

Chapter One

On the morning of July 15th, 2018, I woke up covered in a cold sweat with my heart racing inside my chest. My mind trying to conjure the explanation for the volcano of emotions erupting inside of me mentally. I was in bed alone as the shadow of the moon crept through the sheer curtains of my bedroom window. My body felt like every blood cell inside of me was on fire. My mouth dry as cotton as I placed my hands against my chest to reassure myself that I was still alive.

You're okay Angelle. You're going to be okay.

I began to chant repeatedly. I glanced at the digital clock resting on my nightstand. In bold red letters, 4:45 am stared back at me. It was hard to describe the agony and frustration taking over me. I wanted to escape the confines of my physical body and

run through the door. My reality was crushing me by the minute. I felt like I was being suffocated alive, yet there was no one there holding me against my will.

As my breathing began to normalize I climbed out of my bed and planted my feet firmly inside the plush carpet. I wobbled slightly as I searched for my balance.

Surrounded in the sea of beautiful things I had acquired over the years. I felt the loneliest within this single moment. There was no one there to hold me or rub my back. Part of me felt as if this was what I deserved. That perhaps I was to blame for the vacancy in my bed. The frequent disappointment in my life and the breakdown of my relationships. Nobody wanted to put up with my shit. I had to put the pieces of my shit together each time I fell apart.

I made my way to the hall bathroom and turned on the light. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror. My mother olive brown skin stared back at me. Each of her facial features duplicated across my face. I was my mother's daughter. The spitting image of a woman in turmoil and confusion at the same age. I run my hands across my full supple lips and smirk. My mother used to always say that a woman's life is defined by the width of her smile. Right now my smile was buried deep within the hidden parts of my soul. I was searching for a part of me that I knew existed on the

blue print to becoming the woman God called me to be. I just couldn't find the damn blue print to save my damn life.

Little by little I stared at my features and wanted to erase the parts of me I didn't like. Start anew. Begin again. Go back to a simpler time in my life when parts of my world sort of made sense. I don't vividly remember a time in my life where agony and heat from the pressure of the world didn't cause me to wilt slowly into the night. As the cold bathroom floor kissed the soles of my feet I began to run my hands through my thick coils. My plaits had come undone through the night. I know longer looked like the woman I had prepared myself to be at sunrise. The heavy bags underneath each eye and loose ends told a different. A sad song of a woman breaking into three parts and no longer whole.

What's happening to me?

I wondered. Desperate to find a robust lover to shield me from the darkness and protect me from the demons galloping against my back. My nightmares haunted me mostly during the night. During the day I could pretend to be normal. Whatever the fuck that meant in the world eyes. I just wanted to breathe without counting backwards and closing my eyes. I needed to exhale and not wonder if the next breath would be my last. I needed to escape myself.

I relieved the pressure on my bladder and washed my womanly essence from my hands. I leave the light on inside the bathroom and hall. It's a subtle comfort I've become used to. I pour a glass of milk and sit my naked bottom on the stoop. The cool breeze from the air conditioner causes my nipples to become erect. I shiver slightly. Yet, not uncomfortable enough to run back to my pillow. Besides the murmur from the creaky fridge and in frequent beeping of the smoke detector I am alone. Alone in my oversized apartment for two. An empty bedroom across from mine. Vacant and filled with unopened boxes, portraits, clothing with the tags, and shit I've held onto since college. It's all inside boxes adjacent the twin bed for company. I'm picky about my space so I never could adjust to a roommate. I like my uncomfortable weirdness in small doses. I only tolerate other people. As soon as the milk begins to settle in my stomach I shuffle through my thoughts once more. Go over all the things in my head that await me once the sun finally kisses the sky. My body feels tight all over and still restless. I don't want to be alone for the rest of the night. I rinse the milk from the glass and leave it inside the sink to dry. I swiftly walk back into my bedroom and slip into a pair of yoga pants. I grab my pillow and blanket from the bed and head towards the front door. I leave my front door unlocked and knock on my neighbor's door. Two loud knocks and a half ass kick later Casimir

answers the door. His sleep ridden face stares back at me with pity and regret. Before I can even speak, Casmir tilts his head and says, “Couch or bed?”

“Bed.” I confirm.

Casmir lets me inside his apartment to rest.

Chapter Two

“You know I’m going to start charging you for opening the door that early in the morning.” Casmir jokes.

I flip him the middle finger and toss the covers over my head. Casmir’s bed was too lumpy for comfort, so I ended up crashing on the couch. Casmir joined me on the adjacent couch. Slightly perturbed by his quest for crunchy cereal and cartoons in the morning. I do my best to block out the sounds around me.

“Angelle, don’t you have to work today?” Casmir asks from a distance. I can hear his footsteps travelling back and forth between the kitchen and living room.

“Unfortunately.” I mumble.

Casmir slurps his milk from the bowl and says, “Well, you better get going. It’s already a little past eight.”

No response.

“Angelle?!” Casmir yells.

I abruptly push the covers from over my head and turn towards Casmir with a look of whoop ass on my face. “Negro, if you don’t quit yelling my name like you Jesus.

Casmir laughs from his comfy position on the floor. With milk dripping from his coco brown lips he squints his brown beady eyes back at me and smiles. My temperament quickly changes as Casmir doesn’t take my aggression to seriously. Within a matter of minutes, we break out laughing.

“You crazy as hell, you know that.” Casmir replies.

“Only half as crazy on Sunday.” I laugh.

Casmir and I have been neighbors for six years and some change. Our friendship started out over a parking spot. Every morning his red Ford Chevy would be parked in front of the building in my favorite spot. I'd come out of my apartment feeling hotter than fish grease in Mississippi. I would have to walk around the building to get to my car. One morning I had enough so I did what anyone else would do. I waited outside Casmir's car with a baseball bat and cap. As soon as I saw this six foot four muscular brother with dread locks walking towards me I was shook to my knees. I'm never one to back down from a fight. His good looks were not going to shift my purpose. I knew I needed to aim for his knees first and head second if we began to fight. I may not have won the battle. But, dammit I wasn't going to leave without some licks.

I squared my shoulders and stood up straight. My five foot two petite frame was ready for war. Once Casmir walked up on me, he burst out laughing and looked at me half crazy. I didn't care how much he laughed. I was serious. He was not going to park his vehicle in my spot any longer.

"What the hell is so funny?!" I exclaimed.

Casmir shook his head and said, "You and that damn bat. What you going to do with that crazy lady?"

“I’ll show you if you park your car in my spot again.” I warned.

Casmir slowly walked towards me and removed the bat from my hands. The bat hit the ground and I was taken aback by his warm demeanor. I was expecting to go at it like cats and dogs in the parking lot. I looked at Casmir perplexed by his response. He cleared his throat and stared down at me with a smirk on his face.

“Do you really want to go back and forth to court, lose your home, and get thrown in jail over a parking space?” Casmir inquired.

His question made me realize that I was fueled by my fiery emotions and logic had taken a backseat to my reality. I was about to risk it all for nothing. I couldn’t admit to a stranger that he was right. Instead I bit down on my bottom lip and began to walk away from embarrassment.

“Don’t you want the spot?” Casmir asked.

I glanced back over my shoulder at my handsome and logical neighbor to ashamed to admit that I was wrong. Instead I offered a head nod and waited for a response. Casmir picked up my bat and walked over towards me.

“It’s yours during the week and mine on the weekends...deal?”

“Deal.” I agreed reluctantly.

We shook hands and walked away.

“Were you really going to hit me with a bat?” Casmir tossed over his shoulders.

“Only if I had too...” I retort.

After that day in the parking lot Casmir and I exchanged frequent hellos and morning coffee. One by one my layers came down and allowed Casmir to see the real me. We had more in common than I realized. His life was completely different years ago when he ran the streets as a drug dealer. After a bullet missed his spine by an inch, he vowed to give his life over to God. I confessed I wasn't quite there yet in my journey and that sometimes I needed help. Casmir agreed to let me stay at his place or come over whenever I felt like I was drowning in the world alone. That saved me.

“I'm about to head out. Stay as long as you like...just lock up when you're done.” Casmir states as he walks towards the kitchen.

“I'm about to go home to get dressed. I'll talk to you later.”

Casmir turns towards me. A crooked smile cover his youthful face.

