

Burning Of The Ashes

Restore me to the earth

Cleanse me in the riches of the soil

Unravel my human essence

Unburden the depths of my spirit

Breathe new life into me

Release me unto the high heavens to flounder in the deep blue skies

Heal the parts of my heart that love has scorned me

Reach for the burning desire to love again and again

Cloth me in forgiveness

Reign down on me with the presence of angels and ancestors

Comfort me with hymns and praises

With my creator I am no longer the ashes of my sins

Count me in as the line to heaven begins

Sweet birds will sing a new song

Each day I will spread the seeds of love and faith unto the many on bended knee

Open my heart as I close my eyes in humbleness

Burn the ashes of days past

Sweep me into new beginnings

I am rising into my calling

Destiny whispers my name

Free as a bird

I am a phoenix rising above the ashes

A new day has just begun deep within me

Chapter One

Fill my cup, Lord; I lift it up Lord...

All children get excited about watching cartoons on Saturday mornings. Didn't you? They taught us that every story has a good guy and bad guy. No one dare mess with The Hulk unless they wanted to risk being smashed. Everyone could depend on Ironman to come up with a genius master plan. Add Superman's strength or Wonder Woman into your line of defence and the superheroes could always swoop in to save the day.

Without realizing, I too, was convinced that I had a superpower. Drowning in the sea of brokenness that was my family, lovers and friends, I felt the need to rescue everybody. And so, I tapped into my superpower of being... the selfless giver. I gave and I gave, even though I had but a little, I gave until I could give no more. Subconsciously, I hoped that once they were back on their feet, maybe they could pour back into me too. I waited, waited and I'm still waiting. My revelation has been that the problem didn't lie with them but with my expectations. I can't depend on people to fill me up, the only one that can do that is God.

It's true that we shouldn't give to receive. Volunteers always attest to how fulfilled they feel when they give back. My acts of service went beyond giving, I was trying to solve the problems around me. I wanted to fix situations, fix things, and fix people. Maybe my desire to help people is rooted in my childhood dream of becoming a lawyer. Come to think of it, maybe I should have

dreamt of being an engineer. I just wanted to put the pieces of everyone's life back together again.

I had a rocky childhood. Even as a child, I knew life would be difficult for me. I've been blessed with a strong spirit of discernment and along the way, it has guided me and even tried to warn me. Even so, I couldn't turn my back on relatives and friends spiralling out of control. I had to save them from themselves.

All I got in return was pain, lies and betrayal.

Is it too much to expect that when you love someone that they will also love you back?

In any given relationship that's expected right? And shouldn't it be unconditional? Whatever happened to we love each other just because...we are in love.

So to all those women who have given their love and souls and never received a 'thank you', I dedicate this book to you. You gave access to your mind, your spirit, the very essence of your soul and that's nothing to be ashamed of since you were guided by your heart. All you got in return were empty promises which died a slow, painful death and now you're left with nothing but ashes.

But it's time to let go. Breathe new life into those ashes. Set them free across the sea, over the mountains and all over the world. Watch your ashes transform from something tragic into something beautiful but it starts with you.

I also dedicate this book to my mother. You're the strongest woman I know. You had your own cross to bear but you prayed fervently along the way. I was amazed at your relentless faith. It was inspiring but most of all, it was empowering and I have inherited that said strength.

I've been giving and giving to others my entire life. Even when I didn't want to, I still gave.

However, this time it's different. Sharing my life experiences with you is important to me. Why?

Because I believe it can be impactful. If this book can help at least one woman who has struggled or is still struggling, my goal would have been accomplished. This is my gift to you. I hope the lessons I have learnt along the way will help you to better navigate life and avoid pitfalls.

Woman, you Majestic Being, remove that mask of shame and doubt! Be bold enough to be vulnerable with your truth. Own your story. Pursue your passions and breathe life into those ashes. It's time to spread your wings and fly right into your destiny.

Chapter Two

“Someone call 911 NOW!” my uncle yelled.

It was a steamy, hot, summer morning. In a regular family, this would be an ideal day to frolic in the backyard. Chasing each other with the hose, spouting water everywhere, slurping lollies while our tummies growled for the barbeque burgers on the grill. Lots of laughter. There would be lots of laughter on this perfect summer day. Can you hear it? Nevertheless, I did not live in a regular family and today was not an ideal summer day.

Instead, my mother was on the floor shaking uncontrollably, foaming at the mouth and her eyes were rolling to the back of her head.

This was definitely a shock overload for my 12-year-old mind. Stunned, I stood there frozen.

“Was this it? Was this how I’d lose my mum?”

I felt helpless but I wanted to rescue her and then for a moment part of me wanted her to die, she wasn’t a mother anyways I thought, never have been. I hated her for leaving me and my brother there with her mother. We were constantly abused rather that was physical, mentally or emotionally. The things that went on in that household were just completely unbearable. Any child, who has an ailing parent or loved one in distress, wants to save them. Therefore, it is

difficult for a child to accept that there are certain things that happen and they are beyond our control. And so, there she lay, on the floor. By now you may have assumed that she was having a stroke, an epileptic seizure or struck by some kind of rare disease. None of the above. This was all self-inflicted. Symptoms of her own actions. You see, my mother was addicted to crack cocaine and she'd been addicted to crack cocaine ever since I was about 6 or maybe 7 years of age and that went on and off until up into my early 30ty's. On that perfect summer morning, death came knocking at her door as I witnessed her body convulse from a drug overdose. Hell, maybe she needed to be put out of her own misery, maybe she wanted to die. This was not the last time that this would happen. If you asked me to spell childhood, I'd spell it t-r-a-u-m-a. My childhood was difficult and I sensed that life ahead would be no different. Honestly, there were some good times but this wasn't the case the majority of the time. Most of it was an uphill battle. Childhood is a critical juncture. We all know this. Children are like sponges, so it was in these formative years that I soaked up rejection, disappointment and heartache.

