

Chapter One

"He's gone! My only son, my baby is gone! Let me go! I'm not ready to leave! I can't abandon him!" I screamed as I was dragged away from the burial plot; my chic black pumps now spattered with specks of mud. The two men holding onto me were by no means weak, yet even they were struggling to restrain me. Unbeknownst to those sympathetically watching and other's gawking, I had made arrangements to stay until my son's casket was lowered into the ground and covered by the dirt that was currently shielded by the grass colored covering. The workers along with the remaining family members and nosy stragglers watched with odd glances at the scene that was taking place. Clearly, everyone thought I had finally snapped from the hurt of such a loss.

"Why won't they all just go the fuck away?!" I thought angrily. Watching me protest being forced inside of a waiting family limousine, Tracey attempted to calm my grieving soul assuring me that

"You'll see him again one day. Be at peace knowing your son is with God in heaven. Even God had to watch Jesus die."

The words jarred me into submission. I snatched away from the men holding me and stood starkly upright. Staring from behind an expensive pair of darkly tinted Dolce & Gabbana shades, my red, swollen eyes shot daggers. If looks could kill, Tracey would have fallen dead right there at Houston Memorial Gardens, straight inside my child's freshly dug grave.

On any other day, I, Victoria Simone Gafford could light up a room with my presence. At five foot four my frame is brought to life by the unbothered confidence in my stride, while my youthful face held an infectious smile I'd come to be known for. With a sun kissed caramel skin tone that always seemed to glow and behind my almond shaped eyes hid a joke that only I seemed to know - a unique quirk that seemed to have a welcoming effect on those I came in contact with. Affectionately known by family and friends as simply Vee, on this day my round face held no trace of a smile. Stiffening my shoulders and casting a final longing glance in the direction of the workers completing this final part of their task I thought, maybe it's for the best that I do not remain for this. As my heart screamed in objection, I reluctantly stepped inside of the waiting limousine. I knew the tears would fall again, and soon, but for now I refused to let them drop, not today at least and definitely not in front of Tracey. That last week of January 2004 had started innocently enough, yet somehow became the most traumatizing of my life. I reluctantly agreed to go on a date with a man I met through a mutual associate. This absolutely wasn't the smartest idea; in fact, I couldn't have picked a worse time to stumble back into the dating pool. Just over three weeks ago, Eric – my former fiancé and father of my son - and I, had officially called it quits, ending a tumultuous relationship that we'd both grown weary of. For me, dating was new frontier. I'd never seriously considered a life that didn't include my high school sweetheart, a man I'd been inseparable with Eric for years. He'd provided my first experience of love and inadvertently taught me that fairy tales don't always have a happy ending - at least, not mine anyway. Against my own better judgment, I agreed to the date, trying to convince myself that a simple night out would help dull the pain of my failed relationship. The doorbell rang as I gave myself a final check in the mirror. Approving of my reflection, I smoothed the wrinkles from my dress and admired the way my smooth skin glowed as I quickly headed over to my five-year-old's room to kiss him goodnight. Gently pushing open the door, my heart warmed at the sight of my mother affectionately reading a book of bible stories to the boy as he sat intently, hanging onto her every word. I reminisced about myself at that age, wondering if this is what it looked like when my mother would read these same stories to me. Not wanting to ruin the moment I called out softly,

“Momma I'm headed out; I won't be out late.”

Also named Victoria, my mother peered at me with a smile,

“Ok Vee.”

Jumping up with speed only a child seemed to possess, Colin leapt across the room and tumbled

into my arms screaming “Mommy don’t leave me!” His words knocked the wind out of me. I was already hesitant to go on the date; I had been fighting the strong urge to cancel all day. For days, Crystal had gushed about the man, but in this moment, I just wanted to be with my son. Looking down into his greenish-gray eyes, now filled with tears, I asked him softly

“What’s wrong my love?”

Hugging me even tighter he answered,

“I just don’t want you to go.”

I was speechless.

In his short life Colin had never behaved this way before, and because of that, I decided to oblige him. Consoling my child, he finally began to calm down as the doorbell rang again. Now determined to go with my first mind, I pried my son from around my waist and made my way out of the room. Walking downstairs to open the front door, greet the person on the other side and officially nix the date. Coming up with an apology on the fly, I convinced my disappointed date to take a rain check on the evening, something he eagerly agreed to - though I had no clue whether that would actually happen. Right now, my mind was on Colin. Walking back into the house, I breathed a sigh of relief as I watched Keith’s, my date, car pull out of the driveway. I knew I couldn’t fool myself; it was entirely too soon. Slipping off my stiletto heels I began removing my earrings as I headed back up to Colin’s room, telling myself that I would hold him extra close that night. What I didn’t know however, was that it would be the last time I would do so.

January 25th, 2004 is a date that will forever be imprinted on my mind. I woke up late this morning; flying through the house to get Colin dressed, so that I could sit him down in the living room with my father who would keep him occupied so I could get dressed as well. We were going to be late for church, a place I’d grown-up in, making my professional debut as a pianist there at the age of 11. As an adult church had also become a financial blessing, allowing me to earn a living by playing the piano every Sunday - rain or shine - at Concord Missionary Baptist Church.

Music is as much a part of me as my mother and Colin are. If I am in a bad mood, I will either lament my emotions with solemn tunes or cheer up with music that guided my emotions in the opposite direction. It's my outlet, especially when I was angry. I would literally take my frustrations

out on the piano. Banging the keys similarly to how drummers bang drums. Percussion instruments are the best. Finally dressed, I rushed back into the living room to grab Colin. In the brief time it had taken me to lay my hair down and throw some clothes on, my child had somehow managed to create a masterpiece - a mess actually - with his finger paints. To him it was Rembrandt, worthy of hanging in the Houston Museum of Fine Arts or at least the refrigerator. But to me it was yet another obstacle in what was shaping up to be the morning from hell. At this rate I won't even leave the house, yet alone touching a piano. I am livid, more so at my father for allowing Colin to make the colorful mess. That was one of the cons of moving back into my childhood home, my son's grandparents were around constantly, indulging Colin's every desire. It is maddening, but I truly appreciate the love and support from my parents while I figured out my life, post Eric. In that moment I allowed my child to win, deciding to let Colin stay with my dad and finish what he'd started. I figured if I move quickly enough, I can still salvage the shitty morning. But that day Colin wasn't having it, running over and entangling himself in my legs as he'd done the night before.

Screaming "Mommy! Please don't leave me!" as the tears started to flow. But unlike the night before, this wasn't a date and I couldn't miss work. There were bills that needed to be paid, and Colin was one of those bills. Unable to calm him down this time, I begrudgingly pried him from around my legs, scooping him up and placing him in my father's arms and then dashed out the door to head to church. Usually a bright and bubbly child, I thought. As I drove, Colin's tears and hysteria replayed over and over in my mind. It was so unlike him. My mind and my heart utterly conflicted as I could only see a tear drenched face as I backed out of the driveway. I contemplated returning home as I was turning into the parking lot. As I opened the door to get out of the vehicle, Colin's screaming as if his life depended on it, echoed in my mind. I turned around and grabbed my purse from the backseat. Kissing and hugging him tight, I transferred him into my father's waiting arms and exited the house; I shook my head at the thought and reminded myself that I had responsibilities to take care of. If I didn't show up, then I wouldn't be paid and unfortunately for us, I was no longer receiving an allowance from my parents. Hesitation mixed with weariness as I stepped away from the curb - entered the church and went to handle my business. Colin would understand one day... And that's the last living memory that I have of my son. Not a day goes by that I don't fucking regret it. Had I known then what I know now....

I am thumbing through my bible, searching to find the passage of scripture that the pastor just mentioned, when the church phone started ringing, which is slightly odd. Anyone with sense would know it'd be difficult to answer the call. We are too busy worshiping the Lord. Service was epic today! The choir went into extended praise and the music director put on a major performance. I was mentally giving myself a high five for the riffs and scales I added to some of the songs. Lately I'd started experimenting with infusing other genres of music into my playing. Not that I was being sacrilegious or anything like that I wanted to diversify but my mother would always tell the story of Mahalia Jackson and how she turned down secular music to use her gift of singing for God only, every time I tried to talk to her about expanding my repertoire. So, I settled for sneaking in some jazz or blues chords for fun occasionally. For some odd reason, my heart skipped a beat as an usher hurried over my way, tapping me on the shoulder to come to the phone. In my gut, I knew that whoever it is on the other end, it couldn't be good.

“Hello?”

I half asked into the receiver once I reached the phone. It was my neighbor, who'd called to inform me that paramedics were in front of my home and to come back right away. I dropped the phone down, telling the waiting usher to get my mother from the choir loft and inform her to meet me at my car. Immediately.

Sprinting out into the January air, my skin prickled as a chill swept across my body, but somehow, I knew it was more than the frigid air. Pacing on the side of my freshly washed Nissan Maxima, I couldn't help but feel annoyed as I waited for my mother to exit the building. In that moment it seemed like forever. My mother stepped outside apprehensively and slightly annoyed that I had her leave service. I could hear the irritation in her voice when she asked,

“What's going on?”

She tried to hide it.

“I have no idea mommy; Steven called and said to hurry home now”

Thankfully we live only five minutes away, I thought as we were on our way. I raced back to our neighborhood, speeding down North Main Street, breaking every traffic law imaginable in the process. Slowing down for the stop sign that sat in the intersection near my parents' home, I could see a gurney being pulled into a waiting ambulance. The lights somewhat blinding as the sirens pierced through the air. There were numerous police cars blocking the street and yellow tape was tied up marking out what appeared to be a crime scene. Immediately I thought of my father, my

throat tightening as I imagined the possibility that something had happened to him. Colin hadn't crossed my mind. Nobody else crossed my mind. My daddy is 70 years old besides, no mother on the planet wants to believe the worst for her child and I am no different.

Pulling into the driveway of a neighbor's house, I barely managed to put the car in park before hopping out of the vehicle. Making my way to the ambulance, I froze as a voice called out "Is this the mother?" Instantly motionless, time seeming to stop as my body began to go numb. The crowd of first responders parted as I walked over to the group, giving me a view of the rear section of the ambulance: it wasn't my father. It was my brother, David. He'd been shot however the injury wasn't fatal. The ambulance and crew were gearing up to take David to the hospital. I turned to go into the house and that's when life as I knew it, was changed forever.

"Ma'am! Wait!"

A detective blocked my path and was trying to say something to me that I couldn't hear since sounds became muted and my eyes were fixated on the sight of a small frame laid on the gurney coming out of the front door.

Suddenly everything went black...

I have no clue how long I was blacked out, but when I came to, I was sitting on the ground and my mother was on her cell phone leaving a frantic message on Eric's voice mail. Eric Spencer - Colin's father - was already hard to reach by phone, and considering he wasn't a morning person on this day it was even harder. I don't have the patience for his nonsense. I angrily snatched the phone away from my mother as he answered groggily on the second ring. I was in a rage. Hysterically I screamed "Eric! Get the fuck up!! Get up!! Colin is in the hospital; he's been in an accident!! GET UP!!"

The ambulance headed to the hospital shortly after I fainted. My distraught older brother rode with them; my mother was concerned about and stayed with me. It seemed as if time had stopped as I waited for him to answer and by the time he did, I was livid. My mother was driving excruciatingly slow to the hospital. Neither one of us is in a good condition for driving, however at 70 years old; she's the lesser of two evils. I had never met anyone who moved as slowly as he did, but I thought today of all days he'd put a fucking pep into his step. But fear began to supersede my anger, my mother and I scrambling to Eric's car as he sped into the parking lot of Northwest Memorial Hermann Hospital.

