Chapter 1

They say that “Angels” walk among us and I’d have to say that my mother, Clara, was probably the most Angelic person I’ve ever known; just a sweet, loving and caring person whose heart went out to everyone. Clara Mae Fallen was born in Danville, Virginia, to Mary and Fred Fallen. The oldest of three children, she was big hipped and *“high yella,”* two great qualities that served her well in the small town that put great emphasis and preference on light skinned Negroes. My grandmother, who was part Cherokee Indian, often proudly remarked that had we been born during slavery, we would’ve been the “house niggers” given our families light skin tones and delicate features. After high school, my mom went to work for a family of “good White folks” and the Missus took it upon herself to introduce her to their chauffeur, a good looking, tall young man named Colonel. They soon married, had my sister Ruth and migrated to New York City where they quickly entered the restaurant business. They did quite well from all accounts even though it was a constant case of “one step forward and two steps back.” My father’s constant gambling drained the profits considerably. My mother often reflected on how they made five to six hundred dollars per night on the weekends alone, a lot of money in the fifties, only to have to borrow money from my grandmother on Monday morning to re-stock the restaurant. This gambling addiction would ultimately cost my parents their home and their business.

Clara and I developed a bond before I even arrived. I began communicating with her from the womb and she listened. Oh, I don’t mean that I actually talked but, I communicated in my own way and she did respond. For example, if she ate something too spicy, I’d kick her in the ribs and if she drank something too cold, I’d nudge where I thought her bladder was and send her running. Finally, over the course of nine months, we understood each other. So, even though her doctor, Dr. Aurelius King, told her not to expect me until Christmas day, she knew from my constant barrage of elbows and kicks that I was anxious to make my entrance. I’ve always had a sense of urgency about things and that has not changed until this very day.

My mom informed my dad, Colonel Jesse Mayfield that it was “time” and he’d have to interrupt the illegal gambling game that he ran in the basement of their restaurant. He must have had a bad card hand because he stopped the game immediately and asked his friend “Reebop” to give them a lift to the hospital in his brand new, 1953 Cadillac. My mother often recounted the story of how they pulled up to Williamsburg General Hospital in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn and Reebop jumped out of the car and ran inside to get a wheelchair. He apparently grabbed a wheelchair from the emergency room without asking anyone. Several nurses and a hospital security guard were hot on his heels as he burst through the doors, rushing to the car.

The nurses immediately ushered my mother into the emergency room, registered her and notified Dr. King. As my mother lay on a gurney in the hallway, my father and Reebop nervously paced the floor.

Curtis Williams, affectionately called *"Reebop,"* was quite a character. About five feet, nine inches tall, with conked hair and a gold trimmed tooth, he was a known "numbers runner" and a low-level mob enforcer. His wife Sarah had knots all over her forehead, mementos of his violent temper and he would later be suspected in the murder of a rival numbers runner and convicted of manslaughter in the death of a man that attempted to rob him. He and my father were best friends and he was about to become my Godfather. My father, to my mother's chagrin, ran around with some of the shadiest characters and they were all afraid of him.

Dr. King finally arrived, greeted my father and rushed to my mother's side as she lay in the hallway. They tell me that he complained to the nurses that my mother hadn't been assigned a room. As he left to address that situation, he assured my mother that everything would be fine and that he would return shortly. I don't know how he defined "shortly" but, upon his return, he was greeted by my mother and me. My mother had already had a child and apparently, the second child usually comes much faster. How that little fact escaped Dr. King is beyond me but, whatever, I was here; *eleven pounds of cute and round!* We were quickly taken to a hospital room where I was cleaned up and my mother attended to. When informed that I had arrived, my dad and Reebop cut short their cigarette break and raced to the room. So, here we were, them looking down at me and me looking up at them, not knowing which one I was related to but hoping it wasn't the one that blinded me from the glare of the sunlight bouncing off his proud, gold adorned smile. No, lucky for me, my dad was "the Colonel."

My dad wasn't a military Colonel, though he had served in the Army during World War II. Colonel Jesse Mayfield was actually his birth name, as it was the custom in his day for Negro parents to give their children prestigious names that inadvertently demanded the respect of folks in general and White folks in particular. It was common to meet Negroes named General, Sergeant, Major, Abraham Lincoln So and So, George Washington So and So or Booker T. Washington. My father was very proud of being named Colonel and used it to his advantage to get out of more than one compromising situation. He often boasted about how being perceived as a military Colonel gotten him out of traffic tickets and even an arrest for gambling. Even though he only had a high school formal education, he was blessed with good looks, a fine physique, a photographic memory and ambidexterity. These qualities alone made for quite a formidable character but the two things that impressed me most about him, even at an early age, were that he was brutally honest and absolutely fearless. I can honestly say that in my entire life, until the day

he died, I never saw him take one backward step. He lived in a "black and white" world. There was very little gray area with him. He told it like it was, would give you the shirt off his back but would shoot you if you crossed him. As I ease into upper middle age, I often reflect that I am better educated, more worldly and sophisticated than my father, but never the man he was.