The constant back and forth between households compounded the situation. My father was in prison and my mother was addicted to crack cocaine. This back and forth wasn't smooth sailing. It wasn't peaceful like the ebb and flow of waves caressing the sand on a lovely beach day.

It was unsettling. Our parents weren't in a position to parent me and my brother, so our grandparents stepped in to take care of us. My paternal grandmother lived in Chicago and my maternal grandmother lived in Missouri.

By now, we've all discovered that 'adulthood' is a scam and that we were misinformed about the freedom it brings and the joy of dictating our own pace. Children don't have to cope with the daily stressors of life...or so I'd thought. In those critical years when adults should have been

filling my cup with positivity and sunshine, they were filling it with endless complications. In Missouri, my mother's mother was the root of those complications. Yes, you read that correctly, "my mother's mother". I guess you can tell that relationship was a bit strained. My grandmother was a very strict and rigid woman, sometimes heartless. We soaked up everything, the good and the bad. My grandmother in Chicago did the best she could but as I reflect upon those years through more mature eyes, I can say with certainty, that the constant back and forth of my childhood gave rise to the turbulent waters that later flooded my life.

However, when I lived in Chicago, I felt loved. The love that all children ought to feel. Contrast that with the hate I felt when I moved back to my Missouri household. I'm not exaggerating. My mother's mother, Joan, dished it and I felt it.

Swinging on a pendulum between love and hate can be very confusing for a child. In Chicago, my grandmother, Margaret, did more than enough for us. She was a bit more well off but it wasn't even about money. I'm sure that even if she had less, she would have found a way to provide a stable and loving home environment. Unconditional love thrived in that home and I felt it, especially from my grandfather who aptly filled in the role of father figure. If all we had was love, that would be enough. More importantly, I was enough.

But then I would swing back to the reality of Missouri. . I must say that my grandmother Joan was a with my grandmother Joan she was a very strong woman. Her strength was resilient she did the best she could do for it was all she knew. She was raised by her brother and older sister once her parents had past. Joan had not only raised her children, but she'd also raised her children's children, and then some of her great grandchildren as well. She was a fighter never showed any weakness just strength. At the time when my brother and I moved in she was raising

now a total of 6 children all on her on in one household all her own. However, this was a house in which was surrounded with hate-infested wounding words such as, “You’re gonna be a crackhead whore just like your mother, you’re just pitiful, you’re dumb, you ain't gone be good for shit. Such words can really mess with a child’s psyche, slashing him/her at the knees and paralyzing them with fear and doubt for life.

In this house was my mother’s two children which were my brother and myself and then you had my mother’s sister Lenora's 4 children, she had 4 girls. However, my mother’s sister, Lenora died tragically, she was killed by her husband. Therefore, we were all 1st cousins living up under one roof. Joan coddled them and showed them more love and affection. I guess that was to help them cope with such a tragic loss. However, my brother and I also deserved to be loved. Instead, she belittled us. She tormented us with her words, saying things like, Lenora was a queen,’ and I guess that’s why she behaved accordingly. She treated my cousins like royalty while we stood on the sideline like rejects. That was wrong. Sorry, I stand corrected, that was a wicked and evil thing to do. It affected me to the core so much to the point I started to hate my grandmother with everything in me.

In spite of the hurt Senta—my mother- caused her, we didn’t deserve to be treated like that. We were innocent by-products being crucified for crimes we never committed. This dynamic made it hard for us to move forward, move up or even move on. Back and forth we rocked, between hate and love. And it was so.

In Chicago, I relished the few seconds of basking in the sun of happiness and feeling carefree.

Gran was willing to go beyond the basic requirements to make us comfortable. Not only did she

provide for us, but she also nurtured and guided us. I never got the feeling that she felt forced or like it was an obligation. She was simply showering me with a grandmother's love. I felt safe and even hopeful for better days ahead. I would get my expectations up, only to be gutted by the misery which greeted me in Missouri. Rolling the dice between my mother's addiction and her mother's wicked ways left me uneasy and walking on eggshells. She was vindictive and there was no telling how far she would go. I recall, she even shot our grandfather. Straight up crazy. Violence, confrontation and abuse was the norm there and that's why it's no surprise that I ended up in similar situations. My difficulties in life didn't just crop up nor was it a stroke of bad luck. Those seeds of instability were planted and watered and that's exactly what I reaped. Childhood for me was also spelt g-r-i-e-f. Our cousins grieved the loss of their mother but so did we. Even though mum was still alive, she was slowly dying at the hands of crack cocaine. Remembering some of the things she said to me, I'm convinced that her soul left her body. My mother and my relationship were always shaken and my grandmother Joan made sure that she added to that misery to keep things just as they were. When her mother Joan was not home, she ordered us not to let Senta come in the house. I can remember so many times looking out the window as she banged on the doors to get in all the girls laughing and I had to play it off like it didn't matter to me like I didn't give a damn. When on the inside I felt her pain, I felt so numb. Some days she'd be high as a kite but all she wanted was food or to take a bath even. She wasn't the typical drug addict.

"Let me in!" mum yelled.

With tears in my eyes I said, "Gran said don't let you in."

"You'd do that to me? LET ME IN!"

“Grandma said we can’t”

And then crack cocaine took the mic and began to speak.

It said, “Karra, you bitch, I’m gonna kill you. I’m coming to the bus stop and I’m gonna kill you at the bus stop. I’m gonna cut your head off and put it in the trash bag.”