After arriving we were immediately escorted to the back, my eyes eagerly scanning the faces

of the hospital staff for any clues or signs. Each face was solemn, causing my stomach to lurch and twist as I came to the dark realization that my son wouldn't be leaving the building in my arms. It was amazing to me just how many familiar faces I saw that day, in fact, one person even stopped me to ask what happened. The odd thing being that, that person had been sitting next to me at church when I received the call - meaning common sense should've told her that I knew about as much as she did. But then again, common sense isn't common.

Reaching Colin's hospital room, the doctor's voice sounded muffled and distorted, yet I heard him loud and clear as he explained to us that

"The machine is basically keeping him alive. There are no vital readings without the machine. There's no brain activity at all."

"No! No... man, don't tell me that!" Eric screamed.

Slowly backing into the wall, he slid onto the floor. The doctor paused before uneasily moving towards the door, "I'll give you some time to decide what the next step is. I'm truly sorry."

As the doctor exited the room, I stared blankly at my baby lying in the hospital bed. His chest rising and falling, and the last five years of his life flashed before my eyes: The baby shower and the support from Tamika, Eric's sister, who'd taken pride in feeding me - graciously indulging my pregnancy whims and cravings. Over the years she'd become like a sister to me, as well. I thought of my mother, who'd held my hand through the painful labor as I gave birth. I remembered holding my son for the first time and falling in love after looking into his hypnotic greenish, gray eyes. I thought of Colin's first words. His first steps. The sound of his laughter. Memories of good times with Eric, moving into our first apartment as a family. Colin's first time saying, "I love you Mama." I remembered it all. My mind traveled back to when Colin was first born. Eric and I were not on good terms at all. We weren't even speaking. The phone in my hospital room rang and it was Eric. "Hey, can I come up?" I know the only person who could've told him what hospital we were at, was his sister, at that time she was like a sister to me as well; my irritation subsided quickly since a part of me was glad that he came. "Why do you want to see a baby you don't think is yours?" I was being an asshole, but I didn't care, I wasn't going to let him get off that easily after hurting me. "Can I come up or not?" This was typical of him, once he's over something then that should be the end of it. Begrudgingly I said yes and a few minutes later, in walks Eric and to my appalled surprise he wasn't alone. "Wassup Vee!" Ray exclaimed with a huge grin on his face. My hair was all over my head, my face was slightly swollen, and I wasn't feeling my best wearing a flimsy

hospital gown. Ray took one look at Colin and turned to his best friend “So what are you going to name your son?” This is how our son acquired his name. “He looks like a white baby, man look at her and look at me, this isn’t even her baby” we all burst into laughter and “white boy” Colin became his name. My heart aching as I realized there wouldn't be any more memories. No new ones anyway. My son, my baby was gone. Forever.

“Vee, VEE!”

I was snatched out of my daze and back to the present as Eric desperately called my name. “We have to make a decision.” *Make a decision about what*, I wondered. Dazed and confused, I hadn’t realized that night had fallen. Still in shock, apparently, I’d been in a trance for hours. Eric pressed on, “He’s not functioning on his own, and the machine is doing everything for him. We have to let him go. And we have to consent to turn it off.”

“What the fuck do you mean?” I hissed.

We were young parents just trying to figure it out. I, being only 21 while Eric was 23-years-old. We were still growing up our damn selves and now life is escalating the process. We had barely gotten the hang of balancing Colin’s needs with our wants. Hell, we had just come to an agreement on what school he would go to in the fall. The argument over that, seemed pointless and pathetic now. Eric wanted him at the popular school, and I was focused on higher level education. Strange how death seems to always reveal what really matters in life. How in the world did they expect us to give consent to turn off the damn machine? We were barely out of childhood our damn selves. I don’t want to let him go. I don’t want to even be here. I am not ready to accept that our only child is dead. Already irate, I was quickly becoming belligerent as I lashed out at Colin’s father.

“I’m not consenting to a god damn thing!”

Looking around my son’s hospital room, the faces staring back at me all shared a similar look; a unique blend of sadness and pity, the latter only further infuriating me. I don’t want fucking pity; I want my son back. Finally, I snapped, kicking every single soul out of the room: “Everybody. Get the fuck out. Now.”

I stood coldly as the room emptied, finally climbing into bed with Colin, his body now barely lukewarm. He didn’t move. Couldn’t move. He didn’t snuggle into my side like he normally did. His breathing moved with a labored rhythm, but it was being produced artificially. It wasn’t his natural pattern anymore that much I knew. Defeated, I began to wonder what had I done in life to deserve this? Why has God forsaken me? I began to accept that my baby is gone. The tears started

flowing and I know that they won't stop anytime soon. The door opened slowly as Eric and Colin's physician came back into the room.

"It's time," Eric whispered.

He hugged me tight as I shook my head no, vehemently. I wasn't ready and didn't think I would ever be ready. Not for this. Hot tears fell on top of my head before Eric finally pulled me away from Colin, composing himself as the doctor handed me a clipboard. Scanning the consent forms, I saw that Eric had already signed the consent papers - and in that moment I hated him. After reluctantly writing my signature next to his, I handed the clipboard over to Colin's doctor, who continued to apologize and offer his condolences. Gathering both of our families together, Pastor Kerry Williams instructed everyone to re-enter the room, grasp hands and form a circle around us. His smooth baritone voice leading a prayer that seemed to calm everyone, except me. In fact, rage that was quickly becoming familiar had begun to rise inside of me. With every benevolent request he made to God for our strength, inwardly I felt like a petulant child throwing a tantrum because I couldn't get my way. I refuse to close my eyes. I refuse to pretend to feel anything by calling out 'amen' with the rest of them. Fuck that.

Slowly, as everyone was exiting the room one by one, in that moment I defiantly vowed to give God the silent treatment for the rest of my natural life. I had never felt such hurt or betrayal - it was a pain I felt on a spiritual and physical level - not understanding how God could abandon someone he allegedly loves so much.

To their credit, the nurses did their best to ease the process for me. Entering the room silently, one nurse took my hand, leading me to a rocking chair I somehow hadn't noticed before. Physically and mentally exhausted, I sank into the chair as a series of beeps and pulses served as the only noise in the room. Each click of a button furthered the process of disconnecting the breathing machine. And each click felt like a gunshot to my heart, as I died a little with each sound. Once he was completely disconnected - that's what they called it "disconnected," as if dressing up the word made it any less ugly - Colin was swaddled in a blanket and gently placed in my arms. In that moment, the record scratched. It was surreal. This was the same way that Colin had been presented to me at birth, his first day of life. Now on his last day, everything had come full circle. I wept bitterly. For Colin. For his future and all the other things, he'd never get to do or experience. For the future memories we would never make. For the rocky beginning that he was born in... I rocked and hugged him close, refusing to accept that his small arms would never hug me back again. A

blood curdling scream bubbled up and escaped from my lips. My soul ached. Shit, everything did. So, I cried until my eyes dried out, and then I cried again. Eventually, my body went numb and I couldn't feel anything. I thought that I had died as well.

In fact, I hoped that I had.

Eric

The phone just wouldn't stop ringing, the sound cutting through his sleep as he struggled to ignore it. Exhausted, it was way too early for his phone to be ringing like this. Turning over he mumbled "Vee answer the pho..." before cutting himself off. So accustomed to her being near his side, it was something he still wasn't used to. Angrily scooping up the phone, he groggily answered with "What!" He knew the voice on the other end well but had never heard it laced with so much panic, making him unable to hear anything other than high pitched screaming mixed with vulgarities - which only irritated him more. It was too early for Vee's shit. Looking at the screen he wondered why she wasn't at church. Shouldn't she be playing that piano she loved so fucking much? Tired and eager to cut the conversation short he started with "Vee...VEE! Calm yo ass down. Wha..."

Quickly cutting him off, he sat dumbstruck as she uttered the words that would forever change his life: "Colin is in the fucking hospital!! Get your ass the fuck up and come meet us!! Northwest Memorial!! Hurry up!!!"

"What's wrong with him?"

"Can you please just for once think about someone other than yourself and get your lazy ass up now!!!"

Eric hung up the phone. Vee could be so damn dramatic. She was probably panicking over him sneezing too many times. Parenting hadn't come with an instruction manual and at 23; he and Vee had just gotten to the point where they could consider themselves a family - until last week at least. Climbing out of bed, he began to get dressed, trying to convince himself that Vee was simply overreacting. Still struggling to wake up, he'd assumed she'd said, "Colin needs to be picked up

from the hospital,” not that he was actually in the hospital. Soon he’d realize just how wrong he’d been.



As Eric slowly slid down the wall to the floor, the entire morning flashed in his mind with brutal alarm. Every action he had made was now added to a list of regrets that would haunt him for eternity. Eric now hated himself for ignoring his phone, turning the ringer on vibrate, taking his time about getting to Victoria when she called. He willed himself to believe that this was all a nightmare, however watching the first woman he’d ever loved, the mother of his only son, scream hysterically and sink to her knees in utter anguish forced to him realize that he had actually been told that his son, his junior, his best friend, his only baby boy... is dead. He sat on the floor in a daze, until he noticed a multitude of feet. He shook his head to clear his vision and looked up into numerous faces, most of which he didn't even recognize. Who the fuck are these people?! Eric got up off the floor, he needed space. He quietly exited the room and leaned against the nurses’ station to gather himself.

“Can I get you some water or something else to drink?”

Eric turned towards the nurse and shook his head when his voice failed him. A heavy hand rested on his shoulder and Eric turned around to face the doctor who had just given them the horrible news.

“Can I speak with you, Mr. Spencer?”

“It’s Eric... yeah, sure”

Eric followed the doctor into a quiet room down the hallway.

“I’m speaking with you first, since your wife doesn’t seem receptive to... there’s some paperwork that needs to be signed by the both of you and it’s my opinion that the transition is easier when a spouse or the parent assists.”

We aren’t married... She’s not my wife... That’s all she wanted and that’s the reason she left him.

“We both come from married parents and our son isn’t deserving of married parents?!” It was the last thing Vee said to him before she moved out. He shook his head trying to process what the doctor was telling me.

“Assists?... with what?”

“These papers are in regard to removing your son from life support. I...”

“What the fuck do you mean remove my son from life support?”

Eric could feel his rage and anger beginning to boil over.

“Mr. Spencer, it is with much regret that I inform you that your son is not functioning on his own nor will he ever have the capabilities to do so any longer. He’s already gone, and the machine is literally acting as a puppet master. Colin has no brain activity at all. It is however you and your wife’s choice to keep your son connected to the device but just know that you would ultimately cause yourself more anguish and grief. I’ll give you a few moments alone.”

The doctor exited the room and left Eric alone with his thoughts. Eric stared at the papers and thought about what the doctor said. Life was so strange. Eric had always made a point to correct anyone that referred to Victoria as his wife and not once had he corrected the doctor. A couple weeks ago, he and Victoria were actively trying to have another baby; a little girl is what they hoped for. They were all under the same roof... now here he was having to swallow that not only had he lost the woman he loved, now his son and only connection to her is gone as well. As long as Colin was alive, there was hope for... no point in having hope anymore. Eric picked up the pen and signed his name on the highlighted blanks as his tears saturated his face and his soul shriveled and died as well. Between the alcohol, lack of sleep, an affinity for drank and sheer anger, the days following Colin’s death were a blur. Eric still didn’t have a good enough explanation for why he was no longer a father, that alone fueled his rage to extreme levels. Fuck seeing red, he wanted to kill somebody. Someone needed to atone for the death of his son. To feel the pain that he felt. Instead he found ways to distract himself from the emotional pain; straddling so many lines he wondered how he kept managing to evade jail. A detective kept calling and leaving messages, but Eric didn't want to talk to the cops about anything, they should call Victoria. If she would've had her ass at home where she belonged, then their son would still be alive...

