed in many forms. Baker also taught me to stand up for what I deserve. A few months ago, I told him I was releasing him as my partner. And that when he was ready to have a full relationship with me, to get in touch. If I was still available, I might give him a shot. That wasn’t easy because I really love this man. But I knew it was what I needed to do for me. I will always love you, Baker.”

Violet was about to invite Baker to share his lessons, but before she could call on him, he stepped forward to speak his truth.

Baker turned away from Curtis and toward his father. “Lesson number one. God don’t make no mistakes. I am a child of the Most High. I belong in this world, as who and what I am.”

Everybody except Papa Joe started clapping. Baker continued.

“Lesson number two. It’s not who I love but how I love that defines me. And lesson number three...”

Baker turned back around to face Curtis.

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“Curtis, you loved me even when I hated and was ashamed of myself. You endured the lies I lived to be accepted by strangers who didn’t give a damn about me. You cooked for me when I was sick. You celebrated every success I had.

You did all of that while I hid you and our love from the world. From this day on, I will treat you like the priceless diamond you are. Curtis, I love you. I’ve always loved you. And anyone who can’t accept that doesn’t deserve to be a part of my life anymore.”

The group burst into applause again.

Cordelia jumped up from her chair and walked over to her son.

“I love you, Baker. Always have, always will. I accept you just like you are. And Curtis, welcome to the family. I’m Baker’s mother, Miss Cordelia.”

Curtis was crying. Baker was crying. The whole group was slinging snot.

Except for Papa Joe.

Papa Joe stood to the side, staring at his son. His sweet boy, Baker Joseph Wainwright, the second. The child he would kill an army to protect. He got up and walked over to where the fruit of his loins was standing. Baker lowered his eyes to the ground.

“Raise your head, son and face me like a man. Don’t ever put your head down. You’re a Wainwright. You’re *my* son.”

Baker lifted his head and looked his father in the eye.

“I’m not gonna lie, this wasn’t easy for me to accept. I was worried more about what the world would think, when I should’ve been worried about you. I see now that what people think isn’t important. Even though it’s gonna take me some time to understand how all of this works, from this day on I will respect you and your life partner. And Curtis, you’re welcome in our home anytime.”

Baker threw his arms around his father. “Thank you, Daddy. That’s the best gift you ever gave me in my entire life.”

Cordelia hugged Joe and Baker at the same time.

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“Group hug.” Curtis threw his arms around the three of them.

Papa Joe said, “Okay, that’s enough.”

The group cracked up on that one, but Violet knew the lesson had been learned and that their family was on the path to authentic healing.

“Curtis and Baker, you may be seated. Cordelia and Joe, please remain.”

Papa Joe inhaled and exhaled a sigh of relief. It wasn’t as bad as he thought it was going to be. So far, so good.

Once they were inside of the nucleus, Violet asked, “Cordelia, what lessons did Joe come into your life to teach you?”

Cordelia turned to her husband and said, “Lesson number one. I learned that I couldn’t fully love you until I loved me. The day we sat down with Miss Violet, I realized that your love language is how you provide for your family. I didn’t acknowledge that before because I was focused on the things you didn’t do. But the way you’ve treated me since that day in Miss Violet’s store is what my soul has been craving for twenty years.”

Papa Joe walked toward her, but Violet stopped him. “Hold on a minute, Joe. She’s not finished. Two more lessons.”

Cordelia smiled at Violet and continued. “Lesson number two. I learned that marriage has seasons. Sometimes those winters can feel like they’re never gonna end. And sometimes, you have to put a few more logs on the fire to heat things up and melt the bricks of ice that can get in between two people who love each other. Work, jobs, friends, children—sometimes you have to push it all to the side and tend to the one you love.”

Amens echoed from the group.

“And lesson number three. When you think you can’t walk another step beside the person you love, that’s when you need to talk to somebody that can see into the future. Because when we’re angry or disappointed, we might not remember all the good times and the blessings we’ve shared. I thank God that we went back

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to the place where this story began. I remember sitting in that restaurant twenty years ago and looking out at the ocean. I felt like the luckiest woman on earth. And that's how I feel today."