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I was named Jesse Aurelius Mayfield. The name "Jesse" obviously came from my father but my middle name came from the good doctor that "almost" delivered me. Dr. Aurelius King was another interesting character. His sister Inez was married to my father's first cousin, Charlie Tinsley so, that sort of made us related, once removed. It seems that he was a nice guy and took really good care of my mom so, I got his name and his nickname, "Reedy." He went on to have quite an illustrious career and often remarked that his two biggest claims to fame were delivering the *Reverend Al Sharpton* and me.

A week later my mother was released from the hospital and I was brought home to meet my sister Mary Ruth. I was only a week old but immediately I knew something was up. Hey, "intellectually gifted" didn't just start when I got to the fifth grade. Mama was yellow, Daddy was yellow, I was yellow and sister was chocolate brown with what would now be commonly called "Afro-centric" features. It confused my little brain but it was apparently my first attempt at intelligent thought. I just couldn't articulate what I was thinking. My eyes must have said something because my mom kept saying, *"He looks like he wants to say something. He looks like he wants to say something."*

My dad's gambling finally caused us to lose our home, a beautiful brownstone on Tompkins's Avenue in Brooklyn. The family moved into a one-bedroom apartment and my parents quickly applied for an apartment with the New York City Housing Authority. The projects! The housing projects, today, poverty, slum and gang infested, were once beautiful, secure, well-maintained, Jewish and Italian occupied dwellings where your rent was determined by your income. For example, two families may both have a two-bedroom apartment but one family would pay $27.00 per month and another family would pay $80.00 for the same apartment. This would be ideal for my father, given his weaknesses.

As fate would have it, a White gentleman entered my parent's restaurant one evening and while eating and making small talk, he admired my father's diamond studded watch. My dad was very proud of this piece of jewelry that he had won in a card game as it was valued at $2500.00. In passing, Dad mentioned that he had applied to the Housing Authority and that given the bureaucratic red tape it would probably be a year before he was called for an apartment. The gentleman smiled and said, *"I'll bet you that watch that you're called for an apartment within a*

month." My dad said that was impossible and agreed to the wager. Three weeks later my mom and dad received a letter from the Housing Authority informing them that they had been accepted and granted an apartment. Apparently, the White gentleman was an "Executive" with the New York City Housing Authority! Oh well, my father never asked and the gentleman never volunteered and all's fair… My father relinquished the watch and my family moved into the Kingsborough Housing Projects. A fateful relocation as it turned out because, a member of my family would be in that housing complex for the next thirty-six years.

Chapter 2

Growing up in Brooklyn in the fifties was quite an experience. Oh, I know that someone growing up in Terra Haute, Indiana in the fifties would say the same thing about their reality but Brooklyn, with its' multi-ethnic and multi-cultural diversity, was not so much a "melting pot" but more so, a pot of stew; each cultural and ethnic ingredient essential to the overall flavor of the borough, yet each distinctive and identifiable. Brooklyn was a beehive of activity. The Dodgers were still there and Jackie Robinson was a source of pride and inspiration to Negroes, as we were called then, and Whites alike. The neighborhoods were peppered with Jewish and Italian merchants and the aromas that emanated from Jewish delicatessens and Italian restaurants excited your senses and made your mouth water. Sheepshead Bay, Bensonhurst, Bay Ridge, Brighton Beach, Graves End and Flatbush were all predominately White neighborhoods. Growing up, I never even heard of these places as they were pretty much considered "no man's land" for Negroes. Few people of color lived in these areas and few seldom ventured into these neighborhoods for any reason. News of Negroes being shot, stabbed, set on fire or beaten for daring to walk through these neighborhoods was common. The United States of America is a *"free"* society but for Negroes, historically, that pretty much meant, *"being free to exercise common sense about where you set your foot."*

After the end of World War II, there was a major northern migration on the part of southern Blacks. They came north seeking jobs, the right to vote and increased opportunities. Many southern transplants settled in New York City's five boroughs: Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island. The government began to build affordable housing complexes throughout the city. These housing complexes called "projects," were low rent, well maintained, clean and safe dwellings occupied primarily by Whites. Suddenly, a sad, historical pattern began to emerge. As Negroes moved into these areas, Whites moved out. Traditionally Jewish, Italian and Irish neighborhoods suddenly became all Black. Many White merchants remained in the Negro community however and as Negroes patronized their establishments and depended on them for goods and services, these White merchants and landlords took Negro dollars out of the

community, thereby depleting Black economic power. This reality, combined with high unemployment, high crime, and low police presence, created the northern ghetto.