Had he been honest with himself, he would’ve acknowledged that his pain was laced with guilt. In addition, the rage, it was the only other thing he seemed to feel nowadays. Guilt for suggesting Vee get an abortion when he first found out she was pregnant. Guilt for how coldly he’d treated her during the pregnancy. For not coming to the hospital until after he was born, giving Colin his name only to turn around and demand a paternity test. Guilt for taking his time to meet her at the hospital the morning that he died. But it was easier to point the finger at someone else, and in time that finger would land squarely on Vee.

Beep beep beeeep

Lost in his thoughts, the sound of a horn brought him back to the present. Opening the front door, Eric was blinded by the sun. He didn't even know what day it was. Pulling his cap down lower, he shut the door behind him and made his way towards the car where his brother from another mother was waiting. Not only was Ray his best friend, he was Colin's godfather and now, the only person that Eric had spoken to or allowed around him.

Ray didn't ask him how he felt or try to force any information out of him, instead, knowing that Eric needed time to ride and drink like they used to before becoming adults - and parents. Like they used to back when they were still adolescents without a care in the world. A sprawling city, they'd been driving around Houston for the past hour with no destination in mind. He just needed to think. The sound of his phone ringing caused him to look down with disdain. It was Vee calling, again. Reluctantly answering the phone, he immediately noticed that she sounded as lifeless as he felt.

"Eric, we have an appointment at the funeral home tomorrow morning at nine. Are you picking me up or meeting me there?"

"I really don't wanna go at all. Is your mom going?"

A defeated sigh escaped her lips as she replied, "No Eric, why would she? She's not his parent, we are."

"I'm not going."

"I hate you."

"The feeling is mutual sweetheart."

He instantly felt remorse as Vee hung up in his face. He knew that she didn't deserve to be treated like this but hell; he wasn't ready to deal with it either. He willed his mind to go blank as he poured another cup of drank - a mixture of promethazine, codeine and today's soda of choice Mountain Dew - that usually relaxed him. Lately, it had no impact at all. Ray was concerned about his friend. He usually steered clear of whatever went on between Eric and Vee, but the death of their son had made their relationship borderline toxic. He couldn't even begin to understand what his best friend - more like a brother - was going through. Hell, none of their friends could, they were all kids practically themselves. Their entire crew made up early twenty somethings; a few had kids the same age as Colin, but most had none. For the first time in days Ray finally brought up the elephant in the room.

“Have you talked to your girl?”

silence

“Say man, you hear me” he chuckled

“Yeah, that was her that just called. She’s going to the mortuary in the morning”

“What time?”

silence

“Are you going bro?”

“Nah man, turn the music back up.”

Sensing he wouldn’t get any further, at least not today, Ray turned the music back up. Navigating through Houston’s notoriously congested Galleria area; the duo rode down Highway 59 in silence as they headed back to 5th Ward. Eric didn’t want to feel anything. Didn’t want to feel any pressure, or answer questions, or deal with that nagging hurt. Eric looked down at his ringing phone, this time it was his sister Tamika.

“Yeah, Tam what’s up?”

“Have you talked to Vee, she’s not answering my calls or calling me back and we need to know if services have been planned...”

“Man, I don’t know. I don’t have nothing to do with that”

“What do you mean...?”

“Look don’t call me with this bullshit alright”

Eric contemplated throwing the device out the car window. Instead he just turned it completely off and dropped it onto the floor.

Victoria

“Vee, are you sure that you don’t want me to go?” My mother, affectionately called Dodie by close family only, was worried about her baby girl. She wanted to help but was unsure where to start. How do you console your child...about the death of her child? Some situations you’re just never prepared for. Trying to sound brave for my mother, I replied “I’ll be ok mommy.” Neither one was doing a good job of convincing the other. Hugging my mother tightly, I then proceeded to walk out the door, pulling it shut and locking it behind me. Now on the other side, I faintly heard my mother sobbing. My heart felt like cement in my chest. How much more would I have to endure?

The closer I got to my destination the more intense my anxiety became. By the time I reached Pruitt’s Mortuary I was in full panic mode, parking and practically falling out of the car in an attempt to catch my breath. Devon, a former coworker from my days employed by the mortuary - slowly walked up and pulled me into an embrace - staying that way until I finally began to breathe normally again. As we entered the building my knees slightly buckled, but with Devon’s assistance I made it to the conference room. I made it through the meeting in a mostly robotic state - during which I’d barely spoken, saying either “no” or “yes” as needed. Had it been left up to me alone, they would have held a graveside service for immediate family only and be done with it. Even in this moment I was still being considerate of everyone else's feelings and wants. While working together here, Devon and I had developed a genuine friendship, and it was he who persuaded me

to at least have a memorial service the Friday night before the graveside service that Saturday morning. Once the details had been set, I made another appointment to bring in the clothes that Colin would be buried in. I had been unprepared thanks in part to the medical examiner, who'd only released his body to the mortuary that morning. Not wanting to push the boundaries of our friendship, I debated whether, to ask what I knew would be considered an outlandish request - and also one that could potentially get him in trouble. But in the end, I threw caution to the wind, shooting a shot in the dark and hoping for the best.

“Devon... please let me see him”

Her voice was barely a whisper, he wasn't sure if he'd actually heard her. But once he turned around and saw that Victoria was no longer following him to the front, he knew that he had heard her correctly. Wanting to help but knowing he could not, it broke his heart to say

“No, Vee I can't do that, and you shouldn't want to see him like that. You know how M.E. cases come...”

“Please... I just want to hold him one last time”

“I ca...”

“I need this. I feel so empty. So, lost.”

Her face flooding with tears as she sank to the floor in a heap of herself and her belongings. Devon came back to her and sat next to her on the floor. Gathering her into his arms, she just continued to sob despondently. Unable to give her what she wanted, instead Devon came up with an idea to bend regulations rather than break them altogether - and if it helped his friend heal - it was worth it.

Facing me he said, “When you bring his clothes on Thursday, after I do the major work, I'll let you help dress him.”

Words couldn't adequately express my gratitude, instead I hugged him tightly. After a moment he helped me off the floor and picked up my bag. He kept his arm around my shoulders as he escorted me out of the door and to my car. After saying our goodbyes, he watched me drive away. I couldn't figure out which was more intense, the hurt over losing my son or the brewing hatred

towards his father, Eric.

How could the one person on the planet that should empathize with me, that knew exactly what I was going through, be so cruel and unkind? In addition to leaving all our child's funeral arrangements to me, including choosing his final outfit, on the night of Colin's memorial service he refused to ride with me to the church.

"Where are you? The car will be here any minute."

"I'm driving myself"

"So, you're picking me up?"

"No."

"Why would you do this?"

"I don't..."

Ending the conversation, I shook my head in an effort to dismiss it from my mind. At this point I'd had enough. Whatever feelings I had left for Eric were officially dead, along with our son. He'd never been the epitome of the perfect boyfriend; however, a part of me had always hoped he could be. Love can be a bitch, especially when given to the wrong person. But after investing so much time into another person, leaving the relationship can make you feel like a failure - something that had kept both of us around for a while. In our case however, neither parent was interested in fighting anymore. Not with each other, and certainly not for our relationship.

Eric

Eric looked at himself in the mirror for a final time, carefully putting on his hat before heading out the door to join his family in an awaiting limousine. He hated funerals. This one would definitely be no exception. No parent should ever have to bury their own child. Their only child. He looked down at the DVD case he held tightly in his right hand, beads of sweat beginning to form across his knuckles as they began to turn white, his eyes watering up as he read the title for what felt like the millionth time. Finding Nemo. It was Colin's favorite movie, often on a continuous loop that played from the time he woke up to the time he went to bed at night - driving both Vee and him crazy. Remembering a time they tried to hide the video from Colin brought a slight smile to his face as he loosened up his grip. Times weren't always bad. They couldn't have been, considering they were trying to conceive another child before their lives fell apart...

They arrived at the church to find all their family members in various shades of blue. Eric's face flushed as he instantly became annoyed. He should be in blue as well, but of course Vee hadn't bothered to call and tell him personally. She'd made sure to tell everyone else though, he thought bitterly. Vee could be so selfish and childish, conveniently overlooking how selfish and childish he could be as well. All she wanted was him and their family and he wasn't ready to settle down. Hell, he was only 21 when she finally graduated high school and he couldn't understand how at 18 she wanted to get married. Victoria wanted to get married, move in together, raise their child together and have another baby together. I wasn't ready for all that responsibility. I loved being Colin's dad and I loved Vee and I wanted a baby girl with her so I could have a version of her for the rest of my life but not on her timeline. Eric's thoughts of her irritated him yet when he walked into the church, she was the first one he searched the room for, making his way upstairs to the

second floor when he didn't find her on the first floor. He didn't have to look far, immediately seeing her as he reached the top of the stairs. She looked absolutely beautiful, especially when she was angry, though he had enough sense - and pride - not to say so. Anger he could deal with versus her hurt. He didn't know how to process his own pain, let alone hers. Usually so resilient, the sight of her tears made him feel oddly inadequate. Their eyes met and Eric was completely sure in that moment that she wished him death as well based on the rage in her beautiful eyes. He didn't say a word, choosing instead to walk up and grab her hand. Handing her the DVD, he led her into the sanctuary where their son's casket had been placed for viewing. Vee stopped in her tracks once she realized where he was taking her, not yet ready to face what they were all there for. Gently but firmly pulling her hand, what Vee didn't know was that Eric couldn't approach their son's casket without her. They would need to lean on each other for strength, but Victoria's pride wouldn't allow her to admit that she needed him too. A double-edged sword, on one hand his pride had allowed him to cope with Colin's death the best he could, on the other it caused him to hurt a woman that still meant the world to him. But allowing Vee to see his hurt would force him to admit the truth, that this wasn't a horrible nightmare after all, it was now their reality.

Victoria

Despite assurances from family and friends that “the ceremony was beautiful,” the entire funeral had been a blur for me. To be honest I didn’t give a damn. I appreciated the kind words and swell of support, but the reality of the situation was finally starting to sink in: no matter how hard I prayed, cried out loud or even ignored God, Colin wasn’t coming back. It was a brutal truth my 21-year-old mind and spirit wasn’t emotionally or mentally equipped to handle. Few people were. Then there was Eric.

Already strained, the death of Colin had stretched the fabric of our relationship to its limits, further estranging the former lovers. Distraught with his own grief, I had been left to plan our child’s funeral alone, going through the motions as I threw my energy into details like the coffin, headstone and outfit he would ultimately rest in. I didn’t have the luxury of grieving because there was simply no one else to handle the details. If Colin’s father couldn’t pull it together, his mother damn sure would.

The equivalent of a robot, somehow, I made it through the ceremony, staring stonily out the window as my family’s limousine carefully rounded a curve on the way to the repass. Things were so tense that Eric and his family had rode separately, using our large entourages as a cover for taking two limousines.

Right now, I couldn’t stand the sight of him since he’d essentially abandoned me. I couldn’t stand the way he’d somehow managed to make himself the focal point at the memorial service, looking dapper but appearing in completely the wrong color. Had he taken the time to listen to me or at

least help share the final responsibilities, he would've known everyone was wearing blue.