“Promise as long as the night is long.”

“And the sky is some shade of blue.” I reply with a smile.

Satisfied with my response, Casmir disappears into his bedroom. I gather my blanket and head towards my empty apartment. As soon as I enter the door I feel a shift in my energy. Suddenly, Casmir is no longer available to protect me. My heart starts speeding up and I feel stuck inside my foyer. Afraid and nervous to start my day. I close my eyes and begin to count slowly from twenty. I'm on fifteen when I hear the notification of a door bell going off on my cell phone. My cell phone is on my nightstand inside my bedroom. I muster the strength to walk towards my bedroom. Perhaps there's an emergency at work and I don't have to go in to work today. That would be a relief.

I crawl over my crumpled sheets and reach for my cell phone on the nightstand. I enter my pin to unlock the screen. As soon as the screen opens my eyes widen. It's a text message from my Uncle Dino. Telling me I need to come home.

Chapter Three

What the fuck do I need to come home for?

I stare at my cell phone with a furrowed brow. Nothing was waiting for me back home in (insert city). I'd left that part of my life behind me fifteen years ago. I could feel my blood began to boil as flashes of crying into my pillow cloud my mind. I moved to (insert city) to start over. To get away from my Uncle Dino and his judgmental stares, my grandmother Mary Lou lies and manipulation, and the small-town secrets that haunted my family since the death of my mother Sandra. Everybody loved my mom. She was the middle child and the only girl. Of course, she was spoiled from the day she entered the world. My mother never had to want for anything in her life. When she passed away when I was ten years old. She died quietly in her sleep of a heart attack. I felt like my entire world went dark. My mother was my light in the world. My father wasn't in the picture. And when he did come around he didn't stay very long. Walter Jones was his name. Slew footed, fast talking, crooked smile Walter Jones. He couldn't sit still for too long. Always had somewhere to be and someone to take care of in anyway he knew how at times. My mother and father were

as different as night and day. My mother was a little firecracker. It didn't take much to light her fuse. You said one wrong word to her and she'd read you for filth. The only person to bring that side of her out was my father. He'd try to run one of his many games across her and get knocked on his behind. He'd disappear for a few days and come back with a bouquet of flowers or box of chocolates. My mother said my father was a basket case and his head was not screwed on right most days. I learned from an early age that you can't choose your parents. God does that for you. You just have to love them despite their shortcomings and flaws. My mother was no angel. But she made living life simple and fun.

Uncle Dino was my mother's younger brother. Her brother Otis went off into the military and never returned home. I remember my mother telling me about all the wonderful things her brother Otis would write to her in a letter. One-time Otis came home from his tour overseas and gave my mother the sweetest candy across the land. My mother told me she smiled like a Cheshire cat getting its belly rub. Otis protected my mother like his life depended on it. When Otis died I wasn't born yet. My mother's eyes would fill with tears when she used to talk about Otis. I always hoped that someday my mother would give me an Otis to share my life with it. Before that could happen, we were burying my mother in a graveyard next to Otis.

I didn't realize how much my life would change after the death of my mother. I just assumed that the people I called family would love on me and guide me through life. Instead what I received was hate, anger, and confusion wrapped up in the same bloodline of other people. My father was know longer in the picture. I'd get on my knees and pray that he'd show up with a box of chicken and biscuits and take me away. That day never arrived.

Going back to (insert city) would send me down a spiral of self-destruction and sabotage. I'd worked hard in my adult life to become a woman of substance and value that I am today. Although I may struggle and fall short of my own expectations. I never felt the need to turn back and mend fences with the people in my family that caused me more pain than I'd like to remember.

As far as I was concerned, they were better off without me. I was for damn sure better off in my life without them. But, the longer I held my cell phone inside my hands something told me I needed to respond to the text message. My palms began to sweat as my heart beat sped up. I could feel my mothers spirit urging me to do the

right thing. Even if the right thing meant facing my past. I wasn't mentally ready to handle the response on the other end of this call. I knew I wouldn't be able to let go until I satisfied my curiosity.

The phone rang and I hit the speaker button. I closed my eyes and prayed for voicemail to pick up instead. After the second ring I knew I was home free. And then....

Uncle Dino rugged baritone voice came penetrating through my phone.

“Angelle...is that you?”

Fuck I mouth.

Chapter Four

I stuttered to say my own name. For a brief second I stepped outside of myself and ran into a safe corner. I didn't want to face my own reality within the moment. Fear and regret choked me into suffocation as my eyes begin to swell with mist. Childhood memories of me sitting on Uncle Dino's lap as a small girl flash through my mind. His rotten teeth often reeked of alcohol through his olive skin pores. He always wanted to touch me. Make me his special friend for a day. I was his special friend when it came time to scratch his back for a nickel. He'd take me to the store and let me ride shot gun in the front seat. I was five years old at the time. Sweet,

innocent, and naïve. I loved my Uncle Dino like he was my personal black superhero. That is until, my superhero turned into a villain that crept inside my bedroom at night.

I was eight years old sitting on the front porch waiting for cartoons to come on. When Uncle Dino called me inside the house to come here for a second. He sat on the floral print couch in the living room in his matching shorts and shirt. His dark brown sandals kissed the carpeted red floor. The tv was on Amen. I remember because Sherman Hemsley used to crack me up each time he appeared. Uncle Dino asked me to grab him a glass of lemonade and come sit next to him on the couch. He often told me the sun was going to turn my skin every shade of black except beautiful if I sat in the sun too long. Most times his crazy sayings would roll off his shoulders and on to my deaf ears. I did as I was told and quickly came back and sat next to Uncle Dino on the couch. There was a cushion between us. I placed my baby doll in my lap and sat Indian style on the couch.

Uncle Dino took two glances at me and demanded I get my corn dogs off of Mama Lou's couch. His strong baritone voice frightens me and made me stand at attention. From the corner of my eyes I could tell there was something wrong with Uncle Dino. His eyes were blood shot red and he stared blankly at the television. He didn't laugh or hardly move from his comfortable position. Something inside of me

told me to go to the bathroom or somewhere else. But, my feet wouldn't listen to my brain.

“You want to play a game banana pudding?” Uncle Dino slurred.

I nod my head yes nervously.

Uncle Dino's eyes opened wide as he patted the seat cushion between us. I jumped into the seat cushion and waited for the special game instructions. Uncle Dino reached inside his shorts pocket and pulled out a five-dollar bill. At the time that five bucks looked like a hundred in my eager eyes. Uncle Dino licked his lips and looked in my direction. He said, “I got five dollars in my hand. It's yours if you do exactly as I say, understand?”

I smiled eagerly and reached for the five bucks.

Uncle Dino shoved the five bucks back inside his pocket and grinned at me. My heart started racing because I didn't recognize that evil look in his eyes before. It was like he was possessed by the devil. Uncle Dino unzipped his shorts and reached for my hand. He places my hand down his pants and starts rubbing back forth. I was freaked out and uncomfortable. I didn't know what I was touching or doing. All I

knew was to do what Uncle Dino said because I wanted those five bucks in his pocket.

Chapter Five

I could feel my blood boiling deep beneath skin. Every word that came out of Uncle Dino's mouth brought back the memories of my childhood. I wanted so desperately to reach through the telephone and strangle him with my manicured hands. I'd talked about taking my Uncle's life so openly with my therapist that it often scared me. My wounds were too deep. Deeper than I ever realized or could ever imagine. I knew I would never get the apology that I rightfully deserved. After years of therapy I realized that the emotional turmoil and scars he'd left on my spirit would have to be cleansed by God himself. I promised myself that if the day ever came for me to pull the plug on my Uncle Dino's life I would. I'd have the courage to sign the papers and get the vindication I would never receive while he was alive. Somehow deep down inside I knew that day would never come soon enough.

"Baby girl...you still there?" Uncle Dino echos through the phone.

With a deep sigh I rolled my eyes and answered slowly. "Still here."

I could hear in his voice how much smoking and hard liquor had robbed him of his once distinctive voice. Nowadays, Uncle Dino sounded like a broken stereo system without any base. For only five minutes, I felt sorry for the wrinkle old bastard.

“Like I said, we want everybody in the family to come down to pay their respects to momma. You know, before she passes on to the other side.”