In one such ghetto, Bedford Stuyvesant, sat the Kingsborough Housing Projects. Seven rows of buildings, each six stories high. Not the worst as housing projects went but by the time my parents moved in in the spring of 1954, the White exodus had left only a sprinkling of elderly Jewish people who only ventured out of their apartments in the early morning hours. We immediately became part of the fabric of the community that was Kingsborough in general and part of the family spirit in our building in particular. I think for the folks that lived in our building, there was a sense that "we were all in it together." This communal, supportive

mentality provided a safe and loving atmosphere into which we settled and in which I was about to experience my early growth and development.

After settling into our new apartment, it wasn't long before my father's gambling debts caused my parents to have to close the restaurant. It was inevitable. My dad, like all gambling addicts, was always chasing that "big score." He had had some luck in the past but not a sustained run. My mother was tired of his antics and since he had promised her that he'd stop gambling after they married, the lie they were living was a constant source of tension between them.

The "Colonel" went to work for Frank Bros., a well-known Manhattan shoe store, famous for their shoes and hats. Mom seemed content in her role as "Suzy Homemaker." My grandmother, Mary, was a constant fixture around our house. Raised in the South and having only a seventh grade education, she was a proud and industrious woman of great integrity and rock based spirituality. She was our conduit to our family history, often telling family stories that captivated and inspired. She was also our back-up support system as my father's $50.00 a week salary didn't go very far. It amazed me then, even at that young age that he could support us all with a fifty dollar salary. I now know that he did so with the help of my beloved grandmother. She and my dad had a very nice relationship. Even though she was only eleven years older, he treated her with the same respect he gave his own mother. I often heard her say that she'd "swim a river for him" but her biggest problem with the Colonel was his gambling. Many paydays he didn't come home because he had lost his pay gambling and who came to our rescue each time with a couple of grocery bags, my grandmother. She never complained and would walk in, put on her apron and start cooking. I remember on several occasions when dad didn't come home, my mother took money from my piggy bank and sent my sister and I to the store to buy some pork n' beans and a loaf of bread. On one such trip from the store, we encountered a nosey neighbor on the elevator and I proudly declared, *"We got pork n' beans and they were bought with money from my piggy*

bank." My sister could have gone through the elevator floor. As we reached our stop, she yanked me out the door and proceeded to scold me for having such a big mouth. Once inside, she related the story to my mother who calmly explained to me that while she was very proud of me, our circumstances were not something she wanted everyone to know. She then kissed me on the cheek and proceeded to make us rice with butter and pork n' beans. It was a feast to me. To this very day I only eat when I'm hungry and to satisfy that hunger, either filet mignon or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich will suffice. Dad would usually come home by Sunday night, listen to my mother's scolding and admonishment and then go to bed, a cycle that would repeat itself for years to come.

The years rolled by and after my fourth birthday, we were blessed with the birth of my brother, Ernest. He was named after my father's deceased brother, Ernest Reynold Mayfield, a troubled World War II hero that had committed suicide the year before. Now our family unit was complete and I must say that growing up in Kingsborough was truly a case of the proverbial

"village raising a child." It seemed that everyone in our community, particularly the folks in our building, took an interest in each other's children. Everyone looked out for each other and adults would smother you with attention and affection but they'd also chastise you and report you to your parents if you got out of line. Looking back in hindsight, I am grateful for the communal involvement in my upbringing as it provided a loving foundation steeped in rich traditions which placed great emphasis on courtesy and honesty, while at the same time, always exhorting you to be the very best you could be. That's how I feel "now" but at the time, I considered these old folks to be nosey and meddlesome. Our resident busybody was an old lady named Mrs. West. She and her husband lived on the first floor and they were both old as water and twice as weak. She was a precursor to the "security camera" and she was known to spend her days peeking through her peephole. She had reported every young person in the building to his or her parents or the Housing Authority for one offense or another. I remember her telling my mother that she'd seen me in the garden pulling up her newly planted flowers. My mother gave me hell and made me apologize. The next time my mom and I encountered Mrs. West, she was trying to be nice to me and I stood there staring at her like she was a pig in an evening gown. My mother told me to say hello and I said, *"Hello Mrs. West and who did you squeal on today?"* Her eyes bucked wide and she went back into her apartment and slammed the door. My mom was so embarrassed and she proceeded to give me the only whipping I ever received from her. From that point on, Mrs. West ignored me and I couldn't have been happier.