Why should I have to beg him to listen to me? Both of our families had worn some form of blue because that was the color that Colin was dressed in. It seems odd that I was able to function so efficiently despite neglecting all my other responsibilities. My baby looked like a model. I dressed him in a blue sweater vest with ombre' effect, long sleeve white button up shirt, dark blue linen pants and fresh all white S. Carters. Then there was Eric's former girlfriend, who showed up dressed as if she was entering a nightclub, then had the audacity to bump into me by "accident." A petty move that got the woman escorted out of the church and caused Eric to lash out, accusing me of being childish and immature. "Why are you causing a scene? This isn't about you!" Eric's verbal attack was just another bullet point on a long list of infractions where he's never had my back. I thought about the beginnings of my pregnancy and this same girl was telling everybody that I had an abortion or that I had a miscarriage because my stomach was too flat to be pregnant. Fast forward here we are years later at my son's funeral like she had been praying for it or something.

"Fuck you and that horse faced, bad built bitch, you're welcome to join her on the other side of that door for all I care."

A few of Eric's acquaintances only made it worse after they asked to take pictures of Colin - in his casket - a callous tacky request that drove me ballistic and I stormed out of the building. Not surprisingly, no one followed me, which was fine. I was becoming thoroughly accustomed to having my own back. Angry, numb and drained, once we arrived at the repast site I settled into a chair in the corner, fighting the urge to put my head down on the table and cry; I watched bitterly as everyone around the room seemingly celebrated my son's life. I understand, Lord knows I do, but I am angry. Furious even. This isn't a party. My child is dead, yet I knew that life would continue to go on, and that's what pissed me off the most.

I heard a voice call out, "Hey girl! I'm about to leave, but I'd like you to meet someone special." Raising my eyes to meet hers, I summed up the woman that stood before me. Shameka, my closest friend... She has been quite honestly, missing in action as of late. I stared blankly, not quite comprehending how I am supposed to play nice and make small talk with a stranger on the hardest day of my life. Meka had a history for being slightly callous and supercilious at times, something I couldn't help but remember in that moment.

I flashed back to the car crash we were involved in when I was eight months pregnant, the result

of a distracted Meka anxious to get her boyfriend's house. Just along for the ride, it was one that I - and Colin - almost didn't survive after Meka smashed into the back of a truck. In her haste to get to that young man's house she'd ignored my request to visit an ER, leaving me to sit outside in the car once we finally arrived at her desired destination. There'd been other red flags throughout the years, but I found it difficult to pull the plug on a friendship first started by our families in their youth. Shaking the past from my mind I answered,

"Hey, nice to meet you"

Slowly standing up, I offered my hand to Meka's newest guy. My face was suddenly hot as I willed myself to calm the surge of annoyance that was growing inside of me. Humans are curious creatures; an unfortunate fact I often reminded myself of. Too tired to acknowledge my alleged best friend's blatant disregard of the obvious bad timing, instead I excused myself and made my way across the room - filing the encounter away for a later time. Now was not the time because today - it was all about Colin.

I made my way to the mailbox. I wasn't looking for anything in particular, but it was a routine - one of many - that I learned to rely on in the days and weeks since the funeral. All I could do was take it day by day. It was the kind of cliché advice I learned to hate, but heed, nonetheless. Lost in my thoughts, I opened and shut the box, thumbing through the mail before stopping in my tracks; I carefully examined the invitation in my hand, a flowery creation sent by her estranged best friend. My fingers traced the slightly raised lettering, Shameka Anderson's name shining brightly in gold. I wasn't angry, quite the contrary actually, but I couldn't help but wonder just when our friendship had derailed to the point that I had to discover a life milestone via the U.S. Postal Service. Had we ever been friends at all? Looking back, it was highly unlikely. I was just space filler for Meka's narcissism. I was unsure of how I felt, in fact; I was tired of feeling shit altogether. Something inside of me clicked...

I grabbed my keys from the bar and hopped into my ride and headed towards 610 and Lockwood. I'd spent a lot of my childhood in the Trinity/Kashmere Gardens area. On the

weekends, I stayed with my big sister at her house on Peachtree St for Sunday Fundays in Busby Park. I graduated from the illustrious Barbara Jordan High School. That's where Eric and I met. My thoughts jumbled together as I finally turned into the driveway. I turned the car off and just stared at the house that held so many memories... good and bad. I remember when we finally moved in. I was happy and content living on the East side in our "luxury townhouse". I laughed slightly, at how I thought we were really accomplished to be that young living in non-subsidized accommodations. An opportunity to move back to the hood presented itself and typical Eric, breaks our lease to move into this very house, so that he could be "closer to this granny" was what he said. I knew he just wanted to be closer to his friends. I stepped back into the home that Eric and I technically still shared. I was rarely here, opting to spend most of my time at my mother's house, returning only because the house was closer to my school's campus. I had rushed to register for classes even though my initial motivation was gone. Initially I returned back to college to make a better life for myself and Colin - but now that he was gone, I simply needed a distraction because day and night, he is all I think about. To my relief Eric wasn't here yet, making what I was about to do even easier - or so I thought. My eyes grazed the interior as I made my way upstairs, gathering and packing my things for the final time. It hurt to go into Colin's room: to see his toys with the knowledge that he'd never get to play with them again. It really fucking hurt. However, I was tired. Everyone and everything had control over my life except me. That would end, starting now.

Nowadays Eric and I rarely even spoke to one another and when we did, we argued every single time. I was starting to feel suffocated. It was more weight on top of the already heavy burden I was carrying and despite Eric's pleas for me to stay, in my heart I knew the relationship was over.

Downstairs the front door opened and closed, signaling that Eric had finally made it home. Parking my car in the driveway, I'd made no effort to conceal that I was here - and Eric knew exactly what I was here for. His steps echoed through the hall as he made his way upstairs, making a beeline for our son's room. Stepping inside, his eyes zeroed in on me as I finished putting Colin's favorite stuffed animal into an overnight bag.

"So, you're moving out?" he asked.

I wasn't ready for the confrontation I knew lay ahead, quietly praying that the conversation could be salvaged before it went left.

"I think it's for the best..."

Eric

Shock and joy invaded his heart as he turned into the driveway and saw Victoria's car parked there. As of late he would come home to evidence that she'd been there, which made him believe she was purposely coming when he wasn't there. Sometimes he would linger around in hopes to catch her, but she even had a plan for that, going to his sister's house across the street until he finally gave up and left. He really couldn't blame her for avoiding him, but he did anyway. Shutting the car off, joy turned into anger. He entered the house determined to have this much needed conversation while getting answers to his questions in the process. Stepping inside he almost tripped over a suitcase left half-open near the door, answering one of his questions in the process. He instantly became irate - it wasn't the answer he wanted. Eric knew that things had changed between them, but the history between them was enough to make him want to hold on, or at least put up one last fight for the road. He was ready for the challenge.

"So, you weren't going to say anything? You said that we would talk about it. That you just needed space and would be back."

Standing up she explained,

"Don't do this. Don't make it ugly. We both know what it was when you abandoned me when I needed you the most. So, I'm just taking the things that I bought for Colin, I'm getting my stuff and I'm moving back into my mom's house."

"Oh okay," he replied... Then all hell broke loose.

Victoria

I am tired of fighting. I am tired of struggling against the waves of emotions that swept over me daily. I just wanted to grab our things and go. Stepping around him, I was eager to leave and close this painful chapter as best I could. Making my way downstairs I moved as quickly as I could, ready to pack our things into the car and go. Zipping the suitcase closed I yanked open the front door, sunlight spilling into the dark living room that hadn't been cleaned in days. The love was gone in this house, of that I was sure. Eric had other plans, grabbing our belongings and throwing them right onto the lawn. My face flushed at the disrespect, my body running hot as I watched things like Colin's clothes and toys fly through the morning air. I'd had enough, screaming "What the fuck are you doing? What in the hell is wrong with you? Why are you doing this? The nerve of you! After everything I put up with! After everything you put me through!"

Angry and ashamed, I wanted to throw the entire day away. Throw the whole fucking year away. I struggled to shove everything into the car, picking Colin's things up off the ground - where his own father had flung them like garbage. The fucking disrespect. Our son's body was barely cold in the overpriced coffin I'd picked out alone, yet here his parents were, putting on a full show on the front lawn.

And put on a show we did, as Eric growled

"Fuck this and fuck you."

"Fuck me? FUCK ME? You didn't even want our son, but now it's fuck me? Fine." I am tired in

every sense of the word... And with Colin gone, the last tie holding Eric and I together has been broken. In some ways, I was glad. My child's father wasn't done either. Calling out,

"Get your shit and get the fuck out my yard." His words cutting far deeper than any physical act could.

"Your yard?!" I asked.

Anger and hatred mixing outside of the home we'd once happily shared.

"I hate I ever had a child with you. In fact, I hate I ever met your ass. Your selfish ass abandoned me to do EVERYTHING by. My. Muthafucking. Self! While you're off riding around doing nothing as usual, I had to go buy a plot of dirt for our son to be placed in! I had to go to the funeral home by myself! I had to buy his clothes! I had to deal with detectives and CPS!!"

Not to be outdone, with a final nail in the coffin Eric added

"I don't give a fuck, you heard what I said, bitch. Get your shit and get the fuck on. I hate that you had him too. He'd still be alive if you weren't his mama. So yeah, I hate you more...bitch."

And there it was. I felt as if someone had hit me directly in the chest with a sledgehammer. My lungs collapsed; at least that's what it felt like. I was struggling to breathe. Picking the last of Colin's belongings off the ground, I finally got inside of my car. As I pulled off, I refused to look back into the rear-view mirror. It was officially over. I didn't know what was ahead, but I damn sure wasn't going back.

Chapter Two

“Victoria!”

“Ma’am?”

She got up to see what her mother was calling for her. Sitting at her desk with an envelope, Dodie looked up at her baby girl as Vee approached. She was still as beautiful as the day she’d been born, but that light inside of her, the one that used to command an entire room, was diminished. In the months following her grandson’s death, she’d watched her daughter slowly transform into a person she barely recognized. As a mother, it hurt not to be able to fix what was broken instead, all she could do was pray even harder for Jesus to protect her child, put her back together, and/or at least give her child some peace.

“You called me momma?”

"Do you have any plans today?" Dodie asked, even though she already knew the answer to her question. Vee had quickly enrolled in school a few weeks after the funeral and quietly dropped out shortly after. Now, Dodie just wanted to treat her daughter with some semblance of normalcy in hopes of bringing her back to life.

“No ma’am”

“Ok, I’d like for you to drive me somewhere. I have to go to an office building in Greenway Plaza.”

“Ok momma, I’ll go get dressed”

As Vee slowly exited the room, it was all Dodie could do to keep herself from crying - during this trying time in their lives, her daughter’s strength was awe inspiring. Even though she didn’t need to be alone, Vee had all but pushed Dodie out the door and back to work; staying secluded in her room in an effort not to burden anyone with her grief. Yes, she was incredibly strong, but this was the terrible downside of that strength.

More often than not now, Dodie overate just to make sure she saw her daughter eat something to offset all of the liquor she was consuming. Something Victoria thought her mother was unaware of. She quietly sent up a 'thank you' to the Holy Trinity once she heard the shower turn on, the pounding of the water briefly replacing all sounds in the otherwise quite house. After Dodie had to bathe Vee one night, she'd made her daughter promise to at least bathe once every couple of days. I didn't want to be here; however, when the one person that has never left your side asks you to accompany her...

you can't tell your mother, no.