I searched my brain for a quick lie. But, the sound of my molesters voice trickled me down to bite size spiritually. I was caught between running away from my inner self and dealing with the demons that caused me to take three different pills almost daily. I wanted to hang up the phone and resume the normalcy of my adult life. Or at least a hint of the adult life I had work so hard to create and maintain. Yet, even through the phone I could feel the suffocation of my past life creeping up on me and holding me hostage. Starting with this lukewarm phone call.

Casually running my hand through my faux locks I searched inside myself for the right answer. I knew no matter how much I ran from my past, it would always pop up and disturb my life. Something inside my spirit urged me to begin to put things to rest. It was the only way I'd ever really have total peace in my life. I needed to see my grandmother one last time before her body became one with the ground.

“What time is the funeral?”

“Huh?” Uncle Dino questioned. “ No, she’s not dead...the doctors say it’s only a matter of time, day or night before she departs this world.”

“I’ll be there on the day of the funeral.” I confirmed.

“Now, Angelle...you are a grown woman and everything. But, your family members need to see you. You know, um to get reacquainted.”

I could hear his labored breathing trickling through the phone. Every nerve in my body started twitching as beads of sweat began to form across my head. It was the way the words came out of his mouth that made me feel like I was that helpless little girl once again. My right hand began to tremble and my mouth felt drier than cotton in the summertime. I could hear the little girl inside of me crying. Crying so loudly that the back of her throat burned in heat. My entire body became limp as memories began to flood my mind. As a tear slid down my right cheek, I couldn’t help but stare down at my feet. No matter how much I urged them to move me forward, I was stuck in a downward spiral of anxiety.

I could hear Uncle Dino calling my name over and over again. I couldn’t respond. My knees began to buckle underneath me and I hit the floor. It was lights out for me.

Chapter Six

By the time I came too I felt uncomfortable in my own body. Everything was much heavier on me like a ton of invisible bricks. I glanced around my bedroom floor to familiarize myself again with my surroundings. My memory started to recover and bring me back into my reality. As I reached for the support of the dresser to stand up I knew something was taking over me in the moment. I left my cell phone at my feet and climbed into my unmade bed. I knew my life was calling me outside of my bedroom door. But, I needed a few extra minutes alone to really digest everything circling around in my head. As soon as my head touched my pillow I could feel two more tears slipping from my eyes. Instead of wiping them away with the back of my hand I let them roll down my cheek.

The wetness against my cheek allowed me to feel like I was more alive than ever before. Instead of feeling like I was in an altered reality or someone else's dream. I laid on my stomach and tried to regain my peace. My Uncle Dino's voice kept interrupting my thoughts. As far as I'd ran across the country to start over my past was staring me right in my face. Daring me to kick it ass or allow it to kick mine. As I rested across my bed, I didn't have the inner strength to do anything. I was on the receiving end of a battle that was going to turn into a war soon.

Most people are able to talk about things have occurred in their past and move on like nothing has ever happened. I want to become one of those people. But, that version of me only exist in my dreams. I can see that version of me sitting inside an of cabana in a lime green bikini. Sun bathing without a towel to cover my round behind. The towel boy frequently flirting with me as he refills my drink. In this world I am happy from the inside and out. When I open my eyes, I am trapped in a place of frequent discomfort.

I turn over to lay on my back. I close my eyes as the sunlight sneaks into my bedroom window. I do my best to quiet my mind. Fight for the inner me who just wants to come out and enjoy the sunshine. Although the tears won't stop I am

practicing to center myself. Bring me into a place where I cannot be altered by things that I cannot control.

Inhale a deep breath and hold it for three seconds and release. I repeat the exercise a few more times. The heaviness I feel upon my body doesn't leave suddenly. But gradually I begin to feel like my whole self once more. I open my eyes and stare up into the ceiling. My mouth is dry and it's hard for me to speak. Yet, somewhere in my spirit I have the desire to connect with my mother. I know she's in heaven watching over her only baby girl. I know she's probably crying because I'm crying too. I know that she protects and guides me even when I don't ask her too. Even though she's not here in the physical world. Her love is still present in the spirit. Today, I don't want to be alone. Today, I feel like a girl that needs the healing touch of her mother's hands and wise words to lift me from my bed.

I know she can't respond to me. But, that doesn't deter me from speaking to her as if she's in the room sitting at the bottom of the bed rubbing my feet. I'm a woman of great faith and love. I know that there is power in my words. In this moment, I choose to be vulnerable and open my heart to ask for guidance and direction.

Momma, I know you're watching from above with tears in your eyes. I'm wiping my tears and I want you to do the same. You raised me to be strong even when I feel weak and tired. I don't want you in heaven causing a fuss because of me. I want you right beside me encouraging me to rise up and face the truth. You always told me that the truth will set me free. I still hold on to that. Right now, I'm asking you to give me the courage to revisit my past, learn from mistakes, and forgive those who have done me wrong. It's not easy, I know it's necessary. I'm just asking that you don't allow me to do it alone. I want you right beside me climbing this mountain. This victory is not mine alone, it's ours.

Chapter Seven

“Well, it's about time you decide to join us working folks.” Lovie jokes.

I pull a chair from the round table inside the break room. A few onlookers glance in my direction. I avert my eyes forward and ignore their inquisitive stares. I

called my boss Smith Walker and lied over the phone. I made up a story about car trouble and that I'd make up the time later in the week. Instead asking a million and one questions Mr. Walker just grunted and hung up the phone. WorldWide Communications is credit and debit processing company. Our job is to make sure online retailers and brick and mortar stores get paid on time each time a customer swipes. It's not the hardest job in the world. But, it pays the bills and keeps me out of jail most days.

I've been with the company for five years. I started as a temp and worked my way through the trenches. This was the first company that allowed me the opportunity to work from home occasionally and vacation in the summer. I couldn't see myself as an office manager of sales or anything. I'm still in the process of figuring things out for myself career wise. For now, I was just happy to have a job that paid me fairly decently that didn't work my nerves.

“You better have a good excuse creeping in this building after ten o'clock.”

Lovie stated as she places her hot coffee onto the table.

I half smile in her direction and shake my head. Lovie McCoy was my workplace best friend. We worked on a presentation together during my second year and we have been inseparable ever since that day. Lovie is from the backwoods of

South Carolina. Whenever she opens her mouth a bigger than life voices vibrate through her curvaceous melanin body. She's a sweet as sugar and about as outspoken and silly as they come nowadays. Lovie is the only person in the office I know that I am safe to be myself without judgement. Over French fries and ketchup, she confided in me that she was raped multiple times while in foster care. We had our grief and love for our deceased mothers in common. But her rape and my molestation made us sisters from a different mother. There was nothing Lovie could say to me that I needed to repeat to any other soul inside the office. She understood the same for me.

I release a heavy sigh and bury my head inside my chest.

“Is it that bad Angelle?”

Lovie sips her coffee slowly and stares back at me. Usually not at a loss for words. But today seems to be the exception to the rule. Without me having to say it out loud Lovie reaches across the table and grabs my right hand. Her manicured nails squeeze my hand and I feel more tears well up inside my eyes.

“Whatever it is, we going to get through this together.” Lovie whispers.

I take her hand and dot my eyes. I exhale at the sound of her words giving me a safe place to release the heavy burden on my shoulders.

I clear my throat and state, “My grandmother Mary Lou is sick.”

“Oh no. I’m sorry Angelle.” Lovie says emphatically. She releases my hand and wraps her juicy arms around my shoulder. Her freshly pressed hair kisses my faux locs as she holds me tightly inside her arms. I’ve never been the super affectionate type. It’s hard for me to show love and allow others to love on me. I do love best at a distance. I pat Lovie’s hand to let her know her love doesn’t go unnoticed in the moment.

Before I say anything further I whisper for Lovie to follow me to the ladies’ room. I don’t want the entire office in my business. Lovie takes a few sips of her coffee and follows behind me.

We enter the ladies room closest to the breakroom. As soon as Lovie enters behind me I check the stalls and make sure that we are alone. The coast is clear. Lovie rest against the bathroom sink as I begin to stare at my reflection in the mirror.

“You want to start talking before my next birthday.” Lovie urges.

“My bad Love. It’s been a rough twenty-four hours. I couldn’t sleep last night so I crashed at Casmir’s spot this morning. I left his spot feeling like I had myself all together or at least something like that. And then...”