Violet handed Cordelia a tissue.

"That was beautiful, and you *are* lucky, Cordelia. And blessed. Joe, are you ready? Three lessons that Miss Cordelia came to teach you."

"Yes, I'm ready. Thank you, Miss Violet."

Joe looked around the circle at each one of their faces.

"Well, this has been one helluva day. Actually, it's been a helluva month. Kind of like a roller coaster that you can't get off of. Every time I thought it was coming to a stop, we went up another mountain. But we're here. I guess life ain't gonna never be the same after today."

The group clapped in agreement.

"You asked me about the lessons my wife came to teach me. That's a whole book right there. I would say she has been my greatest teacher. For somebody to love a selfish, foolish man like me, for this long, they gotta be a saint. To forgive a man as many times as she has forgiven me—that's the kind of love only God can give."

Everybody nodded their heads knowingly.

"So I guess lesson number one is—what you got is always more important than what you're trying to get. Don't lose what you have, chasing what you're trying to get."

Velvet sounded off like she was in church. "Preach, Mr. Joe! Tell the truth!"

"Lesson number two. I know the good book tells us to respect our mothers and fathers so our days will be longer but parents have to respect their children too. Even when they don't agree with their decisions. Especially if their children ain't hurting nobody. If they're happy, if they're getting that bag, that's what matters."

Violet went to church on that one. "Yes, sir! Speak on it!"

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Darryl gently caressed Violet's hand to calm her down.

"And finally, lesson number three and the most important one of all. Leave the streets in the streets. Especially when you already have a queen on your throne. Some of us men think we're getting away with something going behind our wife's backs. But we lose a piece of ourselves every single time we step out. I opened my bible this morning for the first time in many years. And the Lord turned the page to this passage:

Proverbs 31: 11-12. When the heart of her husband trusts in her, he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not harm, all the days of her life.

My Cordelia gave me my son and made us a beautiful home. You showed me what God's love is in human form. And I wouldn't have been able to do none of this if it wasn't for her. And so, on this day, I ask you, with a renewed heart and spirit, to take my hand in marriage. To be my wife, again."

Papa Joe kneeled down on one knee and pulled a small black box out of his pocket.

Delilah stood up and shouted, "Go 'head Papa Joe! Break out the black box!"

"A ten-carat diamond in eighteen-karat gold for the woman I love."

Cordelia extended her left hand, and he slid the ring on her ring finger.

"It's beautiful, Joe. I love it."

"Wait a minute. I ain't finished."

He went in his pocket and pulled out an envelope.

"This here is our airline tickets. We're going on a trip around the world. Two months of traveling, resting, making love and enjoying all this hard work and sacrifice. And while we're in Paris, we're gonna renew our vows under that Eiffel Tower. And I'm paying for everybody to come and witness the wedding of the decade."

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Delilah lost it when he said that. “Oh, my God. I’m going to Paris! First class!”

Joe looked over at her. “Business class, gal. I ain’t no fool.”

Everybody fell out laughing.

Cordelia tugged on his hand for him to get up off his knee.

“The answer is yes, Joseph Wainwright. I will marry you. I will be your wife again.”

Everybody started cheering.

Violet stepped back into the nucleus.

“Joe, Cordelia, you are complete. Congratulations on the renewal of your vows. Darryl and I will see you in Paris.”

Papa Joe turned to Violet and said, “I know you will. Who else but you is gonna to marry us?”

“I’d be honored.”

Everybody clapped and cheered again while Papa Joe and Cordelia returned to their seats.

“Okay. We have one last thing to do before our closing ceremony. Each of you have received a mask and a scroll with a spiritual message to help you stay on the path of your destiny. Please reach under your chair, pick up your mask and retrieve your scroll.”

Chapter

Thirty-Nine



Any Heart Open

They dug beneath their chairs, retrieved their masks and the small envelope Darryl had placed there earlier that morning that held their scroll. Violet explained the final step of their healing process.

