

NOVEL

**BORN
IN THE
BLACK
AND
BLUE**

ANGELIA WILLIAMS

FROM: ABUSE

TO: ANOINTED

From: Abused

To: Anointed

Dear Anointed,

I was sent from generations and generations of curses in your family to destroy your spirit, to kill you, and steal everything, your service, praise, and worship. But you choose to serve, believe, praise, and worship your creator. Now, by faith, you have a protective mansion around you. I can only bluff you with false evidence appearing real – fear. As long as you keep the faith, I am powerless in your life and everyone you love. I have controlled and ruined your family since the beginning of time. How dare you put me under your feet, get thee behind you, and totally end all generational curses forever? I will always hate you and seek the opportunity to destroy you if your faith stops completely. If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, I am dead in your life.

Your enemy,

Abused

A MAMA'S HEARTACHE

Does it matter that my heart is broken today?
You left me with three children and all the bills to pay.
Walking around bragging about being a man,
The only proof you have is in your pants.
When a young lady walks by in a skirt,
That's all it takes for you to flirt.
While you are lusting after her,
Remember, she's the same age as your daughter.
Scheming, scamming, and planning who you are going to rob,
My brother, have you ever heard of a job?
Instead of buying setups at the bars, lift your head towards the stars.
Stop showing off those Air Jordan shoes, get some education, and go to school.
I'm not trying to be all up in your mix, but ignorance is not bliss.
I go to work every day because I have babies to feed.
I go home every day to teach them to read.
I have to look in my babies' eyes and listen to their cries.
Is my daddy coming home? Mama, it's my fault he left us alone.
Is my daddy thinking of me today?
All I can say is that God will make a way.

BY ANGELIA WILLIAMS

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This memoir was born from moments of silence and struggle, but also from the voices that carried me when I could not carry myself. Writing this memoir has been both a reckoning and a release. I could not have walked this path alone.

To my family: thank you for teaching me that love is not always loud, but often found in the quiet gestures that sustain us. Your presence, even in absence, shaped the contours of these pages. To my mother, who taught me resilience in the face of silence, and to my siblings, who reminded me that laughter can survive even in the hardest places — thank you for being the roots that held me steady.

To my mentors and teachers: your belief in my words gave me the courage to speak truths I once thought unspeakable. You reminded me that stories matter, even when they tremble. Your belief in my voice carried me through the moments I doubted myself. I owe you a debt of gratitude. Your guidance shaped not only these pages but the person I have become.

To the friends who listened without judgment, who held space for both my vulnerability and my resilience — I am grateful beyond measure.

To my pastor, I offer my deepest gratitude. Your guidance was more than sermons on Sundays — it was a steady light through the shadows of my journey. You reminded me that faith is not only found in scripture, but in the daily act of resilience, in choosing hope when despair felt easier. Your words gave me the courage to speak my truth, even when silence seemed safer. Your presence reminded me that healing is possible, that brokenness can be met with compassion, and that stories, when shared, can become bridges. This memoir carries your influence on every page. Thank you for believing in my voice, for listening when I doubted myself, and for teaching me that grace is not something earned, but something given.

To the reader: thank you for walking with me through these memories. Memoir is an act of trust, and I offer these stories with the hope that they remind us all of the strength found in honesty, and the healing found in being heard.

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Prologue

Have you heard the saying, “Born with a silver spoon in your mouth?” I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth, and the spoon part was broken off, leaving the handle. I had to upgrade my spoon. Do you feel the need for an upgrade in life? We upgrade our phones, supersize our fries – it's time to add the super to our lives. Every superhero or shero has to find a place for transformation. Discover your place of transformation and how to transform. Move from a Negative position to a Zero position in your life, then advance to a positive one.