“What?”

“I walk into my place. I pick up my cell phone and it’s a message from my Uncle Dino.”

Lovie gasps. “Holy shit!”

“Holy shit is right.” I confirm.

“What did the message say? Did you respond or ignore it?” Lovie questions. “If it was me I’d probably would have dropped my phone in some water.”

“Trust me the idea and a few others crossed my mind. Until...”

“Until what?”

“Until I realized that I can’t run from my past forever.”

Lovie nodded her head in silence. She could relate. Her past had showed up at her doorstep three years ago. Claiming to be her ailing father. Lovie desperately wanted to learn about her mother and father’s relationship. She needed to know if she had more brothers and sisters in the world. Lovie moved the stranger into her home with her fiancé at the time. They made him comfortable as possible. Even bought him a plane ticket back to South Carolina to help refresh his memory. It was at the airport that the unexpected happened. The gruff stranger that claimed to be her father died

inside the airport of a heart attack. Lovie didn't feel comfortable running a DNA test on a deceased man. Instead she buried him with dignity and decided to allow the past to be the past. I could tell by the look on Lovie's face that she needed answers and healing in this moment just as much as me. The words could barely come out of my mouth. I could hear myself talking. But it was like I was standing in the room listening with virgin ears. My heart raced as my lips trembled after every word. I wanted to rush through my emotions and crash into a sea of love. I tried my best to hold back the tears filling up my eyes. The more I tried to hold back the more I stepped outside of myself. I desperately wanted to run outside the door and pretend as if I never walked inside the building in the first place.

“Whatever you need from me....say it?” Lovie stated evenly.

Her hand clasped mine as she closed the wide gap between us. I could feel a tear roll down my cheek. It fell unto my top lip. I could taste the saltiness of my cries. I held my friend hand a little tighter and searched for my next breath.

“I need you to come with me.” I whispered.

“Of course.” Lovie echoed. “ Whatever you need I'm there in a heartbeat.”

I wiped both of my eyes and cracked a smile. Lovie dotted my eyes with the back of her hand. She looked at me like a mother who just wanted to comfort the

hurt inside of her child. I couldn't help but stare back at her with admiration and respect. In this moment, Lovie was more than just my colleague, she was my sister.

“I don't know how I can ever repay you for this.”

Lovie laughs. “You can start by taking me shopping.”

Chapter Eight

“Child open up a window, door, and the ceiling.” Lovie cried out.

“Girl, relax you just getting old. It ain’t that darn hot in here.” I declared.

“Whatever.” Lovie replied as she rolled her eyes and walked into the kitchen.

It was moving day and we were knee deep into brown boxes, plastic bags, black markers, and tape. I didn’t realize how much stuff I had accumulated over the years. My apartment was covered and the only place to sit was on the floor or in a tight corner. I’d cleared out my cabinets and gave most of everything to the local homeless shelter. Only thing left in the fridge was ice and mustard. Don’t ask. I planned on tossing my furniture to the curb or storing it at Casmir’s place. But, he was never home long enough for me to have that conversation. I knew the way our relationship was setup he would have felt some type of way via text about my leaving. Plus I didn’t want to tell him goodbye and look into his dark brown puppy dog eyes. He was in a safe place inside my mind. A place where only a few sacred people could exclusively

go once they entered my life. I wasn't ready and when the time was right I'd save Casmir for my last goodbye.

“You sure you want to put some of in your trunk?” Lovie asked as she peeked her head from around the kitchen corner. Slowly rubbing a cold glass of water across her head. Lovie looked like life and the change had showed up at her door at midnight and kicked her ass. I couldn't tell my friend she looked like shit because I knew a man wouldn't take two looks in my direction. Yesterday scent stuck to my skin like hot leather and my hair was beginning to take on a life of it's on. I wasn't in the mood to make myself pretty. It'd taken everything inside of me to purchase a plane ticket to (insert city). I figured I'd get there early enough to grab a quick bite, say my goodbyes, and leave the past in the past. Plus, Lovie was convinced that she needed to try collard greens and fried green tomatoes before we returned back home. I didn't have the courage to tell her yet. But, I didn't know where home was for me anymore. I felt like my life was being pulled in several directions. Each direction I couldn't explain or make logical sense of in the moment. In my mind I could only summarize that the feeling inside of me was preparing to explode. By the time it exploded I needed to be in a different city, state, or county to deal with the remnants. I couldn't tell my

sister/best friend that this was the last time we'd see each other. Instead I bit down on my tongue and tried to remain inside the moment.

“Whatever doesn't fit, we'll just chuck it or give it away.” I confirmed.

Lovie shook her head and disbelief. Her eyeballs glanced over everything all at once as she tried to dissect my life. It was impossible. One box was filled with books on the karma sutra. While the others had wigs, straw hats, costume jewelry, collages, and cracked picture frames. I'd hoped silently that her curiosity wouldn't send me over an emotional cliff of explaining things. Sometimes I hoped my silence was enough for the both of us.

“I hope you know dinner is on you.” Lovie joked.

I nod in agreement. I turn on the radio to boost our moods. We start off with a little Janet Jackson, work our way over to Mariah, and listen to the edgy sounds of Beyoncé. We were busy stacking boxes and learning how to do the single ladies dance like two old gals. We were grinning ear to ear when Lovie open an envelope and her smile disappeared. It was like she'd seen the ghost of Christmas in the middle of July. I was trying to keep the party going between us. But, Lovie planted her back against the wall and began to sit down. I turn down the music on my cell phone and walk over to Lovie.

“What the hell’s got into you?” I joke. “You look like somebody done slapped you sideways.”

Lovie held the vanilla envelope near her chest and averted her eyes. She wouldn’t look back at me. I reached for the envelope and she held it tighter inside her arms.

“Whatever it is, it belongs to me....so”

Lovie nodded her head. Her bottom lip began to tremble. I called her name a few more times. Lovie wouldn’t respond. She nodded her head and whispered no several times over. I didn’t know what to say or do. It was like she was reacting for me and I was watching myself have a mental moment in real life. I slowly sit down beside Lovie against the wall.

I speak softly and place my hand on top of hers to allow safety to exist between us.

“I can handle it. Whatever it is...I can handle it.” I assure Lovie.

She slowly releases her grasp on the envelope against her chest. We lock eyes and I can tell that Lovie is trying to protect me in this moment. I nod once more and she slides the envelope into my hands. As soon as my eyes rest on the envelope the

anticipation of what's on the inside causes me to shake. I pull out the contents inside and what stares back at me nearly rips me to pieces. It's not just a photo. It's a photo of my mother and father on their wedding day.

Chapter Nine

The photo was decades old. I could see my mother's bright brown eyes vividly. She looked beautiful in her lace white gown. Her remarkable smile flashing for the camera as she held my father's hand. It looked like a church wedding from the background. It was hard to see all of the distinct details. My eyes were drawn to my mother's olive brown skin and the way she looked so angelic inside her gown. It was like I was almost staring at my former self. My father looked strong and debonair in his bow tie

and penguin suit. I almost didn't recognize him with his thick mustache and afro. They were young. Young and in love. I could tell by the way their hands were intertwined that they believed the future belong to them. I held the picture inside my hands for what felt like an eternity. Tears began to rain down my face as I couldn't hold back all of the emotions inside of me. There were so many questions that came to mind. So many words to exchange with my mom about her wedding day. Becoming a wife to a man she promised to love forever. Until forever was cut short by life and circumstance. My heart began to bleed into my hands at the sight of not being able to see, touch, or talk to my mother again. I was beginning to spiral out of control. I was beginning to lose myself once more.

"Angelle, I need you to just breathe..." Lovie uttered as she rubbed my back.

"That's my mom." I whispered through my tears.

"I know." Lovie stated. "I know."

"I remember she told me that I could have her wedding dress. She'd sit me on my lap and tell me how pretty I'd look on my wedding day. And now..."

Lovie didn't know the right words to say. I'm not sure if I could clearly express the sentiment of the moment without speaking gibberish. Suddenly I didn't feel like this forty-plus woman sitting inside a cramped one-bedroom apartment with her best

friend. Instead I felt like a little girl sitting at the window anxiously awaiting her mother to walk through the front door. Even though my mother had departed this physical world more than fifteen years ago. I still believed that someday I'd find a piece of her standing on a street corner waving me over for ice cream. I know how crazy that sounded but I needed something to believe in privately.