“These masks symbolize the old you. You will wear these masks for the last time today. Please place them on your faces now.”

One by one, they put on the masks symbolizing their old selves.

“How does it feel to put the masks back on?”

Delilah said, “It doesn’t feel right anymore. It’s not who I am.”

Everybody nodded their heads in agreement.

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“Good. That’s exactly what you’re supposed to feel.”

Violet held an envelope up. “Inside the envelope is a sacred scroll with a message I received from spirit during my meditation in preparation for today’s ceremony. You each chose the message specifically for you when you picked your seat today. Now, in the same order that you shared your lessons, please share the message on your sacred scroll. No commenting on the messages, just read it and let it sink in.”

Delilah went first.

“My scroll says, *lies in the past hurt more than truth in the present. Truth will always lead you to freedom.* Word, that is so true.”

Violet reminded, “No commenting on the message in the scroll. Just feel it. Marcus, it’s your turn.”

“*Love does not operate on worldly timing. Love has its own clock. God will always show you when it’s the right time to love.*”

Everybody nodded and smiled, but everyone honored Violet’s request for no comments.

“Velvet, it’s your turn.”

“*Love never wears a costume. True love cannot disguise itself. You are always dressed for love if you are being you.*”

“Kelvin.”

“*Life, like love, never ends or begins. It is a continuous flow of receiving. Get and stay in the rhythm.*”

“Curtis.”

“My scrolls says, *somebody or something wants to marry you. What will be your answer?*”

Delilah had jokes. “Curtis, that’s my scroll!”

Violet did the zipper lips motion.

“Sorry!”

“Baker.”

“I want to know his answer.”

“No commenting. For now.”

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Curtis turned to face him. “The answer is yes, Baker. Yes, I will marry you.”

Violet smiled and said, “Y’all are being disobedient.”

Everybody cracked up laughing. Except for Papa Joe.

Baker opened his scroll and read.

“My scroll says, *you are more than what you do for a living. Your dreams matter.*”

“Cordelia.”

“My scroll says...*you are falling in love with life again. Give yourself permission to be happy.*”

Cordelia stopped trying to hold back the tears and let them flow.

Violet gave her a tissue and said, “Joe, it’s your turn.”

“Miss Violet, I think somebody gave me this one on purpose.”

Violet calmly told him. “Read your scroll please. Don’t comment.”

“*You’ve earned the right to do absolutely nothing. Rest. Be happy. Enjoy life.*”

They all howled with laughter.

“Beautiful. Now, everybody gather up your offerings. We’re going to visit the ocean.”

Each of them retrieved their watermelon and white flowers. Darryl stayed behind to stand guard over the space. Together, the group made their pilgrimage to the place where dry sand turned to blue water.

Violet rang a big copper bell and greeted the ocean in the way of her ancestors.

“We thank you, Mother Ocean, for watching over us as we shed our old selves and give birth to a new spirit within. We offer these fruits and flowers in memory of our beloved ancestors. We thank God for all the lessons and the blessings of our journey together. Ibase!”

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Violet instructed them to let the watermelons roll into the ocean and allow the current to take them out to sea. Then they were to pray, ask God for what they needed and toss the flowers into the water.

“If the ocean takes the melons into her belly, your prayers are received. If she doesn’t, you still have work to do.”

Each of them rolled their bright green melons into the water. They followed with the white flowers. A few minutes later, all but one of the melons had disappeared into the surf.

“One melon returned. Anybody know whose melon that is?”

Delilah stepped forward.

“Delilah, what else do you need to release?”

“The anger and hurt over how my mother treated me.”

“Get down on your knees and ask God to cleanse your heart of any anger you still carry toward your mother.”

Delilah dropped to her knees and started praying. A minute or two later, she stood up, walked to the edge of the shore and tossed her watermelon back into the ocean.

Violet walked up next to her. “Pray not only for your mother but for the ancestors whose pain she carried and passed onto you.”

Delilah followed directions. She watched her melon bob for a few minutes. It acted like it wasn’t sure it wanted to go. Then it was swallowed by an angry wave and floated out to sea.