Writing this book is a part of a healing and forgiving process for me. My prayers are to replace despair and depression with hope and prosperity. I pray that it blesses you; that's a double blessing. I plan to sharpen my internal tenacity to bring out the best in myself and others. This is a true story based on the experiences of many people. The names have been changed to protect the innocent. This story is based on true personal experiences from many people. This is a self-journey for a breakthrough and breakout. You must face yourself in honesty and truth. Please, be truthful with yourself. I hope my journey will encourage you to embrace yours. Your participation is required. Walk with me as I tell my story, and you write yours at your pace. The Key is to learn something new about yourself. Please join me on a self-journey that we can only do for ourselves. Search your heart, mind, body, and soul. Your first challenge question is: What's your first memory? Why do you think you were born?

Chapter 1

Welcome to the world – not, Negative: You are not welcome here

Five years is enough time to develop a personality and form an opinion. The first five years in life are your first experiences. Unconsciously, we have developed beliefs and behaviors that influence our judgment of life.

Safely embedded in my mother's womb is where I wanted to stay. I could hear a great deal of confusion, fighting, and arguing in the outer world. I didn't understand why suddenly I was being forced out of my comfortable, all-sufficient apartment.

When I was born, my mom was so disappointed because she wanted a son. She already had four beautiful daughters. She said I was the saddest baby she had ever seen. I was born with a heart for my mother. She didn't realize I felt what she felt. She had to work really hard to make me smile. My parents really didn't want another child. My father always introduced me as "the last pea in the shell. We didn't want her, but we had to have her. It was a joke to the family. It was very embarrassing for me. That comment was a constant reminder that I was not wanted. My siblings started saying it too. I am the only one who carries the mark of the beast, my father. I have a clef in my chin, just like my father. The rest of the family had my mother's mark, a tiny pin-sized hole on the inner ear lobe.

The First Vision

The first memory I can recall is not soft. Not gentle. It isn't the image of a mother's embrace or a lullaby rocking me to sleep. It is violence. It is the sound of bones cracking against concrete. The first vision etched in me like a scar, is me sitting in my little *punkin seat. It was a bright orange plastic seat with straps snug against my chest and my little legs dangling free. The kind of seat you put a baby in when you need both hands. My legs were too short to touch the floor, my voice too small to be heard, but my eyes—my eyes took everything in.

My daddy had my mama by her hair; his fist tangled in those strands like he was gripping rope. He yanked her down, and I watched her body collapse. Her head hit the concrete floor—hard. The sound still echoes somewhere in me. A dull, sharp crack that made me cry before I even understood why. I can hear the thud, the sound that split me open before I even had the words to describe it. My mama's cry. My own cry.

I cried, but I couldn't move. My seat held me hostage, my body too weak to fight for her, my voice too small to stop him. I can still feel the helplessness—the way it sat on my chest like a weight pressing down, stealing my breath.

I was just a newborn baby, but my spirit knew. Something in me already knew. I couldn't move, couldn't reach her, couldn't stop him. I could only cry, my whole body shaking, my chest tightening with a grief too heavy for my size. I didn't have the language for abuse, for violence, for broken love. But I knew. I knew what I was seeing was wrong. I knew it was unacceptable. And that knowing—it grew inside me like a fire. A fire that would burn every time I saw injustice, every time I felt powerless. That's the thing about a child's first vision of violence: it doesn't just scar, it imprints. It becomes a lens. It teaches you something you should never have to learn so young. I didn't know the word *abuse*, but I knew *wrong*.

That day in the *punkin seat, with my tears wetting my cheeks, was the day I made my first vow to myself. And in that moment—Lord, I remember it like yesterday—I balled up my tiny fist—my whole body shaking with fear—, and I crossed my heart. “When I get big,” I whispered to God in my spirit, “nobody will treat me like that.”

That vow wasn't just words. It was fire. A fire that burned through every moment I spent watching my mama's pain, through every scream that split the night, through every silence that followed too closely behind. It was the seed of my survival.

I didn't know it then, but that promise I made in my *punkin seat would shape everything. My rage, my fight, my hunger to be seen. To be respected. To never, ever allow my body or my spirit to be a place for someone else's violence.