“How did you get this picture?” Lovie asked breaking our silence.

I couldn't help but laugh. It was like a bubble of laughter burst inside my gut and made its way through my mouth. I couldn't stop laughing. The more I laughed the better I started to feel. Lovie pushed me over and looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

“Girl, are you losing your mind?”

I shook my head adamantly. “I stole it from my grandmother.” I confessed.

Lovie's mouth dropped open wide in disbelief. “You did what Angelle?”

“You heard me...I stole it.” I reaffirmed.

“I don't believe you would do something like that Angelle...shame on you.”

I clear my throat after releasing one more chuckle. “Oh relax you old fart...I was intending on keeping it for a while or at least until I could make a copy. But...”

“But..what?” Lovie questioned.

“I put in an envelope for safe keeping and never took it out. I haven’t seen that picture of my parents in over ten years.”

“Wow!”

“Right. My grandmother would hide it from me to be spiteful. She said I was asking to many questions about grown folk’s business.”

“Sounds about right.”

I agree. “My grandmother was a mean old woman and she did everything in her power to rid me of my mother’s memory. I don’t know...”

“What?”

“I think my grandmother was jealous of my mother.” I declare.

“Oh now I know you’re crazy.”

“I wish.” I reply. Holding my mother’s picture inside my hands. “My mom would always try to love on my grandmother. She’d give her the world if she could but it wasn’t that simple.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know the full details. But, from what I heard growing up my grandfather would spoil my mother rotten. He treated my grandmother like day old trash and she carried that around like hot sauce.”

“Sounds like your family tree is buried rest next to mine.” Lovie admits.

“Yeah. But, you know what I always wanted to know was the truth about my parent’s love story. You never everybody has their own version of things. It would be nice to hear it from my dad.”

“Well, why don’t you stop by and see him when you’re in town? I’m sure we can squeeze in an extra day or two.”

“No. I haven’t spoken to my dad in over ten years. Last I heard he was in prison and wouldn’t get out until they buried him in a box.”

Lovie grabs my hands and looks me in the eyes and says, “Angelle, it’s time.”

“Time for what?”

“Healing. You can’t keep running from your past and trying to create your future.

You have questions and some of the people in your life hold the answers. The truth may not always be pretty. But, it’s the key to unlocking your future.”

“I don’t know Lovie...what if he...I mean..?”

“Angelle, do you believe in God?”

“I do.”

“Then trust Him. Trust the path that He has you on right now. Your soul is tired and God has prepared you to receive answers and healing in this next chapter of your life.

Don’t run. Don’t question. Just go.” Lovie states.

Her words rang true in my ear and touched my heart. There were no ifs, ands, or butts about it. It was time I face my past and was beginning with my mother.

Chapter Ten

On the morning of my move my apartment was empty. I felt the same on the inside. Even though the lights were on in every room I felt alone. There was nothing filling in the spaces in my life or apartment. It was true what Lovie had told me nights ago. God was taking me through a spiritual journey of healing myself from my past. Just so I could embrace my future. I knew all of the signs were staring me in my face. Yet, it was hard for me to digest everything all at once. I selfishly wanted to do everything on my terms. I'd grown accustomed to doing things my way. Creating the rules for my life and if that didn't work I had the right to change it. I was being me. Or at least trying to be me or figure out what me was in the midst of unraveling.

That's how I would describe my life. A constant thread of unraveling at the seams. Unlike most people who know how to mend their broken pieces. I learned to unravel parts of myself and leave them untouched for decades. It was almost as if I was bleeding and instead of seeking treatment. I'd put a band aide on the wound and pretend that I was fine. That's the thing about band aides, they don't resolve anything. They just cover up the wound and wait for you to take care of your shit.

I've been self-medicating and remedying my shit for so long that I've become immune to the wounds. I don't feel the pain of my past anymore. I have become it.

That's the scary and dangerous part. Not knowing how to help myself or go past the familiar place of feeling like I am constantly hiding from who I used to be. Sometimes I just want to be free. Yet, the idea or thought seems far or impossible from my mind.

As I stare out at the window at my four door Volkswagen staring back at me. I have to ask myself am I truly ready for the next chapter. Am I ready to bury my grandmother without answers? Am I ready to look my uncle in his eyes? Am I ready to build a relationship with my father?

I don't know the answers just yet....but I plan to find out soon.

Chapter Eleven

“Don’t forget me when you on the road?” Casmir reiterated. He placed his strong arms around my waist. My feet could barely touch the ground.

“I’m not one for keeping in touch. So...I’ll see you around.” I promised.

I could tell by the look in his eyes that there was so much more he wanted to say to me. Instead Casmir released me from his grasp and watched me walk away. I couldn’t help it. I wanted to know what the other side of our friendship would look like if I wasn’t so damaged on the inside. Would he love all of me or just the good stuff? That question would always remain unanswered and un-asked in my mind. As I walked away I couldn’t help but realize that I was also saying goodbye to my younger self as well. The me that promised myself that I wouldn’t go back out into the world unless it was burning to the ground. Although the world was not burning down, I felt like a weight was slowly falling off of my shoulders.

I was once heavy and quite often restless in my mind. Today, I felt like the kind of woman men and women admired from afar. I was finally releasing parts of my anxiety and doubts into the atmosphere. I was finally learning to trust myself.

“If you don’t hurry your butt up...we gone miss the \$2 wings at JJ’s.” Lovie urged.

I couldn’t help but laugh and put some extra pep into my step. JJ’s had the best wings in town. Lovie and I had a good road trip ahead of us and food, alcohol, and snacks were required for the road. Lovie looked like a mix between a librarian and a school teacher. Her blue blouse and high waisted jeans hugged her thick waist as she flapped her gums a mile a minute.

“I’m coming as fast as my feet will carry me. Hold your horses.”

“You know how I get when I’m hungry.” Lovie joked.

“Get in the car and buckle your seatbelt.”

Lovie released a chuckle. As soon as the car doors were shut she hit me across my arm hard.

“Ouch!” I exclaimed. “What was that for?”

“For not jumping on that fine black man in that other apartment.”

“What?!” I exclaimed. “ You mean Casmir ?”

“Hell yes!” Lovie declared. “If I wasn’t married with kids I’d be on his back and front porch daily.”

“Girl, you stupid. We’re just friends and besides...he gay.” I lied.

“Damn!” Lovie shrieked. “The good ones usually are nowadays.

Chapter Twelve

It was the first day of second grade at McNair Williams elementary. I was excited for the new school year. I'd help my mom pick out the perfect outfit for the first day. I'd put my new black penny loafers at the bottom of the bed. My custom made book bag from Mrs. Rogers specialty store rested on my nightstand. My name was printed in bright bold colors like the rainbow in glitter. No matter where I went

inside the school building everyone would know my name. My stomach was filled with butterflies, ants, and all the grasshoppers my cousin Petey had made me eat on a dare. I couldn't tell my mom because I knew Petey would make me suffer something awful if I got him into any kind of trouble. I'd learned my lesson the hard way when he pushed me off the swings on the playground two summers ago. My legs were twitching underneath my blanket as I stared out the window anxiously. It felt like nighttime was taunting me. Lasting longer than it normally would have on any other night. Maybe it was my imagination and excitement joining teams. All I could think about was how I was going to sit in the front of the class and get to know my new teacher. First grade was amazing! I'd done everything I wanted to do in class and in the school. Most of the teachers knew me for being helpful and kind hearted to all the other children. I knew that side of me came from my mom's sweet Southern nature. She'd come into my bedroom and peek in on me to see if I'd fallen asleep. I'd pinch my eyes really tightly and pretend that I was dreaming of rainbows and unicorns. My mother would sniff out my fake sleep and release the tickle monster on my belly. She'd smother me with her warm kisses and warm me that the boogie man was coming with pixie dust soon. So I needed to protect my eyes for the big day tomorrow. I'd promise to fall asleep as soon as the door closed. Each time sleeping

became the very last thing on my mind. Eventually sleep got the best of me and I rested in the comfort of my dreams.