Violet told her, “It’s done.”

“Okay, on the count of three, I want all of you to throw your masks into the water and allow yourselves to be reborn into the person God created you to be. One, two, three! Now toss them into the air and let them drop into the ocean!”

The masks of their past floated on the wind and were immediately sucked into the ocean’s watery womb. They all cheered and celebrated their spiritual victory.

Violet gave them a final command. “Now cross your arms and slowly back away from the sea. After you get a few feet away,

you can turn around but don't look back. Leave the past where it belongs and needs to be."

When they got back to the circle, they started to gather their things to leave. As they were saying their goodbyes to each other, another long, black limousine glided up to the curb.

Delilah was the first to notice it.

"Are we expecting someone else?"

Violet told Darryl, "I knew there was going to be one more person coming to the circle. They are here for the Heartstopper. She's here for Marcus."

Joe nodded to Cordelia and walked over to where his baby brother was standing.

Everybody turned around to see who was getting out of the limo. When Marcus looked up, he saw an older Black woman dressed in African attire walking their way. He turned around and looked at Papa Joe for confirmation.

"Is that....is that my mother?"

"She's here, baby brother. You ready to meet her?"

"Yeah. I think so. My feet won't move."

Papa Joe put his arm around his brother's shoulder and escorted him to the entrance of the circle.

Marcus couldn't believe it was her. He had dreamed of her many times. In every single dream, she wore an African dress with a head wrap just like the woman standing before him.

"Is that really you? Are you my mother?"

"Yes, son. It's me. I'm your mother. The new name I took on when I had to leave America is Josephine."

Marcus dropped everything in his hands and ran to her. He fell on his knees sobbing and crying, holding on to her ankles.

She fell onto her knees beside him and then fell backward into a sitting position on the sand. He laid his head in her lap. Her index finger traced his jawline, nose, eyebrows, and lips. She saw

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her features in his face. She knew without a doubt that he was the baby she'd left behind almost thirty years ago.

Marcus told her, "I've been waiting for this moment all my life. To see you. To smell your skin. To feel your touch. To hear your heartbeat."

"I'm here, my son. I'm so sorry I left you. I should've taken you with me. I didn't know what else to do. I wanted you to have a future. You couldn't have that with me. I was on the run."

"I know, Mama. It's okay."

Papa Joe walked up behind them. He had picked up Marcus's things.

When Josephine turned around and looked at him, her eyes got big.

"You're his son, aren't you?"

"Yes, mam. The man you shot was my daddy."

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry I took your father away."

"I'm sorry he left you when you needed him the most."

Back in the circle, everybody was quiet. Violet had instructed them to pray for Marcus, his mother and for Joe's healing.

Violet let Marcus and his mother sit there for a while as the group finished cleaning up. As hard as it was to say goodbye, Violet knew the time had come for them to leave.

Her spirit was tired and she needed to eat something before she passed out from exhaustion. She summoned Marcus and his mother into the circle. She prepared herself to release them all back into the world to live the lessons they'd learned.

Chapter

Forty



The Hearts Are Open

“**I** pray your lives have been transformed in a way that will continue to be a blessing. It was my honor to be your guide, your teacher and your healer. I release you back into the world to live the lessons you have learned. You know where to find me if you need me again. Just come to the Sacred Trees.”

Marcus, his mother, and Delilah were the first to depart. They thanked Violet for everything and Delilah promised to come and get a reading. Violet told her she would be praying for her mother.

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Violet made Marcus promise to take off some time to rest and spend a few days with his mother. He wholeheartedly agreed. His mother had a hotel already paid for by Joe for as long as she needed, but Marcus had told her to check out and come stay with him. After a little cajoling, she finally agreed.

Baker and Curtis were going to meet friends for dinner. Baker told Violet that Curtis was moving in with him over the weekend. They were both very happy about living in the same house.

Kelvin and Velvet told Violet they had dinner plans and at the end of the week, they were going on a short vacation to wine country. Kelvin told Violet he wanted to schedule a book signing for her at his store when he got back, and then he wanted to get a reading.