We entered an incredibly tall building that required two elevators just to reach our destination, the 24th floor. As we approached the heavy glass doors, I noticed "The Law Offices of Glenn Patterson" in big sprawling gold letters across the wall. I held the door open for my mommy and took a seat as she went to speak with the receptionist, confidently strolling to the front. At 70 years old, Dodie didn't look a day over 50. Her light beige skin always glowed. She wore her salt and pepper hair short and curly. She was always fashionably dressed, especially for church. I admired my mommy so much. I'd always hoped to be a mother just like her... however, that was no longer in the cards for me.

Roughly five minutes later, an older Caucasian gentleman with striking white hair appeared, coming out to greet my mother and me. After inviting my mother to a conference room in the back, she motioned for me to join them - I wasn't in a good space to deal with other people, but I obliged my mother - I knew she was genuinely concerned and I didn't want to worry her even more than I already had.

"Hello Victoria, I apologize for the circumstances under which we are meeting today, however, I'm glad to finally make your acquaintance. I want to first introduce myself; my name is Glenn Patterson, and everyone calls me Pat. We're here today because your mother contacted me on your behalf to inquire about options to help relieve some of your stress. I'm an attorney that focuses on personal injury and other civil matters."

And there it was. My mother had brought me here to file a lawsuit in the death of my child. I was

instantly offended - hurt and angry simultaneously as I glared at my mother. Her facial expression was soft and hesitant as she silently pleaded for understanding. My head snapped back in Mr. Patterson's direction as he called my name again, daggers shooting from my eyes. His tone was empathetic as he told me "It's your decision whether to move forward or not. There's no ill will on anyone's part. Your mother just felt that if there was some type of responsibility taken in your son's death, then maybe you could start the healing process. No one should have to go through what you're experiencing, especially at your age."

I sat there in a daze as I contemplated what he'd just said. With a heavy sigh I nodded my head yes. Opening a file folder, he handed me a stack of forms to complete.

Shaking hands as my mother and I prepared to leave, Mr. Patterson informed me that he would be sending me to a therapist, effective the next day. "We'll send a car to pick you up and bring you back home, so you won't have to worry about transportation" he promised. Adding, "Lunch will be included." With a quiet ok I escaped from the room. During the drive home I sat angrily, glancing between my mother's worried face and back out the window. I didn't always understand her, but now that I'd experienced motherhood, if only briefly, I fully understood the desire to protect your child, no matter the circumstances.

~~~~~  
*"Do you want this woman to be your mother?"*

*It was the same dream I had every time my anxiety peaked. A vivid image of my younger self standing between my parents as we all stood inside of a courtroom in a front of a judge.*  
~~~~~

I opened one eye and looked at the clock. It was 3:43 am but despite the late hour I was alert and wide awake. Dragging myself out of bed, I fished around for my slippers, avoiding the cold floor by shoving my toes into the warm, insulated shoes. Last night was the first time in a long time that I had tried to sleep without the aid of alcohol, drank or pills; as a result, I'd tossed and turned, only getting about an hour of sleep.

I was pretty sure my memories were haunting me because of yesterday's events. Quietly making my way outside to the back porch, I sat down, finding a familiar comfort on my favorite swing. In order to fend off the urge to fix myself a glass of something, I thought about the meeting with the

therapist later that morning. I thought counselors, psychiatrists; therapists and anyone else that made a habit of screwing around in people's heads is manipulative people that preyed on the naivety of others - essentially taking advantage of people who were down in a moment of weakness. Like many others within the Black community, I was skeptical because "Black people don't have emotional or mental issues," we just prayed about it, whatever "it" is and allowing the chips to fall where they may. I didn't realize I had fallen asleep until I felt my mother gently tapping on my shoulder, her way of saying she was leaving for work. Still in a daze, I rubbed my weary, dry eyes and wished my mother a great day. Following Dodie back into the house, we parted ways as we reached the living room, with Dodie heading to her car in the garage while I made my way to the bathroom.

The doorbell rang just as I finished getting dressed. Checking the time on my phone as I walked to the door, I like that the driver is punctual, might as well get it over with. Walking outside and shutting the door behind her, the driver waited patiently as I locked the door, escorting me to a waiting black Lincoln Navigator before opening the rear passenger door for me. We rode in silence as the sleek vehicle merged onto I-45 south towards Downtown before the driver finally spoke "Pardon me Ms. Gafford, do you have a music preference?"

"Boney James, if you have it."

"Yes ma'am"

As the intro to James' soulful "Sara Smile" began to fill the spacious SUV, I felt the tension ease just slightly, music had always been my safe place, allowing me to close my eyes throughout the rest of the ride. Roughly 15 minutes later we arrived at the destination, thanks in part to unusually light traffic in Houston's typically bustling downtown area. Normally I loved being downtown, but today was just another reminder of yet another thing that I couldn't enjoy with Colin anymore. The two of them used to come downtown for all kinds of reasons, any reason really, just to be downtown. Every city brags about its beauty or skylines but being born and raised in Houston had instilled a sense of pride only true Houstonians understood. There was no city more beautiful than this one. But on that day, everything looked and felt different, a feeling I wasn't sure I would ever shake.

After I got out of the SUV, I took a minute to compose myself and then entered the building. After scanning the building directory, I made my way to the office I was scheduled to be in.

I walked into the office and informed the receptionist that I had an appointment - declining the

drink that she offered in favor of getting started. I was already ready to go. A few moments later her phone buzzed, causing the receptionist to rise and instruct me to follow her as she led me to the doctor's office. Dr. Maurice Terry was an attractive man, he is about 6'0" tall about 180-190 lbs. His skin complexion was like roasted pecans his hair was immaculately cut which merged into a very neatly groomed beard and mustache, which made me self-conscious about my appearance. Today I was definitely eligible for winning first place for the "crawl under a rock and hide" look. It's astonishing what can snap you back into the reality of life. With a probing gaze and the warmest light brown eyes, he looked as if he were looking through me, but oddly not in an intrusive way. It was as if he could see the inner me that I'd carefully been hiding from the world. I felt naked. Walking over to me, Dr. Terry closed his office door and gently took both of my hands into his. Standing directly in front of me he bowed his head as I stood silently, staring at him. To be honest I was slightly weirded out by what was going on. Then he began to pray, causing my body to stiffen as I froze in place. I absolutely was unprepared for this - I hadn't even prayed in months - it was an unnerving moment where I literally felt torn. Part of me felt a giant weight lifting away, but another part was fighting to ignore what was happening. What he was doing. It felt like my spirit was broken and dehydrated; he was trying to give me water and I was refusing it. Finally, I heard Dr. Terry say "amen." Opening his eyes, he found me staring at him curiously. Dr. Terry offered me a seat, which I accepted. We sat in silence for a moment while I noticed he didn't have a notepad like the therapists on TV do. After a minute passed, he began with a very simple, but probing, question.

"Why are you here?"

"I was sent here by Glenn Patterson."

"You didn't have to accept. So why are you here?"

I raised my eyebrow at him, wondering just what kind of little game he had going on, countering with "What kind of question is that Dr. Terry?"

"Call me Maurice; it's a simple question Victoria."

"I believe I've answered it."

"What happened on May 27, 1982?"

Caught off guard, I smiled slightly.

"I was born."

"What took place on January 25, 2004?"

My smile dissipated and my anger appeared.

“I died.”

“How did you die if you’re sitting across from me?”

“My son died, is that what you want to hear?!”

“What would you like to hear?”

Finally, I paused. I didn’t know how to respond to the question. I sat for a few moments, my mouth moving silently as I struggled to respond but no words came out. There were a few different ways I could answer the question, but I settled on the one that made the most sense to me. The thing that I wanted the most.

“I want to hear that this has all been a horribly bad nightmare, or that I’m just stuck in a coma I can’t wake up from. I want to hear Colin’s voice again. I want someone to tell me that he’ll be home when I get there. I want...”

By now the tears were flowing from my eyes, prompting Dr. Terry to hand me a box of tissue from his desk. He cleared his throat then asked me, “Victoria, why are you so angry?”

I hesitated. I tried to speak and then I closed my mouth again unsure if I was ready to face my demons. I lowered my gaze to stare at my intertwined hands, cleared my throat and the words started to flow freely...

“It was Super Bowl XXXVIII weekend when I buried my son...”

While most Houstonians were turned up and celebrating Super Bowl weekend, I was going through the absolute worst experience of my life; learning the hard way just how self-centered and self-absorbed some people can be. After the pretty speeches, all the flowers and the hollow promises, once the funeral was over the family had returned to my mother’s house following the repast at the church. After that, it was over for everyone else. I didn’t see it that way, because it was only the beginning of my own personal hell. Meanwhile, my cousins just wanted me to use my connections - which could get them into virtually any party in the city that weekend - and all I wanted to do was fade into nonexistence. I entered my room and began to undress, staring at the reflection that looked back at me from the full-length mirror across the room. Starting at the crown of my head, my gaze then traveled down my face, staring directly at my eyes that were puffy, red and dry. The moisture forming began to burn my eyes. My gaze continued further, coming to a stop at my breasts and midsection. For years I was a firm A cup but, thanks to Colin, I was now a full C cup. I looked at my waist, which wasn’t as flat as it had once been, but portrayed no visible bulge either. There

were no stretch marks, a fate I somehow escaped despite how large my stomach had grown while pregnant. Now, there was no way of telling that I had ever been pregnant, a thought I bitterly pushed away as I wondered whether I was even fit to be someone's mother. I reached for my phone, dialing a number I told myself to avoid. I tried not to make this call often, yet here I am, becoming more and more dependent on drank. It helped ease the pain. I assumed that my mother considered me a full-blown alcoholic, but in reality, syrup was my drug of choice. When Eric first introduced me to it, I would do cute things like put jolly ranchers into my cup, gingerly watching them slip under the ice and to the bottom of the cup. After I became pregnant with Colin I quit completely, but with Colin gone... Tonight I didn't want to be cute; I wanted my drink "muddy," a mixture of cough syrup and sprite that would render me incoherent, allowing me to sleep virtually my life away. The phone only rang once before a familiar voice came onto the line. I placed my order with ease. Hanging up the phone, I tried to quickly think of a way to leave the house unnoticed without letting my cousins tag-along for the ride. But of course, my car was blocked in, making it impossible to leave without alerting at least one of my inquisitive, opportunistic family members. All the keys were in the living room, sitting uselessly as their owners talked and lingered behind. I wondered when they would finally leave. As I picked up my phone to make other arrangements, I looked up, unbeknownst to me; Tonya had entered the room and had been talking to me for nearly five minutes as I stared blankly. Now she stood, staring at me curiously.

"So, you're just going to be rude?"

Startled, I dismissively asked "What are you talking about?"

"I said, you haven't eaten all day and you need to eat something."

"I'm not hungry"

"I'm not leaving until you get something to eat."

I rolled my eyes and released a heavy sigh.

"There's plenty of food in the kitchen, I'll get something in a few minutes. Can you get Monica's keys and move her car so I can get out?"

"Why?"

What in the hell?! I was amazed that I was old enough to bury my son by myself but when I need people to move their vehicles, I had to pass an inquisition. There was no way to keep my secret a secret anymore and at this point I no longer even cared. Not caring was starting to become my mantra for life. "Ugh, fine! I have to run an errand."

“Dodie doesn’t want you to be left alone...”

Now Vee was officially irritated.