I knew she was high but I was so scared. I believed her. I thought my own mother was going to kill me. I was scared to death to go to that bus stop for months. And once when I’d even saw her and she was so high and she paid me no mind, boy I was off the hook.

As an adult, I fully comprehend that she wasn’t in her right mind when she said that. That wasn’t her. She didn’t have the capacity to mother us at the time. And so, I silently grieved the loss of my mother.

Even though drugs took over her, it still amazed me how she had morsels of love remaining to give to my brother. Essentially, he was her favorite child. There I stood, an outcast, once again, not enough. I was already playing second-fiddle to my cousins for they were Joan's favorite and now this. I had to contend for my own mother’s love. I knew what to expect from Joan but when rejection comes from your own mother, it’s a deeper indescribable kind of hurt.

But even then, as a child, I knew I couldn’t hold it against her. When she visited us on hot summer days and we couldn’t let her come inside, she would get butt-naked and use the hose to take a shower in the backyard. I would throw the soap and towel out to her. She had crazy tendencies but she kept herself clean. I wanted to do more to help her but the perpetual hurt taught me that you can only save those who want to be saved. And even then, we still can’t save everyone.

Yet, the Bible teaches us that:

“Love is patient, love is kind...It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

Corinthians 13

I guess that's why I always felt like it was my job to love and heal everyone. Despite my efforts, my childhood taught me that love is spelt c-o-n-f-u-s-i-n-g. Those two very distinct households sculpted and influenced my expectations about relationships. I'm no psychologist but it doesn't take a degree to realize that my childhood is connected to the troubles I had later in my love life. As a mother, I ensure that my children feel loved and protected. I felt this in Chicago. They taught me that love is stable; it's dependable. They didn't constantly rub my father's shortcomings in my face. Meanwhile, back in Missouri, I learnt that love is crazy; it's always angry and unpredictable. From the drugged-up shenanigans of my mother to my grandmother firing shots at my grandfather, the message was loud and clear...love was really felt this way, t-o-x-i-c.

When that toxicity boils over, love walks away. The relationship between my grandparents in Missouri died a natural death. Honestly, who could blame him for leaving? Joan was an evil woman and there was only so much of that a person could tolerate. When he left, things got worse because she blamed the children- blatant denial for her role in it all.

The opposite examples were set in Chicago. Love was c-o-m-m-i-t-t-e-d. My grandparents were married and they didn't broadcast their arguments in front of us. I'm sure they had their differences but a positive committed relationship also teaches us how to respect each other,

forgive and love unconditionally. I didn't have to prove myself worthy of this type of love. Heck, I didn't even have to be the daughter of a queen. Imagine that!

My heart was torn. On one half, I felt like love was all jacked-up and on the other hand, love was a fairy-tale and I wanted that fairy-tale to come true. Regrettably, the constant back and forth of my childhood got my fairy-tale stuck in my imagination. I don't think I ever got close to my happily-ever-after. Nevertheless, my story is still being written. Don't write me off just yet! My childhood may not have been a bed of roses but I survived. I rode those difficult waves of my childhood. I survived the high tide and so can you.

Chapter Three

When Your Spirit Speaks...Listen

Look into my eyes, tell me what you see.

They say first impressions count. The firmness of your handshake, your attire and your smile can all influence someone's perception of you. I agree that first impressions count, but for me, it

wasn't the outward appearance. Something as simple as eye contact or being in close proximity with someone could give me an inkling of that person's true nature.

Preachers, life coaches, everybody nowadays, talk about stepping into your divinity. Well, I never stepped out of it! My spirit has always been acute to when something may be a bit off-track.

I can decode people. It's easy for me to see beyond what they wish to portray. With just one look, their spirit translates through me. My spirit of discernment has always revealed the good and bad in people. Even when I ignored it, it was always right.

Alright, I can hear the cynics in the background singing that this was just my imagination. I beg to differ. You may label it as the subconscious or intuition. Whatever you call it, it's meaningful and it's real. In my case, I have been blessed with a double portion of it and I call it a strong spirit of discernment. I 'pick up' on vibes of what people are trying to conceal. I see past their mask and I'm in tune with their reality.

It's an instinctive feeling.

"But fear is also an instinctive feeling," you may say. "So how do we tell the difference? Is this 'fight/flight' or is it intuition?"

Intuition, I believe, is a combination of past experiences, what you sense around you and supernatural insight. All of these wrapped together become manifested as that 'gut feeling', dreams or even visions. It's difficult to rationalize but deep down inside you know it is true.

I ignored my intuition. I mislabelled it as fear: fear of being left out, fear of everyone crumbling without my support and fear of never finding someone else better to love me. My spirit came knocking at the door of my soul and I didn't answer; I should've listened.

Even so, it was persistent. One morning, I was running late for school. Running out of the house, I heard Joan bellowing from inside,

“If you miss that bus, I’M GONNA BEAT YO’ ASS!”

As I stepped off the porch, my eyes gridlocked with a gray, hairy creature. Standing tall and erect, this wild animal was indomitable. It stood there, piercing right through me. Holding my breath, I stood there...frozen.

Why on earth was a wolf on Luther Street?

I took one step forward and so did the wolf. I walked faster and it walked faster too. I was genuinely scared so I began running. Then, I stopped running, looked around and it was gone.

Why did I envision a wolf? Was it my guardian sent to warn me or watch over me? Was it a representation of me? Wolves are instinctive animals with pure hearts. They trust their first instinct and in all my relationships, maybe I should have too. Or could it be telling me that my expectations of people were too high? We’re taught about The Golden Rule and I assumed that people repaid love and kindness similarly. But after repeated heart-aches, I later learned that was a lie.