Papa Joe and Cordelia were hugging and kissing like two teenagers in love. Joe said he wanted to talk to Violet about helping him find his father's people. She promised to help him when they got back from Paris. Violet told Papa Joe to get to know Curtis. He promised her that he would.

Joe and Cordelia invited Marcus, Delilah and Marcus's mother over for dinner to talk about him helping Josephine re-enter society. They also invited Curtis and Baker. Violet was ecstatic that they were working on becoming one big, happy family.

When Delilah, Marcus and Marcus's mother got to the house, Marcus sat in the living room showing his mom photos albums from his childhood. Delilah made up the bed in his guest room, cooked a light meal and made Josephine a pot of hot water for tea. His mother was exhausted and turned in not long after they got home.

After his mother was tucked in for the night, Marcus and Delilah went upstairs to his bedroom.

Marcus told Delilah, "I want you to stay with me for a few days. Can you do that?"

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“Yes. But I do need to go and see my mother. I talked to her doctor this morning before we came to the beach. She’s stable and getting stronger but I know she needs to see me. She actually apologized for the things she said to me when I told her I had HIV.”

“Man, that’s...that’s huge. Miss Violet is helping everybody be better. How about you, Delilah. You good? You feeling ok?”

She knew he wasn’t asking how she was doing but about the baby he thought she was carrying. His baby.

“Marcus, I need to tell you something else. It might change the way you feel about me. And if it does, that’s ok too.”

“I can’t handle too much more today. If you have a killer disease or something, can you tell me about it tomorrow?”

“It’s nothing like that, but it is serious.”

“Ok, go ahead and tell me. I’m taking a few days off after this, anyway.”

“Marcus, I found out that I’m not pregnant.”

“What? Aw, man. I already ordered expecting father books, baby clothes, rubber ducks and stuff.”

“Baby clothes? How’d you know what the sex of the baby was going to be?”

“I got some of them unisex baby clothes. I guess we won’t be needing them.”

“Yeah, you dodged another bullet. And now you don’t have to be with me...unless you want to.”

“It might sound crazy but I’m a little disappointed about the baby. I had wrapped my head around being a dad. But I know it’s best. We weren’t ready for a child.”

“I felt the same way. That’s why I didn’t tell you at the beach.”

“So those fools mixed up both of your tests?”

“They sure did. I’m suing their asses. As soon as I pass the bar.”

Marcus was quiet for a minute. Then he scooted over on the bed next to her told her,

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“Delilah, I thought a lot about this. I’d like to start over and get to know you.”

Delilah smiled and told him, “I’d like that too, Marcus.”

“Cool. Can we talk about it in a couple of days? I just want to eat, sleep and spend some time with my mother.”

“Of course. I’m gonna take off. Call me when you’re up to it.”

“You...you’re not staying?”

“No, I need to see about my mother and I need some time to process all of this. I mean, just yesterday I thought I was pregnant and dying.”

“I can understand that. I’ll see you soon, Miss Winters. And I’m looking forward to dating you.”

He stood up, put his hands on her hips and pulled her to him. Then he kissed her on the lips until she started feeling his heat.

“You better watch it, playa. Kissing me like that. That’s how we got in all this trouble to begin with.”

“Yeah, maybe we should be like Kelvin and your friend Velvet and do the celibate thing.”

“You done gone too far now. Let’s just keep our hearts open for whatever God has in store.”

“I can flow with that. Pure platinum is forever, baby.”

“If I ever hear you say those words again.”

They fell out laughing at that.



AT LAX AIRPORT, PAPA JOE AND CORDELIA WERE BOARDING THE plane on the way to Montego Bay, Jamaica. They took their seats in Business Class, reclined to relax mode, munched on warm nuts and sipped on chilled OJ.

Joe leaned over and kissed his wife on the lips. Then he raised his glass to toast in a new era of their lives.

“To the Wainwrights!”

“To us.” Cordelia told him.

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“A whole new beginning. Just me and you.”

“Amen to that!”