Because when the first vision you remember is your mother's head meeting concrete, you grow up fast. You learn to read the room. You learn to protect yourself before you even know the word *protection*. I didn't understand marriage. I didn't understand manhood, womanhood, or the weight of love turned violent. But I understood dignity. Something inside me, even as a baby, knew my mama deserved better. I knew I deserved better.

After the sound, after the crack of my mama's head against the floor, everything turned blurry. Not because I couldn't see, but because tears filled my eyes so heavily, my vision was distorted.

I remember her trying to get up. Slow. Shaking. Like her body wasn't listening to her mind. My daddy's voice cut sharply through the air, low and angry, words I didn't yet understand but knew were meant to break her down. His rage filled the apartment until it pressed against the walls, thick and suffocating.

And me—I wailed. I screamed from my *punkin seat like my cries could stop him, like maybe the sound of his baby hurting would make him stop hurting her. But it didn't. My cries didn't change anything.

I can still see my mama's eyes. Wet. Distant. She looked at me—just for a second—and it was like she wanted to say *I'm okay, baby*. But she wasn't. Even as a baby, I knew that look wasn't the truth. It was survival.

Eventually, he let go. Just like that. The storm ended as quickly as it started. He walked away, left the room, left her lying there, bleeding. That was how it was sometimes—violence, then silence. A silence so deep it made your ears ring.

I stayed in my seat, strapped in, my body trembling. I wanted to go to her, to touch her face, to tell her I loved her. But I was trapped. My little arms could only reach the air. My fists, still balled tight, could only hold a promise I was too young to speak out loud.

I could feel it—the shame, the weight she carried. The way she tried to make herself small. The way she kept her eyes lowered, like looking up was too much.

That night didn't end with the police. No neighbors came knocking. Nobody came to save us. It ended the way nights like that often did—in silence, in an apartment holding secrets, in the unspoken agreement that tomorrow we'd wake up and act like nothing had happened.

But I remembered.

My tiny fists remembered.

My baby heart remembered.

My spirit—already heavy, already learning—remembered.

I thought my father was going to kill all of us.

And from that moment on, I carried that vow like a shield: *When I get big, no one will ever treat me like that.*

That was the beginning of me.

Black and Blue Bruises

Now, my mother has two black, and blue eyes.

I remember my mother standing in front of the bathroom mirror with two black eyes. She was dabbing makeup onto her skin, pressing powder into her bruises, sliding sunglasses over her face, covering pain, covering the truth.

She had to work two jobs, back-to-back, to keep us afloat. My father didn't work. My father didn't carry the weight of bills or food on the table. He carried his rage. He carried his cruelty. And because my mother worked, she left me with him. Her baby. Alone with him.

*Colloquial: pumpkin footnote at the bottom of the page

The door would close behind her, and his footsteps would cross the room. He'd come to me, pull the bottle from my mouth, and replace it with his own body. I was just a baby, too young to even speak—but I knew. I knew something was wrong. I thought it was my bottle, but it wasn't. It was him.

My virginity was stolen from me before I even had a chance to know what innocence was. Before I had a choice. Before I could crawl, before I could speak.

My parents were supposed to protect me. That's what parents are supposed to do—stand guard, shield, nurture. Instead, I was left exposed. Unwanted. Unloved. I hated what was happening. I hated them. The very people who brought me into this world became the ones who crushed my spirit before it had a chance to grow.

Even as a newborn baby, I understood. My body shook with anger. I didn't have words for it yet. Shame and heartbreak lived in me before I had teeth. But I knew God. My mother carried me to church in her womb, and I believe His name was whispered into my soul before I was born. That's how I knew it was wrong. That's how I knew what was happening wasn't love, wasn't protection, wasn't family.

The home was supposed to be a place of safety. But for me, it was the beginning of war.