My sister went to school all day and it was a case of "good riddance" for me. She and I did not get along and I relished the thought of her being gone all day as I'd then have my mother's

attention pretty much all to myself. Ernest was a baby and I didn't really see him as a problem. I was a "mama's boy" and these hours with her were precious to me. Ruth and I are close now but that closeness was thirty-two years in coming. Given her dark skin and African features, she seemed out of place to me in our family unit and I let her know it every day. I don't know where I learned the definition of the word "adopted" but from the moment I did, I informed Ruth of my suspicions and we were at it from that point on. She in turn thought I had the largest head on the planet and she told me so daily. Even at the dinner table we would exchange insults. I'd tell her that she was adopted and she'd tell me that my head looked like a basketball with a wig on it. My mom would tell us both to stop talking and eat and as soon as she looked away, Ruth would make the gesture of a basketball with her hand and complete the circumference just as my mom looked up. Mom tried repeatedly to explain to me that Ruth took her dark features from other dark complexioned family members but I wasn't buying it. God, I hated her.

I pretty much spent my time under my mother's armpits. She was very sweet and affectionate and the Southern twang in her voice was music to my ears. Even until this very day, I have a soft spot in my heart for women with Southern accents. When I did give my mother a break, I occupied myself watching television. We had one of those big, awkward looking television sets with doors. The picture screen was small but I could see my favorite shows like *Superman, Jack*

Lalanne and Oral Roberts. Superman amazed me with all of his powers and my little brain just couldn't reconcile that he and Clark Kent were one and the same. Jack Lalanne was fun to watch and imitate and Oral Roberts, a popular "faith healer," kept me spellbound as he healed all manner of cripple and sick people. By the time these three shows concluded, so did my peace. Ruth was coming home.

September 1958 finally arrived and it was time for me to begin kindergarten. I was four and a half years old and not overly enthused about the prospect of being away from my mother but at the same time, I think I looked at school as an adventure. The first day of school is always a crowded and bustling situation and sometimes confusing, with parents escorting their kids to school, many for the first time and older kids who knew the ropes, looking at the newcomers as "fresh meat." Public School 83 was a rather daunting edifice. A red monstrosity of a building, it had been built in 1883. Upon entering it, you actually felt like you were being transported back in time given the antiquated architecture, the pictures of long dead White people hanging on the walls and the sight of some old, but living, mostly Jewish teachers, made you feel like they had been around since the first brick was laid. I saw other kids that I knew from the neighborhood and we all had that same look *"Kunte Kinte"* had when he was chained on the banks of the Gambia River, about to embark on a *"three month cruise."* As he looked around at all of his captured brethren, his look said, *"Damn, they got you too."*

Mom escorted me to my classroom where we were greeted by a nice old lady named Miss Holmes and her teacher's assistant, Miss Troy. Miss Holmes, seventy-five years old if she was a day, leaned down to welcome me and I remember thinking that the many wrinkles in her face reminded me of the chitterlings that my grandmother soaked in the bathtub for twenty-four hours every New Year's Eve. She said, *"Hi there Jesse"* and I screamed. I always hated chitterlings or "chitlins" as we called them. She assured my mother that I'd be fine and Mom kissed me goodbye. As I saw her turn to leave, I started crying like there was no tomorrow. Mom kept walking and I sat down and went through a hissy fit. The much younger and rather beautiful Miss Troy tried to comfort me and gave me a big hug, burying my face in her ample bosom. Miraculously, I stopped crying. I remember thinking, *"School might not be too bad."* I had never seen White women with blond hair and blue eyes in the flesh before and it was a novelty to me. If they all ended up looking like Miss Holmes, well, I wasn't impressed but if they all started out looking like Miss Troy, I planned to be in school every day, sitting in front of the class; the teacher's pet. I settled down and after a week, Miss Holmes informed my mother that I was doing fine and had adjusted nicely. She did say however, that she didn't understand why I cried everyday *just at lunchtime* but she was sure that too would pass.

I loved going to school and by mid-year my mother had taught me how to cross the street and trusted me to walk the two blocks to school all by myself. I think mom loved having her two oldest kids in school because it gave her a few hours reprieve from cooking, cleaning, laundry

and ironing and a chance to get lost in her daily soap operas *"Love Of Life," "Search For Tomorrow" and "The Guiding Light."* I was forced to sit through these three shows every day and for the life of me, it didn't seem that these miserable, rich White folks were loving life and I questioned why they were searching for tomorrow since it was coming for sure and I never saw the guiding light. I just thought grown folks were weird. All I cared about was that when "The Guiding Light" went off the air, it was my cue to leave for school. This routine went on for the remainder of the school year and at the end, I said my goodbyes to Miss Holmes and Miss Troy. As it turned out, Miss Holmes passed away the very next year and Miss Troy, now a full-fledged teacher, got her very own class. I've thought of both of them very fondly over the years and it occurred to me recently that should Miss Troy still be living, she is now the same age that Miss Holmes was in 1958. Life is truly a circle.