“Look damn it, I’m walking out of the door now. If you’re coming then come on, if not then get out of my way and Give me your keys.”

Backing out of the driveway, I decided to take the long way, taking the entrance ramp to I-45 North and merging onto 610 East I made my way towards Fifth Ward. By the time we exited the freeway I couldn’t tolerate Tonya’s music selections any longer. Switching on the radio, Slim Thug’s “3 Kings” instantly caught my ear; I would listen to any song that T.I. was featured on. Once I turned onto Liberty Rd, I called “Dough” to let him know that I was pulling up. I was pseudo bourgeoisie. I didn’t mind driving to the hood to buy drank but wouldn’t dare get out of my car and actually walk into the trap house to make the transaction. Dough would either deliver it to my location or I would pick it up curbside like a drive thru. I had never purchased this much at one time, but now that the funeral was over, my spending money had increased since it was just me to take care of, again. As I left Dough’s spot, I felt my mood begin to shift. With my package now secured, I stopped by Hank’s Seafood to grab something to eat. A well-known eatery, Hank’s was bustling as the delicious smell of things like catfish filled the air around the small restaurant. Tonya had become unusually quiet, saying little other than a brief hushed phone conversation and a few sporadic texts. As we waited for our food at the drive-thru window, the other shoe dropped...

“So, are you feeling up to hanging out tonight?”

“Not at all...”

“You would feel better if you got out of the house, like what is sitting in the house supposed to accomplish? You need to get back to life”

Suddenly my appetite was gone. I didn’t even wait on the food, instead I drove away from the restaurant and headed directly back to Studewood. Cousin or not, I wanted to slap the complete shit out of Tonya or better yet, put her out of the vehicle, however I settled for taking her back to my mother’s house and locking myself inside of my room. The audacity of this bitch. I couldn’t believe that Tonya had the nerve to say that, yet here we were. Once we were back at my mother’s house, I gathered my belongings off the back seat and retreated to my bedroom, promptly locking the door. Grabbing a two liter of Sprite from the back of the closet, I removed the seal from a bottle of promethazine and emptied the entire bottle in the waiting soda. It had just become the most expensive bottle of Sprite I’d ever consumed. Gently rotating the bottle to ensure the concoction

had thoroughly mixed I poured myself a cup and turned on the stereo - filling the air with Outkast's smooth "I Like the Way" before I switched to a throwback CD from the Port Arthur duo UGK, "Riding Dirty" In that moment as "One day" began to play, I fully understood the movement that Houston legend DJ Screw had started with the infectious, slow-banging sound now known globally as Screw music. As the music moved through me, I made a mental note to pick up a few Screw cd's the next day, as the tears began to fall. A few hours passed before I heard a soft knock on my door. It was Tonya, asking if I would accompany her to drop her sister-in-law off. I knew I was under the influence but decided to go since the trip from Studewood to Trinity Gardens was only 15 minutes, on a bad day. Leaving the house with Tonya, I settled into the backseat of the Expedition.

As we rode in silence, I didn't realize my eyes had drifted shut until I was suddenly startled by the biting sound of car horns blaring. After looking around and finally becoming aware of where I was, I instantly became irritated. Not only were we not in Trinity Gardens, we were on the other side of town on the Richmond strip - a Galleria area street home to numerous clubs and flashy cars whose owners often begged to be seen. The SUV soon came to a crawl as we entered gridlocked traffic, courtesy of the ongoing Super Bowl festivities. Any other time I would have loved to see my city so alive and full of activities; but right now, I couldn't enjoy it. I was dead inside. We sat in uncomfortable silence as I wondered where they were headed before Tonya veered into a packed, yet familiar, parking lot.

"Vee! Come on girl, let's go in here. I know you can get us in," Tonya half-joked as she pulled the car to a stop. "Y'all can go, I'll stay in the truck. I'm not going in there. Pointing to the slightly crushed sky-blue velour tracksuit she still had on from earlier I protested, "Even if I wanted to, I'm not dressed to go anywhere, Yet alone in there."

"You look fine" Tonya insisted. Shifting her tone, she added, "You know we can't get in without you, so are you going to stop moping and get us in, or what?"

Staring at them both incredulously, I responded by raising an eyebrow. I finally relented, telling them "Ok, stay here and I'll go see who's at the door." I got out of the truck and began to walk towards the front, but as soon as I was out of their view, I pulled out her phone, furiously typing in the number of Justin Broussard a longtime friend. He answered on the first ring.

"Hey Vee, is everything ok? Do you need anything?"

"Hey Justin, are you busy?"

“Never too busy for you, what’s up?”

“I need a ride. Will you come get me?”

“Of course, where are you?”

After giving him my location, instead of heading back to the car I decided to wait inside of the Dave & Buster’s restaurant next door. Let them find someone else to get them in. Right on cue, my phone began blowing up with calls from Tonya. I ignored everyone. If I would have been sober, I probably would have attacked Tonya by punching her right in her smug face for the continuous disrespect. Justin didn’t take too long; as he was pulling up, I hurried into the passenger seat. I felt bad for calling him away from a night of fun and even though he kept telling me he didn’t mind; I didn’t like feeling that I was infringing on other people.

Hours later, I woke up in a daze. Jumping up startled, I didn’t realize just how long I’d slept. I was fully dressed, thankfully, but I did not recognize my surroundings. Feeling panicked, Justin walked into the room with towels and an array of toiletries. He smiled at me, making my panic fade as my heartbeat settled back into a normal beat.

“Good Morning” I said. A half smile slowly forming on my lips.

“Good morning. It didn’t seem right to take you home so late, so I brought you to my house instead. I hope that’s ok?” Justin asked.

“It’s fine.”

“Good, now go get yourself together and meet me downstairs. Today it’s all about you.”

Now beaming, I could only smile in response. As the water from the shower cascaded over me, the heat and steam instantly made me feel better. After a long shower I finally exited, toweled off, wrapped myself in the soft cotton towel provided and looked at my reflection in the mirror. The flashback of thoughts back to when I first met Justin. It was the summer before I met Eric. I was having lunch with Dodie at Fuddruckers, my mother’s favorite place for burgers. I was filling our cups with soda when Justin approached me.

“Good afternoon, what are you and your sister doing when y’all leave here?” I rolled my eyes, throwing back “You know damn well, that’s not my sister,” as I walked away.

Still he persisted, following me to our table. As I sat back down, I held my breath and waited for the show that I knew was about to take place. Dodie was a woman that always spoke her mind. Always. And when it came to “pissy tailed li'l boys” - as she called them - chasing after her youngest daughter, she didn’t play at all. Shoving his hand out to Dodie, Justin exclaimed “Good

afternoon ma'am, your daughter just told me that you're her mother, not her sister, and I couldn't believe it. I had to come and tell you how beautiful you both are."

My mouth dropped. I'd never witnessed a guy be so bold with my mother, that was one of the main reasons that I hadn't bothered asking for permission to "talk to" a particular boy at school or otherwise. Dodie taught me that if a guy wasn't willing or too shy to meet my parents then he wasn't worth my time or attention. I always thought my mommy only said that to just deter me from boys completely, so Dodie's response surprised me even more. Firmly shaking Justin's hand, she replied, "Thank you, young man, what's your name?"

"Justin Broussard."

"Nice to meet you Justin, my name is Victoria, which is also my daughter's name." Turning and looking directly at me she said, "Now this is the type of young man you should be dating."

I sat in silence, stunned. My mother had never approved of me dating due to my age and the fact that she just didn't like the guys that I chose to talk to. Even though I tried to explain to her that I wasn't seriously entertaining any of the guys. How else was I supposed to learn how to deal with the opposite sex if I never had any type of interaction? Justin continued to smile as he asked me for my pager number. I provided him with the information he requested, along with my home phone number. Considering I already had my mother's approval - which was a miracle in itself - I figured he must be a good catch. But roughly a few months later I would learn another life lesson: Everything that glitters is not gold. Pretty soon we were officially dating; unbeknownst to me our relationship was only exclusive on my side. My first relationship life lesson came sooner than expected as we made our way to the Ice Breakers step show for Black Greek organizations. It was our first official date as a couple. Despite being a freshman in college, Justin didn't mind that I was still in high school. It was the summer before my senior year and I was experiencing my first taste of freedom, something I'd been allowed to enjoy that night thanks to a simple request from Justin and of course some begging to Dodie for permission to attend. After an amazing show, we made our way to Justin's car, pausing as a group of his friends called out his name. Handing me the car keys, he told me he'd join me shortly. With a kiss on the cheek and a hand smack on my derrière, I continued towards the car without him, picking up the pace as the parked car came into view. I climbed inside and waited for Justin, the minutes crawling by slowly as I started to become impatient. 15 minutes later, Justin still hadn't joined me, and I was tired of waiting. I decided to take matters into my own hands; deftly sliding over into the driver's seat and starting the car with

the intention of finding Justin. I started with the parking lot, driving around it while scanning the sea of faces still entering and exiting the auditorium. I reached over and turned the radio back up, allowing my jam “Notorious Thugs” to pour through the speakers as I, although irritated, searched for Justin’s face. As I turned to circle back around again my eyes suddenly locked in on Justin - who was neither with the friends he’d left with, nor alone - with a young woman that handed him back his phone with a knowing smile. Adding insult to injury, she blew Justin a kiss before walking away, incensing my irritation to anger even more. I was livid, throwing my anger into pounding the car horn in front of me in an effort to get Justin’s attention. With the surrounding vehicles causing the same, if not more of the same amount of noise, it took a few moments for Justin to register that the sound he was hearing was coming from his own car. Staring into the headlights his eyes narrowed as he finally recognized it was me behind the steering wheel, my face contorted in anger, the horn still blaring as I continued to push, push, and push. Jogging over, Justin calmly opened the car door, switching places with me as I seething, asked “Who is she?!” Not missing a beat, he answered, “Just some girl whose number my little cousin wanted. He was too scared to talk to her, so I helped him out. He’s fam.”

“So why did she blow you a kiss?”

“She didn’t blow me a kiss.”

“Oh ok.”

And with that I was done, buckling my seatbelt, I sat mutely, staring out the passenger side window. ‘So, this is what heartbreak feels like’ I thought. This was weird for me; I didn’t fully know how to process it. All I knew was that I no longer wanted to be near Justin, let alone in a car with him. When he asked me what I wanted to eat, I told him to take me home.

“Why?”

“I don’t feel good, my stomach is cramping.”

Cramps will get a woman out of practically any situation, a tactic I learned shortly after beginning the menstrual stage of life and that I leaned on to end a perfect night that had gone to shit. I wouldn’t speak to Justin for months after that. I’m sure he thought I was immature for ghosting him, but I didn’t care. I felt like he was immature for lying to my face. For a long while Dodie would ask about him from time to time, but after I began dating Eric, she stopped asking about Justin. And that was that.

But life goes on. Eventually we would become great friends, able to laugh at the memory of our

young, failed romance. Now, I couldn't help but wonder what the future might hold, my thoughts interrupted by the smell of bacon wafting from the kitchen. My stomach began to do somersaults as I followed my nose to the kitchen. Justin had shocked me, preparing a full breakfast that included French toast, fruit, bacon, sausage, eggs and one my favorites, and grits with cheese. We spoke little while eating, simply enjoying one another's company before Justin asked whether I had any plans for the day. I didn't. After calling my mother to let her know that I was safe, which was not a simple task at all...

"Victoria! Where are you? I've been worried..."

"I apologize mommy. I'm ok, there's no need to be worried."