Better yet, it could have been symbolic of my inner strength. A wolf is fierce and formidable. I had that same spark bottled on the inside. If provoked, you would surely find out that I wasn’t the one to mess with. I had a low tolerance for foolishness and drama...or so I thought.

That morning, I stopped running from the wolf I saw but in my life, I kept running. Paralyzed by fear, I listened to the voices that told me I wasn’t worthy of anything better. I ignored my intuition and I kept running.

Even though I have a few fond memories of Missouri, I moved to Indiana and then Georgia. Maybe I'm still searching for something. Love? Happiness? Hope? All of the above ring true but most of all, I just want to be at PEACE.

Aristotle said, "Courage is the first of human virtues because it makes all others possible."

I remember that day when I was running for my life, dripping beads of sweat with my heart pounding through my chest. I remember. I was terrified of what was behind me but when I stopped running, it disappeared. Is there something behind you, in your past that you keep running from?

Yes, I always knew life would be difficult for me. It was challenging to flourish with a family tree that didn't exactly have the strongest roots. My family taught me that it's human nature to oscillate between good and bad traits. However, it left me alone and very confused. I'm not ashamed of my past; it taught me invaluable lessons.

Maybe the wolf's message was for me to settle, be still and stay grounded because that's the only way growth can take place. If you stop running, that thing that you fear the most, will gradually disappear too.

Chapter 4

Giving You All of Me and More

We were on the phone all night long.

In his velvety tone, Stephen asked, “What kind of ice-cream you like?”

Intrigued, I quickly replied, “Vanilla, What kind you like?”

“Chocolate. You want me to bring you some ice-cream?”

I was a tomboy but I was still very much attracted to boys. When I first saw Stephen, I was instantly attracted to him. He was a tall cup of dark chocolate and he had definitely caught my eye. It was an instant attraction.

“Girllll, he is FYINE!”

Scrunching her face, my cousin Tameika replied, “Ughhh, Who? Steve?”

“Yea, he is so cute.”

“Girl, I cannot believe you like Steve.”

Steve was perfect in my eyes, minus his unflattering, yellow-stained tooth and the fact that friends saw us as a very unlikely couple. We had very different backgrounds. He came from very humble beginnings while I came from a middle to upper class household. We were like chalk and cheese, oil and water but I didn’t care. He was also shocked and couldn’t believe I was interested in him. In our courting stages, he would do the sweetest things. He would put Starburst candy and letters in my pullover jacket. It was young puppy love. We pushed our differences out of our minds. We didn’t care about that; we were becoming the Romeo and Juliet of our time and it was nice.

It was nice but looking back I know it was moreso infatuation than love. We were just kids kicking it. Yuh know, the girls that hung out with the guys. I never really had many girlfriends; I tried my best to dodge females and their drama. Our group was cool but they started to spread the pressure thick when I was the only virgin left in the group.

I’ve never had a list of criteria for the ‘perfect guy’ who would be my first sexual partner. Money and material things were just additional. I was loyal and that was what I valued.

However, Stephen skyrocketed from rags to riches and then all the girls were throwing themselves at him. We were together but he got this girl pregnant and they even lived together! I fell into the background but he still lingered, passing by my house at times.

Good guys always finish last. Well, the same applies to good girls too. Imagine my mother’s mother, thought it appropriate to tell me, “They’re giving up. You’re not giving it up.”

I wasn’t 100% ready but I was buckling under the pressure. So that night on the telephone, I decided I was feeling for some ice-cream.

Stephen: You want me to bring you some ice-cream?"

In the sexiest tone I could muster, I whispered, "Yea."

"Are you for real?"

"Yea. I promise."

In total disbelief, he asked again, "For real? You want me to come over?"

Unwavering, I said, "Yea!"

Joan was sleeping so I snuck him in.

As quick as it came, it went. I lost my virginity that night.

He was the happiest man in the world but truthfully, I didn't even enjoy it. Mostly because of the pain but if I was honest with myself, I knew I wasn't fully ready.

Nevertheless, I was a woman now. Now, I could be on the same page with all the older girls. I could compete and hold my own...or so I thought.

That night was probably when it started. That is, my acts of selflessness, giving all of me even if it killed me. That night was a very defining moment, a very special moment but in a sense, it wasn't even my choice. I just caved in to the pressure which was darting from all directions. That night, I gave away my power and my passion. I dwell on it a lot, especially because wholeheartedly, I wasn't at peace with it. As Hollywood depicts, a girl's 'first time' should be remembered as romantic and nostalgic. Yet, I had regrets and I saw it as a loss. Maybe because I was lost, at that point in my life. Not only did I lose my virginity that night but I also began to lose my voice.

Chapter 5

Prince Charming?

I was young and a bit naïve. My Prince Charming didn't come galloping in on a white horse but he did roll up in car with licence plates KDPI (Karra Dominique Patterson is the only one forever and always).

He would always tell me that he was my first love and he will be my last and only. He believed it so much that he even wrote it in my yearbook. To this day, I still have that book because in spite of our rocky relationship, I believe he loved me the only way he knew how to love a woman. It doesn't justify the way he treated me but I do think that the streets hardened his heart, disabling him from loving fully.

I knew he loved me but he had a strange way of showing it. One minute he proclaimed his love for me, broadcasting it to the entire town of Sikeston and then the next minute, he showed absolutely no regard for me, after sleeping around with almost every girl in town.

The infidelity and lies were too much. I gave him all of me and still, it wasn't enough. I even found a list with 20 names of women he was screwing in our town. It was blatant disrespect. Imagine the gossip, embarrassment and drama. I thought he loved me and loved us- his family. I got pregnant right after high school. We were supposed to be building our life together. Instead, he was perpetually cheating and perpetually breaking my heart. I guess that's what happens when you elevate from pauper to prince.