IN A LUXURIOUS APARTMENT IN MARINA DEL REY, A YOUNG WOMAN received news from her doctor that in seven months, she was going to be a mother.

“Pregnant? Well, damn. I didn’t think Joe’s fish were still swimming. Okay, thanks doc.”

After she hung up with the doctor, she dialed Papa Joe’s number. A recording said the number was disconnected. She hung up and called the offices of Pure Platinum music label. They told her Papa Joe was out of the office indefinitely.

She yelled out loud, “He let his old ass wife snatch my wig off and then had me kicked out of the building. Now he done changed his cell and won’t take my calls at the office. Alright, Mr. Joe. You wanna play games. Here we go.”



BACK IN LOS ANGELES, BAKER TOOK THE HELM AT PURE PLATINUM music label. Marcus began his new role as COO. They had just finished a meeting with the team leads when Baker’s assistant handed him an urgent message.

“Some woman keeps calling asking for your father. I told her he was out of the office indefinitely. She called back and asked to speak to you. Said if you didn’t call her back, her lawyer would be in touch.”

After she left, Marcus told Baker, “Sounds like one of Joe’s chippies has her panties in a bunch. I’d jump on that if I were you. Shit like that can snowball on a brother.”

Baker nodded and told him, “My parents are doing really good and I don’t want anything to mess that up. Can you handle this?”

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“Yeah, sure. If it’s above my head, I may have to pull you in.”

“Cool. Hit me up as soon as you have the intel.”

Marcus went down the hall to his office and called the woman. She picked up on the first ring.

“Is that you, Joe? This is Shaunice. I got some news for you. You done got me knocked up. I’m gonna need some cheddar to make this go away.”

“Uh, this isn’t Joe. This is Marcus. I work with Joe.”

“This is that fine ass brothah that dresses real nice and sits down the hall. I know who you are. You have the authority to write checks?”

“Not really. But I’ll pass along the information you gave me and we’ll be in touch. We will be there to support you through this.”

“Once this little mess is over, maybe you and me can hook up.”

“Sorry but I’m married with children.”

“She don’t have to know. It can be our little secret.”

“Darn. You’re breaking up, Shaunice. I’ll call you back when I have more information.”

After Marcus hung up he said, “Damn, Joe. Wreckage from the past is already trying to rob you of your future.”



DELILAH WALKED DOWN THE HALL TO HER MOTHER’S HOSPITAL ROOM. She carried a beautiful bouquet of colorful flowers. She had made sure to include her mother’s favorite Birds of Paradise.

She was surprised to see her mother upright, standing at the window, staring outside. She had a walker next to her but she wasn’t using it.

Reverend Felicia greeted her daughter without turning around.

“Hi Delilah. I knew you were coming to see me.”

“Hi Mama.”

“I dreamed about you earlier today. You were at the beach. You were happy and walking around with the young man that was here with you a couple of days ago.”

“That’s interesting because I was at the beach today.”

“They say when you almost die, it makes your intuition stronger.”

Delilah didn’t answer. The thought of her mother dying was too traumatizing and scary.

“Mama, do we have to talk about that? You’re doing good. God is going to heal you completely.”

“They can’t believe I’m walking around. But when God is for you, no one can be against you. I’m not one hundred percent yet but I feel pretty good.”

“Come sit down, Mama. You need some help?”

“Yes, please. I can walk, but I’m still a little wobbly.”

Delilah helped her over to the bed.

“I called my lawyer today. I gave you power of attorney over me and all my assets. Delilah, I’m sorry for how I acted and the things I said to you the other day. My mother was so hard on me. Nothing I did was ever good enough. I don’t want to be like her anymore. You’re smart, determined and beautiful. I love you. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“I love you too, Mama. And those words mean everything to me. But I want you to relax now. And let me take care of you. I brought some of your favorite chicken noodle soup.”

“The doctors say that going forward, I need to eat a low sodium, low carb, low-fat diet. So I guess I’m gonna have to start eating at your nasty vegan restaurants.”

Delilah fell out laughing and told her, “There’s the mother I know and love.”