When morning arrived I jumped out of my pajamas and into my school clothes. As soon as my mom heard me bumping around in my bedroom she came rushing through my bedroom door. Her big brown round eyes grew big and wide as she burst out into laughter. She laughed so hard I thought she was having an asthma. When she finally caught her breath she demanded I take off my school clothes and come downstairs for breakfast. Her words hit me like a ton of bricks and I quickly jumped back into reality. I quickly ate my oatmeal with blueberries and drank a glass of milk. Before my mom could say two words to me I was upstairs jumping back into my school clothes. Fifteen minutes later I was dressed and ready to rock and roll towards the school building. The elementary school wasn't far from where we lived. The school was historically apart of the neighborhood since segregation. Although the neighborhood was filled with mostly black families, we all looked out for each other. I knew half of the neighborhood kids from playing on the playground or eating supper at their house. It was the kids outside the neighborhood that caused me the most concern. I didn't want my mother to worry about me. I hid my fears deep down inside

me. I knew seeing me upset would only upset my mother even more. I knew from an early age that she would do anything to protect me including fight my battles.

Last spring, I a new kid on the block started calling me spook. I don't know why he targeted me of all people in the neighborhood. But from the moment he laid eyes on me, he treated like I'd knocked down his tree house. I did my best to ignore him while we were outside playing. That didn't work. He'd only taunt me louder and point at me from across the way. I wasn't used to that type of attention. I didn't know how to explain my tears to my mother. She'd told me on more than one occasion that I was beautiful. I believed her, it's just that the laughing and mocking made me question everything. For most of that spring I remained inside the house and played with my cousins when they came over. After the new kid moved out of the neighborhood I thought it was safe to come back outside. Hoping that the other kids had forgotten about the ugly name he'd called me.

I was outside less than five minutes when someone shouted, "Spook!" Everyone looked in my direction and started to laugh. Tears began running down my face as I quickly jettied back inside the house. My mother had enough of my hiding and she balled up her fist and stomped out of the front door. I didn't want to catch the wrath of her frustration. I watched her knock on every door in the neighborhood.

I couldn't hear her words but her body language said she was giving it to them good. Each neighbor bowed their heads in shame and closed their front door after my mother walked away. When she walked back to our house she threw a crooked smile in my direction. I felt like my victory had finally come. That night my mother held me inside her arms and kissed my dark dewy skin. She looked at me with love and hope inside her eyes and said softly, "Just because people call you names doesn't mean you have to answer to it." Her words landed right in the middle of my heart. I held on to them for dear life and promised myself I would always remember them for the rest of my life.

As my mother and I walked towards the double doors to enter inside the school building. I squeezed her hands and smiled up at her beautiful face. I needed her to know that she was not just raising a little girl, she was raising a strong woman. I couldn't express the depth of her words in that moment. But, my smile said it all in one sentence. My mother nodded her head and said, "I know."

As Lovie and I crossed state lines with all of my shit in the back. I needed to remember that my mother's strong spirit was buried deep inside of me. It wasn't just there for an emergency or memorials. It was there to keep in tuned with all the beautiful things she installed inside of me growing up. I realized in that moment that I

would always be my mother's child. But, I was also a child no more I was a grown ass woman. At times it may become uncomfortable standing in these grown woman shoes. But, I'm reminded of my mother's lioness spirit to not run from the fire, but to embrace and own it. My fire was waiting for me in another state. Instead of running from my past I was finally ready to change the narrative of my story and create the happy ending. I was no longer Spook or any other derogatory name. I was Angelle and the world was ready for me.

Chapter Thirteen

We'd arrived in (insert city) on a Wednesday. The clouds were a dark shade of grey. It felt like my hometown was mocking me as Lovie and I hugged the tight corners of the roads. I had half of mind to keep driving through the small town of nobody's. My right foot on the gas pedal was itching to accelerate to the next city and drink buy a glass of whisky. I knew Lovie wouldn't allow me to run away from my old life. I knew I couldn't run anymore either. I was tired mentally and spiritually. More than anything I realized I owed my younger self an explanation for abandoning her and trying to start a new life.

With Cheetos dust on my fingertips and Lovie sipping on her fruit punch. We looked at each other silently and smiled. I smiled because I was glad I had my friend next to me to keep in perfect peace.

“This fruit punch is running right through me. Pull over soon. I got to go.”

Lovie urged.

I couldn't help but burst into laughter. I'd warned her many dirt roads ago that all that sugar in that bottle was going to make her regret everything. Lovie couldn't laugh to hard are she'd piss her pants.

“There should be a hotel or gas station close up. Can you hold it for a little while longer?”

Lovie rolled her eyes and twitched inside her seat. “Does it look like I have a choice?” She mumbled under her breath.

With a light shrug of my shoulders I turned up the radio. Whitney Houston, “Dance with somebody” was blaring through the speakers. Memories of dancing in my bedroom with my purple and green leotard on with a hair brush came flooding through my mind. Whitney could sing and I knew I had whatever it took to give her a run for her money. I just didn't have the beauty and money she had to make my debut. But, you bet your bottom dollar I put on the best concert inside the four walls of my bedroom. As uncomfortable as Lovie became inside her seat. She couldn't deny the infectious attitude of Whitney. Whitney was my one and only beloved pop star.

We were belting out our best high notes when we pulled up at the motel. I could tell it was a run-down hole in the wall just from the outside. The sign read:

Room 4 Rent Red Light Special at the Motel Inn. The o and e were missing from the signage so you had to read it the best you can from a distance.

“I’m sleeping in my clothes.”

“Me too.” Lovie affirmed.

I pulled my four door travelling spaceship into the parking lot of two other cars. I assumed one of the cars had to belong to the owner and the other a travelling patron like us. I unlock the doors and before I could say to more words Lovie was squatting behind the car handling her business. Luckily the street lights were facing the opposite direction and no stragglers could witness Lovie brown round ass. I couldn’t bear to watch or stop laughing. I walked over to the office door to register for the room.

“Thank you Jesus!” Lovie yelled.

As soon as I walked into the motel office I was hit with a strong whiff of ass, shit, and piss all rolled into one. It was enough to make you want to cover your whole body with bleach. I guess my facial expression said it all.

“I’m sorry about the smell. Kind of light on a few hands around here nowadays since some folks moved out of town.” The hotel attendant stated.

I needed extra seconds to catch my breath. My tee shirt was too thin and wouldn’t cover the smell too much. I was afraid that if I opened my mouth for too long something might fly in it and kill me.

“What the hell is that smell?” Lovie echoed as soon as she walked in the door with our luggage.

The motel attendant began to apologize profusely for smell and ushered us outside the office to talk. He began to babble on and on about needing help and the shortage of money available. His excuses went into one ear and out the other.

“We need a room for night. Your cleanest by far.” I urged.

“Yes, with fresh sheets and a towel.”

The motel attendant nodded his head in shame. “Whatever you need, I’ll get it for you. Tonight is on the house.”

Lovie and I both thanked the attendant for his generosity. We were walking away when he said, “Hey, wait a second?”

Lovie and I both looked at each other with concern in our eyes. My heart began to beat a little faster. Lovie looked down at her tennis shoes. We knew what time it was if he tried anything with either one of us. I closed my fist and prepared to swing to save my life. The motel attendant removed his cap from his head and looked at me with curiosity in his eyes. He stared at me a minute longer than normal and took a few steps closer towards. He licks his chap lips and scratches his scruffy beard.

With a squint of his eyes he says, “Don’t I know you from somewhere?”

I point at myself innocently. “Who me?”

“Yeah, you look so familiar for some strange reason. Are you from around here?”

My heart jumped into my throat. I couldn’t move for a good two minutes. My mind began to search for an answer that wouldn’t erupt more questions. I looked at Lovie for security and comfort. She took two steps in my direction and stood shoulder to shoulder with me.

Instead of answering his questions. I decided I needed to pick his brain for answers. Just to see where his head was going. “Why do you ask?”

“I used to go to school with this pretty girl named Angelle when we were in grade school. Real pretty and smart and so much more...” He replied with a twinkle in his dark brown eyes.

His words bounced around in the air for a few seconds. I soon realized who I was standing in front of at the motel. Buddy Holiday, my one good friend in elementary school. Buddy was a little slow with a real gentle spirit. His momma smoked mostly during her pregnancy with him. She almost died giving birth to him. He was small in stature for a man his size. Where Buddy loss in intelligence, he made up for it in his good nature.