"Tonya called me saying that you left them somewhere and they were worried that something happened to you."

"Mommy, no they weren't. They wanted to go out and I didn't, so I called a ride and left so they could continue their fun. We can finish this conversation when I get home." After I hung up the phone, Justin suggested we leave, taking me to the Galleria mall for a little retail therapy. I soon realized that the day was just getting started as Justin took me to the spa after our shopping trip, pampering me with a massage along with a manicure and pedicure. All things I needed badly. I was grateful and happy; it was the most relaxed I felt in a long time. After the spa, we went back to Justin's home to drop off the bags and get dressed for dinner with his friends. For the first time in a long time, I was able to let go and relax, the drinks flowing through dinner and beyond as I held my own, shot for shot.

~~~~~  
*Eventually, the night escaped me...*  
~~~~~

There was blackness. We often think of what we'd do in a given situation, hopeful that our more rational side will prevail against whatever we may face. But sexual assault comes in various forms, including acts committed by acquaintances, friends and even family members. In this case I knew exactly what was happening when I woke up with Justin on top of me. Feeling woozy, I screamed the word "NO!" repeatedly, begging him to stop as he pulled my arms above my head and continued before I blacked out again. Even though I was fully aware of what date rape was, I

couldn't, wouldn't bring myself to say the words out loud. That little bit of hope? The butterflies that had been floating in my stomach whenever Justin was near? Gone. It was all gone. Very much in control of the situation, when it was over, he drove me to my cousin's house as if nothing had happened. Confident that his vile actions would go unreported and unfortunately, thanks to my fear - and shame - he was right. It was as if he was oblivious to the piece of me

he'd just ripped away. Or perhaps he just didn't care.

"If you're going to be a slut and a whore you need to go somewhere else and do that!"

Tonya stated matter of factly, her way of greeting me as I walked through her door.

My blood began to boil. But still, I couldn't bring myself to tell her, to scream out, what had happened to me. I couldn't will myself to go through a rape kit, an interrogation and I damn sure couldn't will myself to write the word 'rape' down on paper. That would make it real. This wasn't some guy with a creepy van, or the pervert from up the street. Society has all the answers about avoiding the deviants of the world, except when that deviant turns out to be someone that you know and trust. It was too raw and too personal - and I just couldn't bring myself to share it with anyone. And definitely not with Tonya. Instead I left, gathering my things as hot tears threatened to spill onto the carpeted floor. Life wasn't done with me yet, but I had reached my limit with life. Acute Stress Disorder/PTSD is what professionals would suggest I was unknowingly suffering from; I was a ticking time-bomb just waiting to explode. Unchecked and untreated because "Black families don't have mental illness." But as I was quickly learning, not everything can be "prayed away." I should have been in counseling, right after Colin died, not-self-medicating. Soon, I'd find myself holding a bottle of pills. Another soul allowed to silently slip through the cracks. Another one...

"You have my sincerest condolences." It was a phrase that I remembered all too well. In the days, and months, after the tragic accident - it was all I'd heard. Usually, whispered to me very quietly before the speaker awkwardly pulled me in for an embrace. It wasn't their fault. They meant well, but few knew the right words for this type of situation. Your child is supposed to bury you, not the other way around. It was an experience that I wouldn't wish on even my worst enemy. After reading the card again I put it away, making a mental note to thank the sender for their condolences. I appreciated the sentiment, even though it did nothing to stop the pain. After the dead are buried, life continues to go on. A bitter pill that I was tired of swallowing, I was tired...

so utterly tired. For the last week I'd spent my time inside of a bottle, using the dark liquid to take the edge off of the biting grief I'd slowly grown accustomed to living with. The house was dark and, for now, quiet. Alone with my thoughts, guilt consumed me – mentally agonizing over and over the “what ifs” ...

What if I would've just taken Colin to church with me?

What if I would've just stayed at home?

What if Eric and I had never broken up?

What if I never gave birth...

knowing what awaited me that day - I'd carefully shut myself off from the world. Tying up any loose ends without arousing suspicion in my family and friends. I knew that they cared, but even their love wasn't enough to pull me out of the hole I'd fallen into. Nothing mattered anymore, because at the other side of it all there was someone waiting for me. My baby. For years I'd gone through life with the short end of the stick, trailed by a string of bad luck that somehow, I'd always overcome, despite the emotional toll involved. This time was different, however. My only begotten son was gone, a shock and blow that even my strong will couldn't absorb. On days when the liquor won, I would stumble through the house in a stupor. Drifting into the bedroom right next to my own, I would sit for hours inhaling the last scents of the child I'd never hold again. It was one of those days. Choking back a sob, I sank into the carpet, my eyes growing heavy as the pills I'd chased with whiskey began to go into effect. I knew that it was time; soon, I would see my son again. Before I lost consciousness, a familiar voice rang throughout my head: “Mommy, please don't leave!” As I went under, I remembered the words, vowing to never leave his side again.

I only remember my eyes opening and I was in a dimly lit room. I realized quickly that I was in a hospital room and I tried to move but my body felt so heavy and my head was feeling as if there was a marching band inside of it. I groaned in agony as I tried to adjust myself in the bed.

“Thank you, Father in Heaven”

I heard Dodie say softly. A single tear left my eye and trailed slowly down my cheek as I looked intently at her very worried face.

“I'm so sorry mommy”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, my baby. I'm just thankful you're still here with us. We'll talk later, let's get you some food.”

Dodie held my hand and rubbed my head until the nurse came.

I sat there quietly, staring at the foot of the chair that held Dr. Terry. I had just bared my soul, exposing a secret I'd refused to accept, let alone share with anyone else: I was date raped a few days after I buried my only son. They were words I hadn't told another living person, choosing to throw it on the pile of burdens I was already tasked with carrying. When I finally looked up, I saw Dr. Terry staring directly into my eyes. And in his eyes, I saw horror, shock and pity staring back at me. A knowing look that I hated, especially the pity. It was a look that signaled, at least to me, that it was time to cut the session short. I got up to leave. After what seemed like an eternity passed, he finally spoke.

"What are your thoughts at this moment?"

"I'm ready to leave..."

"Victoria, you have a homework assignment"

"Homework?!"

"Yes, I want you to hug your mother for five minutes."

I looked at Dr. Terry as if he'd lost his damn mind. Hug my mother?? What was so significant about hugging my mother? This confirmed my opinion that counseling is a tremendous waste of time.

"Ok, Dr. Terry."

"See you next week Victoria."

"Bye Dr. Terry."

After the driver dropped me back off at home, I immediately entered the house in search of Dodie. I found her in the kitchen, a familiar hum echoing throughout the room as she cooked in peace. Her back was facing me as I gave her a brief hug. Instantly her hands stopped chopping vegetables, wiping them on her apron as she turned around and pulled me in closer for another hug. A proper one. I could feel my emotions clawing to the surface as I buried my face in her embrace. I tried to pull away, but mommy wouldn't let go. As my eyes started to fill with tears, I struggled against her, causing her to hold me even tighter. A blood curdling scream escaped my lips as I collapsed into sobs, crying until I was too weak to stand. I cried and cried, and still, my mommy never let go. Emotionally drained, after the tender moment with my mother, I retreated to my room, lying across the bed. Not wanting to be alone, yet not ready to breakdown in front of my mother again, I picked up the phone - calling Stacie to see if she was free to hang out later. I didn't want to stay at home, but I also didn't want to go out alone. Lately, all my "friends" seemed to be turning into

enemies, at least in my eyes. I had always been complacent and passive in my friendships, allowing toxic friends to linger around due to their “history.” Now, at the loneliest point in my life, I didn’t have any friends, no longer had my man, and wasn’t even sure if I could still call Jesus a friend. And so, I called Stacie, a girl I met at church. We had quite a bit in common. We both came from large families, both goal oriented and had similar personality styles. Stacie was free and we decided to go have dinner and drinks. Which was another thing we had in common, we were both foodies. We met up at Sam's Boat on Richmond. Stacie is a hilarious person; we share the same sarcastic sense of humor. Unlike myself however, Stacie doesn't drink alcohol. That was our first hang out together, but it wouldn't be our last. Stacie became my best friend. She is always brutally honest and never sugar coats anything. That's an extremely rare quality that I love about her. No false pretense.

Chapter Three

“I can’t believe this bitch! Who the fuck does she think she is?!” Eric slammed the phone down, not caring that he’d just cracked the base in half. He couldn’t believe that Vee had just called him out the blue, after months had gone by, to inform him he was obligated to be at a fucking deposition in just two days. Classic Victoria.

“Didn’t I tell you that I don’t care about a fucking insurance claim? That stupid motherfucker didn’t even get jail time!”

“It’s beyond an insurance claim. It’s a civil suit and you have to choose a side because the insurance company doesn’t want any more lawsuits arising at a later date.”

“Man, fuck you and that damn insurance company.”

He could tell by her voice that she wasn’t in the mood to play around. Cool yet calm, she responded “That’s fine. Look you have two options: Either do the damn deposition, collect your check and get the fuck out of my life...or I can have your name removed from Colin’s death certificate and you won’t get a damn thing. That shouldn’t bother you at all, since you never signed his birth certificate.”

He took a deep breath, struggling to match her frigid demeanor he spat, “You are such an evil bitch.”

“And you are a selfish ass bum”

“Text me the address. For-”

dial tone

Victoria

I still hadn't figured out how Dr. Maurice Terry circumvented my emotional barriers however, in this moment I was very thankful that he was in my life. After I hung up in Eric's face, I sent Maurice a text message urgently requesting for him to call me as soon as possible. Ninety agonizing minutes later, he did.

"So, I finally told Eric about the deposition."

"The same deposition that you're scheduled to be at in two days?"

The way Maurice said it, seemed like I was the one that was wrong in this situation.

"Yes, that's the only deposition that I'm going to"

"Victoria... You don't, on any level, expect me to believe that you don't see any error in your actions?"

"No, Maurice I don't expect you to believe that. However, I attempted to inform Eric in the beginning. Eric acted as if his decision to be against the lawsuit was the final decision for the both of us. And typical of him, he didn't feel it was necessary to give me an explanation why. So, I decided to take matters into my own hands for once. Had Eric chose to at least respect me enough to explain his reasoning, I would've called Glenn and terminated everything before it even got this far."

"Tit for tat is not healthy for situations like this. Someone has to be the bigger person, Victoria."

"Why do I always have to be the bigger person? I'm only 5'5"

After our laughter subsided, Maurice continued.

"You can't continue to carry this enormous amount of anger. You have to do the work to get the results."

Eric

If looks could kill the malice in Eric's eyes would have done the job to everyone in that conference room, several times over. He didn't want to be there, and it showed, namely because he didn't understand why he even needed to be questioned about his son's death. He wasn't even there when it happened, which meant he had little to no details since he'd never wanted to know. However, during the criminal trial for the people that had killed his son, he gave a victim's impact statement in hopes that the judge would give the maximum sentence allowed. It didn't turn out that way. All that silly simple bitch of a judge did was what amounted to a slap on the wrist: 7 years' incarceration eligible for parole in 3 years. The defendants each had extensive prior criminal records and even though two witnesses came forward at the time, because the officer on the scene neglected to verify that the search warrant was accurate, all evidence collected linking them to the shooting was thrown out and the charges were lowered to felon in possession of a firearm for both defendants. They then pleaded out to the agreed upon terms. Justice served. Justice?! What about us the parents of the victim?!

"Mr. Spencer, we're ready to get started."

State your name, DOB and address for the record please.

"Eric Marcus Spencer; April 10, 1980; 7518 Lavender St Houston, TX 77026."