“You don’t have to eat a carrot and a piece of celery any more. They have soul food vegan places and you’ll love it, Mama. I’m

gonna teach you how to cook the dishes you love but in a new way. We'll do your nutrition plan together. How about that?"

"Thank you, baby."

They visited for a while and watched an old rerun of *I Love Lucy*. When her mother fell asleep, Delilah packed up to go home. The nurse stopped her in the hall to give her the update.

"Your mother is doing really well. It's nothing short of a miracle. They're sending her home on Friday. She'll need a nurse with her for the first few weeks."

"I'll take care of that."

"You're all she talks about. She told us that you're gonna be an attorney. She was so proud of you."

"Really? I mean, that's so sweet of her. And that's good news about her condition."

"It must be nice to have a mother who is so appreciative and affirming."

Delilah smiled and told her, "It sure is."



VIOLET WAS IN A DEEP SLEEP. ALL OF THE SPIRITS WHO HAD BEEN visiting her had departed. All the rooms in her spiritual house were empty.

Then, like an invisible door had opened, she walked into a room and found herself in a busy airport. She looked out of the window to the spot where the planes pull up to the gate. The wind was blowing so hard it looked like they were in the eye of a hurricane. People ran for storm shelters. She saw a trash can fly through the air and crash into the window. The glass didn't break, but it did crack. Violet ran for cover in the nearest bathroom to take cover. When she swung the door open, a teenage girl was sitting on the floor with a handful of pills in her right hand.

"Don't do it. You have so much to live for."

The girl lifted her hand to toss the pills into her mouth.

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Violet screamed, “Noooooooooooo!”

The scream woke her up. She shot up in the bed like a jack in the box. Darryl turned over and said, “Oh Lord. The people are back?”

Violet told him, “There’s a whole new group of people. They’re stuck at an airport in the middle of a bad storm.”

Darryl asked, “Can somebody else save them? We’re tired.”

“You’re right. We do need a vacation.”

“Go on back to sleep. And baby, please don’t dream.”



Other titles by Love Ta'Shia Asanti

- * The Sacred Door: A Spiritual Path to Power Living (Noble Trinity Media)
- * The Master Breakthrough: A 24 Hour Spiritual Revolution (Noble Trinity Media)
- * The Seer: Legacy of Stone & Spirit (Noble Trinity Media)
- * The Bones Do Talk (Glover Lane Press)
- * Sheep & the Wolves (Noble Trinity Media)
- * Tapestries of Faith-Anthology (Glover Lane Press)
- * Letters to My Bully-Anthology (Glover Lane Press)
- * To book Love at your event, to speak to your book club visit: Sheep & the Wolves (Noble Trinity Media)



Acknowledgments

TO D PEPPER MASSEY. THANK YOU FOR YOUR LOVING AND unwavering support through the birth of another of my literary babies! Thank you for being the first eyes to all my creative musings. None of these books would be possible without you. I love you so much! ETL

To Jacquelyn “Pinky” Kennedy. Thank you for listening to my creative utterings on highways, hotel rooms and plane rides and all the fab meals that kept me going while I was writing this book! I love you with all my heart! Read the book Panuka! LOL.

To my daughter, Danielle and my grandchildren, Khalil, Lavelle, Kaelan and Malcolm, remember you can be ANYTHING you want! Dream big.

To my spiritual teacher and warrior sister, Betty Henderson, thank you for believing in, encouraging and supporting me with

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this and all my goals and dreams. You are so amazing and I love you!

A special shout-out to all who people who supported my attending the International Writer's Retreat produced by Thrive Entrepreneurs & Rainmaker Publishing which was the catalyst for many breakthroughs with my writing. It means the world to me that so many support my dreams. Thank you, especially to my powerhouse publisher, Naja Hayward, my IWR cohorts-Carol and Erika, for your love, patience and support.

Thank you to my bio and the Massey family, I love you with all my heart. Especially to my brother, Francis and nieces Monique, Shawntel and Toni and daughter Danielle, as well as all my brothers and sister, grandchildren, cousins, nieces and nephews. I am because you are....