Before I could say anything Buddy’s next words hit me like an express train.

“To bad about what happened to Angelle. I was going to marry her someday.” Lovie reached for my hand and began to squeeze it tightly.

I inhaled and exhaled deeply and asked cautiously, “What happened to her?”

Buddy began to look down at the ground at his feet. I knew something heavy was about to come out of his mouth. I just didn’t know if I could handle the weight of it all.

“Her folks say she killed herself from depression. That broke my heart and many other people in the community.”

“Oh my God!” I screamed. I couldn’t help but burst into tears.

Buddy began to apologize once more. Lovie cradled me inside her arms and shielded me from Buddy’s touch.

“I didn’t mean to upset your friend ma’am. I really didn’t...I just thought...she...never mind.”

Lovie began to rub my back as my tears began to soak her shirt. I didn’t have the strength to tell Buddy that my family had lied and killed me with more lies. I didn’t have the courage to tell him that I was back to possibly bury my grandmother. Instead, I just buried my sorrow unto my friends’ shoulder.

“We’ll take the keys please.” Lovie insisted.

Chapter Fourteen

Once we were inside the motel room I crawled on top of the bed inside the fetal position. Lovie wasn't sure on what to do or say next. She just stood with her back against the door looking back at me with tears in her eyes. My eyes were filled with so many tears I could hardly see. The fact that my own family had mourned my death weighed heavy on my shoulders. Questions and emotions began to flood my mind and heart. I wanted to desperately step outside of myself and shake myself out of the sea of pain. Instantly I felt like the little girl sitting in the front row of her mother's funeral. Waiting for my mother to walk down the aisle and tell me to scoot over as she slid me a piece of candy for being good. I could remember staring at that casket hoping and praying that if I squeezed my eyes tight enough my mom would appear. I'm still that little girl in so many ways desperately waiting for my mother to come and save me. Save me from the bad guys and boogie men underneath my bed. I needed some relief in some way.

“Angelle, is there anything I can do?” Lovie asked gently.

I couldn't help but to nod my head no. There was nothing in this world could do to comfort me in this moment. I needed to be alone. Alone to feel the pain and hurt growing inside of me. And eventually finding the strength to keep fighting again.

I soon realized this was only the beginning of addressing a deep wound with so many layers to uncover. I had only scratched the surface by running accidentally into Buddy. I could only imagine the type of pain and anxiety my family were prepared to bring to my doorstep.

Lovie sat on the edge of the bed and placed her hand gently on my shoulder. She closed her eyes and began to pray.

Chapter Fifteen

By morning my body ached all over. It was like I'd been hit by a truck and miraculously survived the accident. I laid inside the bed a few minutes longer than usual staring up at the ceiling. I could see myself getting up out of the bed and beginning to face the day. I wanted so badly to be my happy and normal self again. But, the pain inside of me was carrying me through a sea of emotions that my heart and mind couldn't handle. I knew when I decided to take this trip I would be in for a whirlwind of emotions and unpredictable moments. I told myself that I could handle it because I was making this decision for my life. I was releasing the pain and burden of my past. Yet, it felt like my past was strangling me with a cord around my neck dragging me down a lonely road of doubt. I could feel the tears began to well up inside my eyes. One by one a salty tear slid down my cheek and into my mouth. I didn't have the strength to wipe it away. I was grateful that Lovie and I were in separate beds. My back towards her inside the tiny hotel room. I didn't want her to

see me like this again. She'd bare the burden of my turmoil long enough for one night. I felt like I needed to be strong for myself and my friend. I just didn't understand how to connect the two. I closed my eyes and crossed my legs underneath the thin sheets on the bed. I weaved my fingers together and began to pray. I didn't really know how to talk to God about what I was feeling on the inside. But, I knew He was the only one who could restore my inner peace again.

Hello God, it's me Angell. I know it's been a while since we last spoke. That's mostly my fault. I haven't been ignoring you. I've just been preoccupied with my thoughts and life. Forgive me for not coming to you sooner. I feel like I'm losing myself all over again. I can barely think straight or find the words to tell you how I really feel without crying on the inside. I know you know the contents of my heart and know the cure to solve all my problems. Right now, I just need a miracle to be able to get up out of this bed and face the day. I'm weak and my spirit is tired. I feel like I've been running from myself my entire life. Running with two dumbbells on each foot. Every time I turn around or feel like I break free from it all. I look down at my feet and realize I'm right back where I started. I know it takes time to undo all of the hurt and pain I've experienced in my life. For once, I just would like to breathe

without barring the hurt of other people misery. I'd like to inhale and exhale without worrying about the next breath.

I'm not too familiar with forgiveness. Sounds kind of backwards to me. Deep down in my heart I don't know if I could look my grandmother in the eyes and tell her that I love her one last time. Yet along stand in the same room as my uncle without feeling like staring his eyeballs out. I know, two wrongs never make anything right. I need you to restore my strength today and each day afterwards. I need you to hold me close to your heart and never let me go. Love me unconditionally despite my shortcomings and flaws. Guide me and keep me on the path of righteousness so that I may serve you. Shield and protect me from my enemies, known and unknown. I trust you Lord God to go before me and clear a path for me. To not allow me to self destruct and spiral down a dark path any longer. I trust that you will hold my hand from beginning to end. I believe in you and I know you are present through the good, bad, and the ugly. As long as you are near, no one can ever harm me.

Amen.

“Amen” Lovie whispered.

Chapter Sixteen

“Hey Sweet Cakes, it’s your Uncle Dino. The family is wondering if we’ll see you anytime soon. Call me.”

Lovie and I were sitting inside the drinking our milkshakes when Uncle Dino’s voicemail came through my phone. I rolled my eyes and nearly tossed my milkshake out of the window. Lovie grabbed my hand and said, “Breathe.”

I took a few slow deep breaths and gathered my composure. We are only thirty minutes away from my grandmother’s house. I didn’t want my family to know I was

in town. I knew as soon as they knew I was here it was going to turn into a shit show. People from all over would come and stare at me like I was an alien. Poking and prodding into my business. Asking questions just to be in my face long enough to make me uncomfortable. My nerves were itching to curse somebody out the first time they step out of pocket.

“I think you should at least tell someone in your family that you are here. What about your dad?” Lovie inquired.

“He’s in prison.”

“Oh.”

Awkward silence danced in the air between for a few seconds longer than normal. I knew Lovie was just trying to help. I just didn’t know how to tell her that my father was off limits in conversation. I didn’t know how to undo all the complicated and chaotic stories of how my father ended up in prison. Or how our relationship was never the same after my mom died. We were strangers that shared the same DNA. A part of me wanted that father daughter relationship that most women dream about. The other side of me knew that my relationship with my father would never be normal. There were too many holes in our story to try to make sense

of everything that has happened to him or me. I just chose more often than not , not to talk about my father. People just wouldn't understand any of it.

“Yeah.” I paused.

“Maybe we could just go for a quick visit.” Lovie suggested.

“Did you not hear what I said...he's in prison. Not at a luxury penthouse.”

“I heard you. Did you hear me?” Lovie exerted.

I release a deep sigh and shook my head.

“No stone left unturned.” Lovie whispered.

“That's not a stone. It's a meteor. “

Lovie laughs. “ We didn't come all this way for you to shrink inside yourself.”

I shook my head adamantly. “ You don't understand. No one does...not even me.”

“You're right. I don't. Probably no one ever will. But, you know one thing....”

“What?”

“You only get one chance in life to make things right with your mom or your dad. Whatever happened in the past, happened. We can’t change it. We can change the future.”

“I’m ready. He’s not ready. Besides...we haven’t spoken in years. He probably doesn’t even remember me.”

“How do you know?”

“Huh?” I replied puzzled.

“How do you know your father doesn’t remember you? You are his only daughter right.”

“Right.” I confirmed.

“Well, what are you waiting on? Its time to make things right. You have to in order to meet the woman you will become in the future.” Lovie declared.

“Where do I begin? What do I even say to him after all these years?”

Lovie placed her hand on my heart. “ Why don’t you start thinking from here instead of over working your brain? You might find the right words will come out on their own.

Chapter Seventeen

“Sweet Carolina...Angelle is that really you?!”