The streets were Stephen and Stephen was the streets. Selling drugs and meddling in dangerous things gave him his big break out of poverty. As if dealing with the constant cheating wasn't enough, Stephen as I knew him, was disappearing and evolving into a person who was a danger to himself and others.

On several occasions, I tried to leave him but he threatened to kill me and then commit suicide. He went as far as to put a gun to my head. There it was again, t-r-a-u-m-a, revisiting me in my adult years. How could he love me yet threaten to kill me? I tried to escape from Stephen but this was no ordinary love. This was a dangerous kind of love.

In the end, I never really knew him.

Chapter 6

I Did You So Wrong

I believe ‘that thing’ made it difficult for him to sleep at times. It pinched him with sadness during moments that should have been filled with joy. It made his stomach churn and shoulders hang because he knew I didn’t deserve this treatment. All I had ever done was love him. Now, he had these emotions written all over his face and etched in his eyes. These were emotions I thought he was incapable of...shame and guilt.

Drowning in sorrow and regret, Stephen stared at me for a long time before he said:

“I did you so wrong. If anything happens to me, find yourself a better man.”

Our relationship was rocky but I remember the good times. Even now, when I look in the mirror and I smile, I remember him; he is always with me.

Although he loved me, at some point, we lost each other. Before the money, jewellery and cars, I was there for him...just him and nothing more. I willingly made sacrifices because I cared for him. Yet, it wasn’t enough and I had reached my quota of the disrespect. Enough was enough. Stephen was killing every fibre of my being and I had to daringly walk away.

We broke up. I was single and ready to mingle. **Club Bucks** was the ideal place to press the reset button. It was a studio apartment with the best parties. That night, the music was pumping and everyone was having a blast. Everyone, including Stephen, twelve others he slept with and his side chick. It was tough being in the midst of that drama but I had to move on and live my life.

That night, several guys flirted with me but there was this one cute guy that peaked my interest. He bought me drinks and we laughed all night. I could feel Stephen’s eyes x-raying us.

There were fleeting moments when Stephen and I gazed at each other, wondering if this was the end. After being lost for so long, there was no chance of us getting back together, of us finding each other again (or so I thought).

The “hottie” and I went outside to talk some more and we even exchanged phone numbers. Little did we know that Stephen had followed us outside with “blood in his eyes”. He came out there huffing and puffing, ready to make a scene.

Could you imagine? After he did me so wrong, he had the audacity to be jealous. Stephen had even slept with younger girls in our small town; he had no limits. I was disgusted by it all and now, he had the balls to roll up on us shouting and hollering?

He and the guy were arguing back and forth.

“She said y’all broken up!”

“Oh yeah?”

Shit was about to go down! Then, out of nowhere, Stephen threw the first...and the last punch.

...When I came back to my senses, I was in complete shock. I was on the ground, feeling weak, stunned and in total disbelief. Stephen punched me. He actually punched me in the face. This man who said he loved me and who said I was his one and only, actually punched me.

I should have known that it would have come to this, our break-up was too easy. Somewhere in his mind, he felt like I was his to keep and he wasn't going to let go.

My friends helped me leave the party but the fight wasn't over. When my family and friends got wind of what happened, they were pissed and there was going to be hell to pay. Everyone went down to the corner store. There was cussing, scuffling and police sirens blazing. That night was total pandemonium but nothing compared to the chaos in my mind.

Stephen punched me.

After all the love I gave, he repaid me with a black eye and three chipped teeth. This was definitely the end of us. I was done with him, wasn't I?

After that, he tried to make amends. He would call me and I ignored him. He tried to reach out to me but I wasn't having it. Stephen was a lot of things but he wasn't a quitter. I knew he was trying to buy my forgiveness, especially when he bought me a car. My resistance was weakening and he knew it. The play that sealed the deal was the Memphis shopping trip. Retail therapy in any form or fashion is a girl's best friend. That was when he hooked me. I wish I had been stronger but I wasn't and so in October 1999, I got all tangled up, back in Stephen's web again.

As you might have predicted, our relationship continued to be bumpy. We were on and off again until the very end. On that day, I was giving him another chance, yet again. I was moving back into his place. On that day, I chose a red outfit. Unknown to me, Stephen also wore red. It was on that day, that I found Stephen dead on the living room floor.

This shook me to my core. Didn't I already endure enough anguish in life? How much more could I take? We both wore red; it was unplanned but destiny's plan was to lay our saga to rest once and for all.

My faith also died on that day. I stopped going to church and I stopped reading the Bible but God never left me nor forsook me. I couldn't see it then but life knew it was time for me to get off that rollercoaster ride and it was time for me to be free.

True, we are all imperfect beings so it would be hypocritical of us to stand here as saints judging Stephen. Nevertheless, the truth also revealed that Stephen did me wrong and probably if he were alive, he would've continued doing wrong by me.

Like I said, when I look in the mirror and I smile, I see my chiselled teeth and I still remember him.

Chapter Seven

My First True Love

When you hear the name Gabriel, what do you think? Don't you think of Archangel Gabriel, who told Mary she was going to give birth to the Saviour of the world?

Similarly, when Gabriel showed up in my life, he too, was the bearer of great tidings. I've never felt for a man the way I felt for Gabriel. He was my first true love.

Helpless Gabriel: Be that as it may, when I first met Gabriel, he was pretty much in a helpless state. I wasn't aware of this when we first met. Frankly, I wasn't even interested in him initially but my friend slipped him my number anyway. Gabriel was at ground zero. He was living in shelters, moving from place to place and even sleeping on porches.