When did you become a father?

"March 08, 1999"

Are you aware of the events that took place January 25, 2004?

"Somewhat."

Would you please give us your version of the events that took place that day?

"My son was murdered in a drive-by shooting"

Were you happy to be a father?

"Absolutely"

Why didn't you sign your son's birth certificate?

"I wasn't there when he was born"

Why weren't you present for the birth?

"His mother didn't call me until after he was born"

Do you know why that is so?

Eric glared at Victoria before responding

"No"

Was there any uncertainty in regard to paternity?

"What the fu-" Eric released a harsh breath, adjusted himself in the seat, shook his head and answered seething

"No, there wasn't any damn uncertainty in regard to paternity. Colin is... was my only son"

I understand Mr. Spencer. Let's move on.

What plans, if any, do you have for this amount of money you're pursuing?

"None."

Are you in serious debt?

"No."

Are you addicted to any illegal drugs?

"No."

Do you have a history of illegal drug use?

"No."

Do you have any other children?

"No."

Do you plan to have any more children?

"...No."

Are you acquainted with any of the defendants in this case?

"Man, Hel- No"

Eric tried to answer the questions, without yelling, to the best of his ability for the most part. He

felt some of the questions were completely outlandish and ridiculous, still, it was nothing compared to listening to the answers that Victoria gave. As he watched her answer her own set of questions, Eric thought he would die right there in that room.

“State your name, DOB and address for the record please.”

“Victoria Simone Gafford; May 27, 1982; 7518 Lavender street Houston, TX77026”

When did you become a mother?

“The day I learned I was pregnant.”

Were you happy to be a mother?

“Absolutely.”

What was your son’s name?

“Colin Sean Spencer.”

Are you aware of the events that took place January 25, 2004?

“Yes.”

Will you please recall, in as much detail as possible, your knowledge of the days before, during and after that date?

"What do the days before have to do with any of this?"

Glen Patterson objected on Victoria's behalf on the basis of relevance. The mediator asked the opposing counsel to explain the purpose of the question. We need to establish the mother's pattern of behavior

The mediator looked at Victoria and stated, "Please answer the question."

With a heavy sigh Victoria started, “On the day before my son died, I was supposed to go on a date, but canceled at the last minute because Colin didn’t want me to go. The following day I woke up late, so I was rushing to get dressed for work or church rather. After I finished getting Colin dressed, I sat him on the sofa next to my dad so that I could get dressed. After I was done, I went to get Colin and saw that my dad had allowed him to make a mess with his finger paint set, so I decided to leave him there while I went to church. My mom had already left me behind because I was late, so I decided to have my dad drop me off since my own car was blocked in. When we arrived at the church, I went to hug, and kiss Colin goodbye and he went bananas. He started screaming and crying to stay with me, but his clothes were so messed up that I didn’t want to take him inside looking like that. So, I went inside and watched my dad drive away with Colin utterly upset. A short time later, I received a call on the church phone from my neighbor telling me to

hurry home because there was an ambulance in front of my mother's home. My mother and I raced home and upon reaching the house I got out of the car and found my brother in the back of the ambulance. As I tried to enter the house, a detective blocked me from entering and then I saw the EMT's exiting the house with a small body completely covered. Then I passed out. When I regained consciousness, I awoke to my mother frantically trying to get in touch with Eric, Colin's father. He finally answered and met us at the hospital. Eric and I then had to sign paperwork in order to remove our son from life support. We stayed for a while after that, and then went our separate ways. The following morning, HPD homicide detectives rang the doorbell and requested to speak to me. I was informed that after dropping me off at church, my father, brother and son were standing in the front yard, when suddenly a car came careening down the street. As the car approached our home, the occupants started shooting. My father fell to the ground and my brother grabbed my son and was struck in his arm as he tried to get into the house. The defendants then drove away from the scene. My brother didn't realize that the bullet had exited his arm and went into Colin's head until long after the shooting stopped. The detectives then informed me that both the driver and the vehicle had been identified and were in the process of being located. As we were talking the doorbell rang again, it was a CPS representative; there to do a welfare check on any other children that I possibly had, a legal requirement in the death of any child apparently. I informed the rep that I didn't have any other children, nor did any children live in the house before promptly slamming the door in her face. That is my recollection of events in that time frame.

Do you plan to have any more children?

"No, I do not."

Are you, or were you acquainted with the defendant prior to this event?

"No."

Why are you requesting this amount of money?

"Because there's no such thing as an infinite amount."

What plans, if any, do you have for this amount of money?

"Whatever comes to my mind."

Are you in serious debt?

"No."

Are you addicted to illegal drugs?

"No."

Do you have a history of illegal drug use?

“No.”

After they were done with their probing question and answer session, the insurance company’s attorneys left the room, retreating to another one down the hall. For the next three hours notes would pass back and forth between the two rooms in an effort to determine just how much farther the proceedings would go. Finally, in the last 15 minutes of the reserved time period left for mediation, the insurance company made their final offer: \$1.3 million dollars.

Mr. Patterson finally showed me the document that had been passed back and forth for the last three hours. Now, the ball was in my court to either accept with conditions or reject it completely and go to trial.

“What happens if we go to trial?”

“You could possibly get more money; however, the process would take longer, and you would have to repeat this entire process all over again, only in front of a judge and jury.”

“What happens if I accept this offer?”

“You the parents would sign a nondisclosure agreement as well as an agreement that this would end any future lawsuits or litigation for any and all reasons. My office would receive a check on your behalf in about 30-90 days. Shortly thereafter your checks will be released to you upon verification of a valid bank account. And that would be the end of this process.”

I shook my head. This is what it all came down to, putting a price tag on a priceless part of myself. Reluctantly I decided...

“I’ll accept the offer.”

I instantly felt like I had just sold my soul by putting a dollar sign on the life of my precious baby boy.

Chapter Four

I don't know why I am speeding down Highway 288. Club Visions wasn't going anywhere, and I hated arriving at the club before midnight. Reaching for my Nextel, I called Stacie to let her know I was almost at her house. Hanging up the phone I quickly opened the visor mirror to scan my make-up and refresh my MAC lip glass. Flipping the visor back up I turned my signal light on to exit before being distracted by a man in a Chevrolet Avalanche waving his phone at me. As I lowered my tinted window to see what he wanted the driver started pointing at the exit, so I assumed he wanted to get over in front of me. Lucky for him I was in a great mood, so I obliged him, watching as he navigated his truck in front of mine and towards the light at Old Spanish Trail. Once I reached the OST light, I turned into the gas station to fill up, paying no mind as the same Avalanche pulled up beside me while I finished pumping my gas. Now it was his turn to lower his window, allowing me to make contact with the most intense set of warm, darkly seductive eyes that I had ever seen.

“Good evening, Beautiful”

“Good evening.”

“You look amazing, where are you headed tonight?” His eyes roamed from the top of my head and briefly down to the red, white and black silk Jimmy Choo heels I had on.

“Out,” I responded.

His smile disarmed me. I'd never met a man with such a beautiful smile, his teeth sparkling white and straight. Beaming wholeheartedly, I couldn't help but return the smile that eased onto my face.

“So... you're not as mean as you're trying so hard to be right now. I'd love to take you out; can I have your phone number?”

“I tell you what, you can give me yours and if I find some free time, I'll call you.”

He laughed, “Ok. I look forward to hearing from you, and my name is Dominic, since you didn't ask.”

I just smiled. I had no intention of ever calling him, but it was fun just going through the motions

again. The greeting experience was a warm welcome after shutting myself off from the world for what had been a tumultuous entire year.

I got back in my car and turned back onto OST to go pick up Stacie. Once she was in the car we peeled off into the night as I put my current favorite CD, Urban Legend, on.

“I don’t know why you even bother to go out Vee, it’s not like you’re going to give any man that tries to talk to you the time of day.”

“I didn’t realize that it was a requirement to give a guy my number just because he buys a drink or tells me that I’m cute.”

Stacie laughed, “No, but you should at least get one phone number and talk to somebody. Go on one date. It’s ok to get back into the dating scene now.”

“For your information, I just acquired a gentleman’s phone number at the gas station before I picked you up... na na na boo boo” I teased, sticking my tongue out at her for an added effect.

Laughing, “It doesn’t matter since we both know you’re not going to call him.” Stacie jokingly rolled her eyes and turned the music back up.

The girl’s night out with Stacie was just what I needed, but in the weeks that followed I buried myself in work. Up until Colin’s death I’d always maintained certain boundaries regarding my musical gift, only accepting church bookings with exceptions made for funerals and weddings. But lately I’ve been taking whatever came my way, as long as it included a check or cash payment. Today I was lending my gift to a local music producer named Key Tones. Prior to today I’d never heard of him, which went without saying because he wasn’t a part of the church circuit, but he’d been referred by a mutual friend that just didn’t have the heart to tell Key Tones that he didn’t have the creativity needed to succeed as a producer. I didn’t care about his creativity, or lack of. Nor did I care about how he chose to waste his time or money. All I cared about was the fact that he’d paid for an entire day of work - in cash - requesting only an hour of my time in return. The easiest money I had ever made, it was something I could see myself doing long-term. True to his word, roughly an hour later I was already walking out of the building after laying the tracks. Done for the day, I called Stacie - who’d grown to become my best friend - to see if she was free for lunch. To my great disappointment she wasn’t, anxiety rising as I scrambled to find something to fill my time. I hadn’t returned to a point emotionally or mentally, where I could be alone for an extended period of time. I was trying, but it was still a process. Now I had three hours before my mother would be home from work and no one else to call. Then I remembered the man I met at the gas

station. I couldn't remember his name, but I had time, spending the next 20 minutes doing a line by line search through the contact list in my phone for a name I did not recognize. Finally, I came across a weird name - crossing my fingers I pressed the call button and hoped for the best. I also made a mental note to do some much-needed deletions later that day.

"Hello beautiful."

"Do you call every woman you talk to, beautiful?"

"No."

"Then how do you know I'm beautiful?"

"I remember your face."

"Do you know who you're speaking with?"

"Yes."

"Oh, really?"

"Absolutely."

"What's my name?"

"You didn't tell me your name."

"So how do you know who you're talking to?"

"Your number isn't saved in my phone so it can't be anyone else" the voice answered matter of factly, prompting me to laugh.

"My name is Vee" I said with a smile

"What are your plans for today; would you allow me the pleasure of seeing you again?"

I paused, "Sure, where would you like to meet?"

"Let's meet at the Pappadeaux's on 610."

"Ok, what's a good time for you?"

"1:30."

"I'll be there, promptly at that time."

As always, I arrived on time, pulling into a parking spot I called Dominic to see where he was.

"Hey Beautiful"

"Are you here?"

"I'm 5 minutes away."

"So, you'll be here at 1:35p?"

"Yes, absolutely"

“Ok, if you’re not, I’m leaving.”

Dominic laughed, amused by Victoria’s insistence on punctuality.

I meant what I said. After waiting another five minutes he still hadn’t arrived, so I left the restaurant and headed home. He had no clue who he was dealing with. By 1:45pm my phone was ringing, and I had a pretty good idea of who it was. I chuckled as Dominic’s name continued to light up on the screen. Surprising myself, I answered the call.

“Hello.”

“Where are you, beautiful?”

“In my car.”

“Come inside, I’m walking in.”

“I left at 1:35”

Vee could hear the smile in his tone as he asked, “You left?”

“Yes.”

“Ok beautiful, maybe some other time then.”

“Yeah, maybe.”