To my dearest friends Iya "Kaykay" Nanina Ra, Cleo Manago, Jeff Fard, LaQuetta Shamblee, Jeffrey King, Sharon Seigel, Vallerie Wagner, Cathy Phelps, thank you for always supporting my writing and for being my friends through thick and thin and for supporting my success in ways that made a huge difference. I love you!

To my chosen family who are the wind beneath my wings, Oloye Ifa Karade, Iya Sokoya Karade, Julia Sangodare, Alexis Pauline, Geevani Singh, Jenenne Macklin, Naji Ali, Thomasina Jackson, Laurence Pinckney, James Saunders, Alexis McSween, Preston Vargas, Oshunike Ifadoyin, Sangotade Luis Diaz Figueroa, Senakhu Donald, Queen Oyade Hollins, Suzanne Woolston, Marci Akoma, Olorisha Osundara, Akilah Osunlade, Pat Munson, Awo Lou Florez, India Omiosun and JJ Kayode Harville Omelagah, Rory McMahan, Iyalosa Olori, Nicole Smith Johnson, Brad Smith, Peter Stocke, Talon Ifakemi, Michael Nobleza, Olorisha Ifasina, Fiona Omisaide, Oriade Harbor, Nauddy Meriweather, Sister Meisha, Almeta Corbin and all my Godchildren, too many to list. To my babies Zannie, Denise, Deborah, Crystal and Anne-

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-thank you for your support and faith in me. To my teachers, Michael Datcher, Peter J. Harris, Dr. Haki Madhubuti, Amiri Baraka, Ayofemi Folayan (Ibae), Akilah Oliver (Ibae) and Sonia Sanchez--thank you for helping to birth the words in me. And to the entire World Stage Family, Conney Williams, V. Kali, Kamau Daood, Imani Tolliver! Love you.

To all the book clubs, book reviewers, friends and family who will buy or have bought, read and reviewed my books--you are the reason I write. Thank you for affirming my life purpose.

TO THE WORLD-THIS QUOTE FROM MY
MOTHER IS MY MESSAGE TO YOU:

***“TRUE LOVE IS SOMETHING THAT THE
BLIND CAN SEE AND THE DEAF CAN HEAR.”
FLORENCE WALLACE MCGAW***



About Any Heart Open



4TH NOVEL IN THE VIOLET BROWN PSYCHIC SERIES, *ANY HEART OPEN* is a story about the intersections between faith, family, sexuality and love and the ways religion can heal and unite or divide and destroy. In *Any Heart Open*, we meet six people whose hearts have been shattered by abuse, discrimination, betrayal and lies. From homophobia to religious extremism, infidelity to miseducation about HIV and AIDS, these players learn lessons and wisdoms that bring them closer to being the souls God envisioned. And none of it would be possible without the wisdom and insight of the prophetess and neighborhood psychic, Violet Brown.



LOVE TASHIA ASANTI is an award-winning fiction writer, journalist, filmmaker, poet and television personality. Ta’Shia’s essays, short stories and editorials have appeared in distinguished magazines, books, anthologies, journals and newspapers such as *Essence Magazine*, *Poets & Writers* and many others.

The author of eight books (*The Seer*, *The Bones Do Talk*, *Sheep & the Wolves*, *Any Heart Open*, *The Master Breakthrough*, *The Sacred Door*, *Fluid: Out of Darkness Comes Light*, *Tapestries of Faith*, *Letters To My Bully*), Ta’Shia has studied with renowned fiction writers and poets including Michael Datcher, Sonia Sanchez, Peter J. Harris and Haki Madhubuti. Ta’Shia is the recipient of the Kathleen E. Morris Award for Best Contemporary Fiction and the Seed Scholarship Award given by the International Black Writers and Artists Organization to a writer with exceptional promise. TaShia was named a Lambda Fellow and awarded a highly competitive scholarship award from the Lambda Literary Foundation to attend their distinguished UCLA Writer’s Program. More about Love’s work can be found at www.officialtashiaasanti.com