Even so, you already know that I don't measure a man by his material possessions, I fall in love with their soul, with their heart, at least the parts that they allow me to see. Thinking about the enigma that was Gabriel and the intrigue that came along with it, helps me to see clearly now, that he only showed parts of himself.

He was a great performer and that's why my intuition screamed at me, "Run, run in the opposite direction!" I knew I shouldn't have gotten involved with him but the pull was so magnetic that we clicked instantly and the rest is history.

My Lover, Gabriel: When our lips touched, it sent electric shocks up my legs and through my body. His kisses were intense and he gripped my body with pure, unadulterated passion. It was new, it was different, his love was refreshing like spring and summer showers. Hips to hips, bodies to bodies, his deep strokes were breath-taking. Sex was no longer just sex, he took love-making to a different level; masterfully stroking it like a piece of art. Childdd, his love was intoxicating.

You might think it was just great sex but it was more than that. We connected on every single level of this human experience: mind, body and soul. Our love was a deep kind of love and an intertwined-into-each-other's DNA kind of love. Even when we were apart, I felt him, I sensed his sadness and I felt when he needed me. He was my lover and friend; he was definitely the one for me.

Eye-Candy Gabriel: Definitely the one to make a fool out of me. There seemed to be some sort of miscommunication because life thought I needed an encore of betrayal, lies and deceit. You see, Gabriel was a ladies' man.

It wasn't like that in the beginning. We couldn't keep our hands off each other. We spent every second, minute and hour together. Time stood still and it was just him and me, floating in our ocean of desire. He said that what he felt for me, he has never felt with any other woman. I felt the same flames of emotion for him.

Yet, as time would reveal, he chose to put other women on pedestals, even though they just popped up for the money. I was there for him at his lowest of lows. I was his lover, confident, nurturer and provider (even financially) and once again, I got the 'shitty end of the stick'.

His actions revealed that I wasn't unique or special in his heart. I do believe, however, that it started out as love but it just wasn't our time. It was a beautiful chaotic kind of love.

The Real Gabriel: With each passing day, the colors of his true nature shone brightly. I gave him all my love and he gave me nothing but hurt. He loved himself. That was evident from his numerous lady conquests. He loved them more than he loved me. This revelations hurt deeply. You think you know someone and then they stab you in the heart repeatedly. That's t-r-a-u-m-a, no stranger to me.

Gabriel was a narcissist, a good actor and a predator. I had found the courage to walk away from him, just like I did with Stephen. However, he found me in 2008 and wrote me a letter laced with promises. He preyed on my vulnerabilities and desires. He got me really good! We would finally be a family, deep in love, possibly marriage was on the horizon. I strongly believed this was going to be our fresh start.

Screech! Press the brakes and jolt yourself back to reality.

As soon as I returned, he was back to his whoring ways.

He said I made him feel like a king. Funny how that worked because he made me feel like dirt. He sucked the life out of me. He drained me and little by little, the emotional and verbal abuse left me feeling like nothing. When we first met, he had nothing but now he had me and I was nothing.

Life had come full circle, just like with Stephen, I tried to leave him but he threatened to kill me. Somebody would have found my dead body if I got involved with anyone else. His threats were convincing.

I never understood how a man could do that. They have no qualms with being unfaithful to you but from the time you decide to move on, they go into a violent frenzy. Double-standards.

What I'm about to share with you is a very painful and personal memory but as I said if I can help at least one woman out there, it will be worth it.

Gabriel invited me over to his house for us to talk through things. He told me he was sorry but as soon as I walked through the door, he attacked me.

“NO!!” I screamed, as he bent me over his couch but he never listened.

He tore off my pants and ripped off my panties, not allowing me to go past the living room door. As I wept, he moaned with pleasure and bliss. He took what he wanted just like that. When he was done, I gathered my things and left.

I cried on my way home.

“T-r-a-u-m-a, why do you continue to torment me?” I questioned.

As if the rape wasn't enough, I later found out that he had a girl in the next room. He slept with her the previous night. How disrespectful and how humiliating? Women were clearly nothing but objects and play toys for him. But even worse, how disheartening it was that she heard my cries for help, for mercy and she did nothing. Yes, she may have feared for her life too but the aim is to fear us into subjection, isn't it? Well, mission accomplished.

I could have never predicted that our story would have ended up like that. My Archangel turned out to be the devil in disguise, coming to steal, kill and destroy. Gabriel really did a number on me. He beat me down until I had no voice, just like when I was a child and just like when I was with Stephen. As I write this in 2019, this chapter in my life will be different. That's why even though it is painful, I am sharing these experiences with you because I won't be silenced like that every again in my life and neither should you.

Chapter 8

My Assignment

I've been 'Mother Teresa-ing' people's problems from the time I was about ten years old. Scattered all around me were ashes from abuse and addiction but I've always wanted to breathe life into those ashes and make them float into something beautiful. I always felt like there must be a way to transform this trauma into testimony.

And so I became the champion of many a cause. I could find the solutions to the problems. I became the fixer. My mom needed help. Stephen needed help. Gabriel needed help and I genuinely wanted to help them all.

This desire to help was also extended to my friends. I've had many friends who leaned on me during their hours of darkness but once the clouds cleared, they also cleared out and seldom kept in contact.

For instance, I had a friend who was suicidal. She was in a dark place. I was very concerned about her well-being and I answered every call from her, especially in the wee hours of the morning; it was crucial that I be there when she needed me. It was a matter of urgency.

Eventually, her mental and emotional state stabilized and then...POOF! She vanished. Just like that. No more calls and no more reaching out. Maybe I'm the abnormal one but I never quite understood how someone could confide their deepest and darkest secrets in another person and then bolt. Didn't the friendship mean anything? But there I wandered again with my high expectations of people.