As soon as his voice hit my ears, I felt like I was the five year old girl again looking into her daddy big brown eyes. It was almost strange for me to see my father behind that plexus glass. My visit was not planned and daddy didn't have any visitors on his call sheet. It was a miracle that we were able to get in and see him last minute. Somehow Lovie convinced one of the guards that the Lord would not be pleased if blocked His work of one of His children. Before I knew it Lovie pulled out her bible and made the guard confess most of his sins right there in front of the entire room.

More tears began to well up inside my eyes. The strong and well built man I once knew with a crooked smile and dimpled chin was gone. He'd been replaced by a frail thin man with round eyes and large bags underneath each eye. His peppered gray hair covering his head. While his olive brown wrinkled skin told his age. I could see glimmers of the man that used to put me on his back and horse with me in the grass in our front yard. I couldn't help but to stare into his dark brown eyes searching for a part of me inside of him. My father couldn't help but stare back at me in amazement.

My heart began to cry. This time for a different reason. I desperately wanted to wrap my arms around my fathers shoulders and kiss him on his wrinkled cheek. Tell him that his baby girl was actually here in the flesh. I could see the years inside the prison had taken a toll on his mental and physical health. My father sat in his seat slumped over with a slight hump in his back. Old wounds appeared all over his body. His dark green prison suit clung to his damp skin. I knew just seeing me would bring a smile to his often sad and worn eyes.

“It’s really me daddy...Angelle.” I replied.

As soon as the words left my body I could feel my energy and his shift into a space of peace and comfort. If only for a little while.

“You look just like your mother...those beautiful round eyes.”

I smiled from ear to ear. Even though his voice was groggy and low I could still hear the deep baritone vibrations of the man that he used to be.

“Thank you daddy. Momma was always a looker especially in her day.”

“It’s been a while...I didn’t know if...”He replied. My fathers hands began to tremble as he buried his chin inside his chest. He used his shirt to wipe his eyes. Every

time a tear would fall from his eyes. He'd look away quickly. That never stopped the tears from falling from his eyes.

“I know daddy. That's my fault. I moved and I didn't think of looking back.”

Daddy began to shake his head and more tears covered his face. When he turned back towards me his face was red as a fire hydrant. Within that moment I realized I wasn't the only one suffering inside my life story.

“Daddy, I'm sorry...I didn't meant to...” I tried to explain.

“It's alright. I told myself long ago that it was my fault. My fault for all the bad things that happened to you. Your mother. I was young and dumb. I was so busy trying to run in the streets that...I didn't know any better. I was selfish and I made all the wrong choices because they would only benefit me.” He cried.

“I understand. And it's taken me a long time to get to this place. A place where I felt like the world owed me something. It took me a long time to realize that you made mistakes and you are human. We all make mistakes and sometimes we just have to learn from them.” I replied.

Daddy wiped his face a few more times. I could see the pain and devastation his life choices had caused him. A part of me wanted to lift his burden off his shoulder and throw it unto mine.

“I thought the worse had happened to you. Your letters stopped coming and my phone calls went unanswered. I didn’t what else to do from inside of here. I knew the worse thing I could have ever done was leave you in the world alone..”

“I’m not alone daddy.” I replied with a smile. “ I have you.”

I placed my hand against the plexus glass. Daddy followed suit. More tears began to flow from my heart to my eyes. Daddy couldn’t hold back his tears any longer. Within that moment I realized that my father spirit was protecting me all along. It was true God really does answer our prayers.

Chapter Eighteen

As we drove away from the prison I watched a bird leap from the top of the building. I watched it fly off into the sunset until it disappeared from my view. Somehow I felt like that was my mothers spirit residing inside that bird. Her and God were with me every step of my journey. Even if at times I felt alone their spirit were covering and guiding me down the right path. Lovie and I exchanged a long sisterly

hug. This time I wasn't crying out of pain. I was feeling like my spirit was being lifted and I was almost ready to take flight. I'd never felt this unfamiliar tingle in my soul before. I wanted to capture it and put it inside of a bottle for safe keeping.

"I told you...you could do it." Lovie whispered.

:You were right...I just needed a little nudging in the right direction."

"Uh huh. You call it a nudge, I'll call it push off the cliff."

We laughed.

At stared back at the reflection of my friend and realized she was right all along. Everything in the universe was conspiring for me to have my breakthrough in this season. I just needed to trust in the process of the woman I am becoming and healing from my past.

"What was it like seeing your dad after all these years?"

I buckled my seatbelt and adjusted the rearview mirror. For the first time in a long time, I smiled at my reflection in the mirror.

"It was like the first time I ever heard the words I love you and the person saying it actually meaning them. And you know for once...I believed him."

Lovie couldn't help but flash a toothy grin in my direction. She understood exactly what I meant.

Chapter Nineteen

There were debris on the ground near my grandmothers property. My eyes blinked a few times as my mind tried to catch up to my reality. From afar the house look ten sizes smaller than what I could remember. The paint began to chip on the

sides of the house. A blue sheet of thick plastic covered most of the tattered roof and gutters. The porch needed major repairs as the wood looked like it was more than 100 years old. But, on the corner of the tiny porch rested my grandmothers dark brown rocking chair. She'd sit inside that chair everyday and stare out into the abyss of the property. Nothing but trees and green acres everywhere. The nearest house was at least ten to twenty minutes away. On any good day growing up a few of the neighbors children would gather in the middle of the dirt road and play games. My favorite was always hide and seek. I was always the best at it. I could find everybody and they always knew I would eventually. My grandmother would just sit on the porch with a mean mug across her face and sip on her dark roasted coffee. Occassionaly she'd chew on her tobacco and spit it out on the side of the porch. She didn't do it everyday. That's only because a trip to the local store would cause her large feet to swell like two big pillows.

My grandmother was about as mean and senile as most women in our neighborhood. She always the meanest to me and nice to the other children. That usually boggled my mind. She'd call me everything from olive oil to black ugly string bean. Her words would pierce my heart and make me cry rivers. She didn't care. People called her names and she thought it was safe to call me the same.

I didn't realize how human she was until I saw tears falling from her eyes on the day of my mother's funeral. She wept so much that the pastor could barely finish the ceremony. A part of me wanted to reach out and console her broken heart. I just didn't know if she wanted that type of support from me. On that day I kept my distance and remained inside my shell for safety.

Flashes of my childhood came flooding through my mind. The closer Lovie and I got to my grandmother's house. The more I could remember vividly sitting on that front porch crying and talking to God, asking Him to save me. God never answered me back. Not the way that I wanted him to anyway. Instead I learned it was best to keep things on the inside and maybe then God would really show up for me like everybody said he would someday.

I still felt that in my spirit til this day. I pulled my car into the dusty ridden driveway. On the side of the house was a rusty 69 Oldsmobile in baby blue. The paint was chipped and it looked like the windows had been shot out. The tires were missing and the tag had been replaced by an expired sign. My heart jumped inside my chest and suddenly I was that young twelve year old girl again afraid of her family. I knew who the car belonged too. I'd taken several trips to the grocery and beauty parlor in it. It belonged to my Uncle Dino.

“This place doesn’t look like it’s changed much in years.” Lovie stated staring out the window.

I turned the ignition off and left the keys inside. I couldn’t look in no other direction than in front of me. “That’s because it hasn’t changed...not one bit.”

“Take your time. Don’t rush.” Lovie whispered into the cool thin air.

I rolled my window door to feel the breeze caress my skin. I unbuckled my seatbelt and rested my arms on the steering wheel. Images of what my family looked like after all the years that had gone by crossed my mind. As hard as I could I couldn’t imagine them any older than when I left them behind. I was angry and filled with rage in my heart and veins. I wanted so desperately to kill all of them with a blink of an eye.

Instead I’d birth the idea inside my head that they were better off without me around.

At least then I wouldn’t be the black sheep of the family. Instead I could start over and become someone new. I vowed to never set foot on this property again. Yet, here I was more than ten years later getting ready to knock on the door.

“I just need a minute to wrap my mind around what I’m about to do.” I whispered.

“I’m here, remember.” Lovie confirmed.

Even with her being beside me I knew she couldn't bare the extent of the trauma brewing up inside of me. That young girl inside of me began to scream from mountain top to the pit of my soul. She was having an inner war with me. I was determined not to run away any more. It was to give my younger self peace and the future me freedom. It was uncomfortable. I was ready.