Many older folks have preached that some people are seasonal in your life. Aint that the truth? They came into my life for a season and I had to learn to let them go. It was tough and it still is but sometimes you have to tell them, "Go in peace and serve the Lord." Amen.

Then there are other friends who will ride the waves of life with you. They celebrate your victories and they get down on the ground and cry with you in your time of despair. They know your secrets and they still stand by you. They are the ones that truly matter. If you have three of those people, you don't need to worry about the others.

Yet, thinking about these people that just 'bounced' aggravated me. Mainly because when I pour into people, I don't pour halfway. I pour until they are overflowing. That's why it bothered me so much. Probably even more so because it fanned the lingering flames of rejection from my past. It

made me feel like the victim all over again, as if I was the one who should have been saved from them.

I believe that latently, the feeling of rejection triggered memories of Stephen and Gabriel. You know it's true that we attract what we are and what we feel. I didn't want to admit it but there was a helpless girl on the inside of me. I had grown into a woman who accepted the dynamics of an abusive relationship because that was the only story the abused girl in me ever knew.

You may also be angry on my behalf but please understand it was all a part of my learning process.

I began to ponder on these things:

“Why do I have such a strong sense of intuition?”

“Why can I decode people and see past their masks?”

“Why was I born this way?”

The answer was loud and clear. “Well, it was never really about you.”

As my faith has grown stronger, God has shown me that my assignment on earth is to be the light in times of other people's darkness. It's not about me. It's not about them. It's about God's work. What's the logical thing to do?

God tells us to lean not unto our own understanding. In my humanity, I naturally did the opposite. Therefore, when I assessed friendships and relationships from a logical perspective, it only led to heartache and anger.

One may argue that this ‘dog eat dog’ world thrives on ‘give and take’ scenarios. However, a more positive lens may view it as reciprocity, love and giving from a place of abundance. That's how I saw it.

I just wanted a little reciprocity, that's all. You scratch my back, I scratch yours. However, as life would have it, the ‘friends’ that I had been assigned, turned out to be a group of temps who I wanted to give permanent positions but clearly that wasn't God's plan. Yes, help them and be there for them when they need you but sister, you gotta let them go when their season is finished. ‘It is finished.’ Those were Jesus' last words on the cross. We all know Jesus could have taken Himself off of that cross but He had a greater purpose...a bigger assignment. We didn't deserve the sacrifice of His life but He did it anyway. He gifted us with grace and mercy.

My spiritual growth has convicted me. If Jesus accepted his assignment, why couldn't I? My family, friends and lovers may not have been deserving of my help but my mission was to be their light.

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

John 8:12

Chapter 9

Forgiveness

Every child looks forward to beach days or pool days in the summer. They splash, float and throw around the beach ball. They jump around and swim in the water. Have you ever accepted the challenge from a friend or relative of ‘who could hold their breath underwater the longest?’ Well, if you know what I’m talking about, you would know how thrilling yet daring this contest is because as much as it pains both persons, no one wants to let go or be the first to exhale. Similarly, in my life, I didn’t want to let go of all the hurt and blame but there came a moment when I had to choose between life and death, so I chose to let go. I chose to forgive.

While you hold your breath underwater, waiting for the other person to mess up, the first thing you may feel is tightness in your chest. While you hold on to unforgiveness, you feel that same tightness, it’s difficult to breathe and your heart aches because love and unforgiveness cannot occupy the same space.

The choice to forgive had nothing to do with the people that hurt me. Frankly, it was the only way I could free myself. Holding on to the trauma and resentment kept me locked away in a prison cell, stagnated and unable to move on in life.

Sister, with deep love I say to you, that you are your own prison guard and you have the key to your freedom. Use it. It’s a bitter pill to swallow but if you hold on to that anger you get stuck in a time warp, ruminating on the past and the way things should’ve been for you. Yes, wisdom teaches us to be weary but still, guarding yourself 24/7 is exhausting and it doesn’t lend to growth or pursuit of opportunities. It’s time to stop blaming others; it’s time to use your key to unlock your potential.

On the other hand, it’s that same potential and drive which makes you determined not to lose this underwater challenge. Your chest gets tighter and simultaneously, your throat constricts but you’re not giving in and you’re not letting go.

In reality, your throat burns and your message becomes mute. Your purpose gets put on pause and you suddenly have no voice. Why? You’re too busy holding your breath and holding onto unforgiveness.

Dwelling on everything ‘they’ did takes away from your assignment here on earth. Your talents and efforts become tainted with darkness because you refuse to let the light shine through.

I know it’s difficult. It’s so difficult to let go. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we lived in a loving world where everyone was nice to each other all the time? Wouldn’t it have been nice if I had my c-h-i-l-d-h-o-o-d instead of t-r-a-u-m-a? Yes, that would’ve been nice but that wasn’t reality.

Furthermore, that perfect world does not exist. Hurt people hurt people. That's how it's always been and it's not changing any time soon. People may not be nice but that shouldn't steal your joy. Change starts with you.

Meanwhile, the water swishes and sways above your head. You feel your heart pounding in your chest as you desperately fight the urge to jump up for fresh air. It feels like everything is about to go to black. You feel like it's all going to your brain and you would be right.

Everything is going black, black with the darkness of bitterness and resentment. Sometimes I craved for revenge but we all know vengeance isn't ours to wield on whomever we please. And that blood rush to the brain? We hate to admit it but that's our amplified self-righteousness. How dare he? How dare she? She should've known better. Yes, I believed my mother should've known better but who am I to judge. Blaming her just perpetuates more toxicity and wrongness because I do not have the authority to judge her, so I forgave her. God knew her beginning, middle and He knows her end. He knew all of this before she came into this world so who am I to judge?

So you too, should hold a funeral for all the pity parties and expectations you've had in your life. In this life, we experience many deaths due to experiences. Life and death lies in the power of the tongue so let's speak death to all the negativity: death to hatred, death to sorrow, death to pessimism and death to bitterness. It's time to breathe and give birth to forgiveness.

Finally, you can't hold it any longer. This moment is a critical juncture. It's no longer about the other person, it boils down to life and death. You splash your hands in the water to propel you to the surface and you GASP for air. You BREATHE.

You fill your lungs and your body relaxes into a more peaceful state. If I had always listened to my gut feeling and been obedient to God's Divine Orders, I suspect my life would have been a little easier. When I think of all the people I placed on my 'Critical Care' watch list and the energy and love I tried to pour into them, it made me so mad and angry. I was angry at myself for not recognizing that you can't help someone who isn't ready to receive help. Pain recognizes pain. And so I pushed to help them, I pushed to fix them but they weren't ready. Heck, I wasn't ready for the backlash and the deflection of their trauma. In spite of it all, I know timing is everything so I forgive them and I especially forgive myself.

I forgive myself for holding on to the past for so long. I forgive myself for not filling my cup with God, the true source of eternal love. I forgive myself for allowing people to treat me like nothing and for acting like nothing when God created me to be walk in divinity and peace.

If you only remember one thing from this book, let it be the importance of forgiveness. The only way to move on from your pain to your promise is to let it all go and just BREATHE.

Chapter 10

Circumstances

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade right? It isn't always that simple.

Being raised by my mother's mother, Joan, was tough. Her nurturing skills were lacking. I dare say they were absent. She made my childhood more difficult than it ought to be. Growing up with her was a living hell and I think it's fair to conclude that the same rang true for my mother.

My mother didn't wake up one day and suddenly become addicted to crack cocaine. Something happened that led to those life choices. Everyone knows how to get on with life when things are going well but what do you do when all hell breaks loose? Worst yet, what does a child do when all hell breaks loose? I imagine that she probably had to 'woman up' from a very young age, tackling worries and responsibilities that no child should be exposed to because that's the adult's job. Hence, trying to survive hell in that household must have triggered her breaking point or several breaking points.

What do you do when you've relied on yourself to simply make it through the day? But now 'the self' is so overwhelmed and weakened that you can no longer help yourself. There's a void so you fill it. There's pain so you numb it. There are unpleasant memories so you bury them. I imagine that my mother's situation was no different. Life happened, one thing led to another, leading her to a very dark place. I wish things were different but there was value in that valley for both of us. As I mentioned before, even though she was strung out on drugs, she remained a praying woman. She would get down on her knees and pray. She kept her faith and that has stuck with me to this day. No matter how hard life gets, seek God and watch Him turn it around for you.

Growing up in poverty, maybe Stephen didn't have much regard for matters of faith. Life was hard and not fair. He had to learn to fend for himself. He must have been angry about a lot of things. For instance, loved ones not being there when he needed them and the lack of a positive role model who could speak life into his potential. However, as children we are told to be seen and not heard. So all that anger bottled on the inside manifested itself in the form of gangster Stephen. It showed up in his disrespect and aggression towards me. Once again, I am not excusing his behaviour. If you are in an abusive relationship, their trauma and circumstances aren't reason enough to stay. It is okay to care for someone but when they begin to threaten your life or well-being, my sister, that is not love.

Stephen thought love was material things. Once we had the nice house, cars and he gifted me with expensive things, everything was fine. I was his main love, he took care of me and somewhere in his mind, that should have been enough for me but it wasn't enough for him. His

acts of unfaithfulness made me feel like I wasn't enough but what I failed to understand was that you can physically escape poverty but it's hard to unshackle from it mentally. He had everything he needed but when you've grown up in scarcity, you subconsciously continue to operate from a place of lack. He was grasping. More money, more drugs, more women. Stephen elevated himself from nothing to a life of abundance but he learnt a harsh lesson early. Life isn't fair so hold on to everything and even seek more because you never know when life will come knocking to take it back.

Timing

In spite of our greatest efforts to plan our lives, life is unpredictable and it can throw a curveball at any time. How we hit that ball, how we respond to life influences everything that happens thereafter.

I knew I shouldn't have gotten involved with Gabriel and just look at how that turned out. He even admitted that God placed me in his life to teach him how to be a loving person. Timing is everything and our timing was definitely off, resulting in pain, indifference and more trauma. You don't have to be an accountant or economist to understand profit and loss. That's simple mathematics. For too long, I dwelt on the loss. The loss of respect, the loss of 'love' and the loss of valuable time but my situation had everything to do with my perspective. I perceived an experience of tremendous loss but I gained so much wisdom and self-assurance. God gave me free will to choose so he allowed it to happen the way it did which means it was always part of His plan.

I say that with the utmost confidence. My life experiences were indeed part of His plan because here I am writing this book to shed light into this dark world. Initially, my circumstances taught me that dysfunction is normal and love is brutal. I built a hard exterior because I felt that people, especially women, could not be trusted.

However, God has filled my cup and now my cup runneth over. Now, I function from a place of light and love. My hard exterior has evolved into strength that is bold enough to be vulnerable with other women, bold enough to trust them with my deepest and darkest secrets because I want to help them. Bad things happened to me but they do not define me. Breathing life into the ashes of my memories and seeing them take shape into this beautiful message in the form of a book gives me unspeakable joy. Les Brown says, "When life knocks you down, try to land on your back because **if you can look up, you can get up.**" Not only did I get back up, I'm now soaring. To live is Christ and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:21

For years I mourned **The Love I Gave** because I felt drained and empty but the **Love I Gained** from my Lord and Saviour is everlasting and it knows no bounds.