The Bottle

I remember being so small, the bottle still warm in my hand, a lifeline I wasn't ready to let go of. It wasn't just milk—it was silence, it was sweetness, it was mine. Not because I was a baby, but because the world around me felt so jagged, and that bottle was the only softness I could hold. It was mine. My escape. The slow pull of milk was a lullaby I could give myself, one that drowned out the shouting in the other room.

Then he came in. My father. His footsteps were heavy, uneven, always announcing themselves before he did. I gripped the bottle tighter. Maybe if I stayed still, he wouldn't notice. Maybe, he'd pass me by.

But he didn't.

He stopped in front of me, his shadow swallowing the light from the window. His hand shot out quickly, snatching the bottle like it was contraband. He held it up, studied it, then looked down at me with a disgust that stung hotter than any belt.

"Big girls don't need bottles," he said.

And just like that, it was gone. My comfort. My piece of quiet. The only thing that had been mine in a house where everything—my breath, my body, my will—belonged to someone else. He plucked the bottle from me like it was a crime to need comfort, like it was weakness leaking out through the nipple.

What he gave me instead wasn't love. It wasn't guidance. It was him. His presence in every corner, his rules carved into the air. That was his way of making himself the center of every need I had. If I was hungry, I had to wait on his mood. If I was tired, I had to quiet my body until the house allowed rest. Even my tears were monitored—how long they fell, how loud they sounded, when they had to stop.

He had replaced my bottle with himself, his control standing in where comfort used to live.

That was the first time I understood the rules of that house: nothing belonged to me, not even my peace.

And that's when the truth landed heavy in my little chest: in this house, I was on my own.

That moment with the bottle became the blueprint. The lesson carved into me early: whatever comfort I found, whatever scraps of safety I clutched, would be taken. If it wasn't my bottle, it was my voice. If it wasn't my voice, it was my body. If it wasn't my body, it was my hope.

The bottle was just the beginning. It was the first betrayal, the first theft, the first reminder that nothing soft could last in a house ruled by fists and silence. But it also planted something else, something they didn't see—Resolution.

The hole in the wall

Dad walked everywhere because he didn't have a car. He carried me with him. Daddy pulled me through a hole in a brick wall. The yard was covered with trash. The house looked haunted, abandoned. Inside, a woman with no front teeth lay on a bed. The bed was taller than me. I was wearing a pamper. I remember screaming and kicking all the way to prevent getting into the bed. My dad pulled me into bed anyway. I remember the woman touching me. My father touched me. I hated her and my father. There was a lot of drinking, drugging, and sexual activity throughout the house. I didn't understand why we were there. We lived in the projects, but our home was clean. My Mother was prettier than this woman. Mom kept me groomed and provided for. I didn't need to be in a hole in the wall. Daily, she left me with Dad. Daily, we would go to the hole-in-the-wall. I was raw like an open sore before the scab formed, and every touch was painful. I thought this place was hell. At least what I thought hell to be. Everything about the place was negative to me. Anger burned like fire in my heart.

My father and his friends stood on the street corner, drank alcohol, lusted, and shouted lustful words to the women. This type of behavior continued until I attended pre-school at 4 years old. By the time I was old enough to talk and tell, I was used to it, even though I hated it. How could I say such a thing? Who would believe me? The private

part of me was destroyed. Being so ashamed and embarrassed kept me quiet. I am daughter #5. When my mom and sisters came home, my father would start a disturbance of some kind with them. I believe my mother knew everything that was going on. She would say, "What goes on in this house stays in this house". NEGATIVE, this is unacceptable behavior. I grew angry, rebellious, and negative. I hated everything, including myself. I was ashamed. From birth, I knew to cry out to the Lord. I heard what was said at church. It seemed strange to hear the teachings and not practice them. The environment I was surrounded by, would kill you if you showed any kindness or weakness. At home, church, and especially at school constant fighting. This world appeared so evil, and I was evil too. Everything was negative.

Romancing the purse

Mama New was my grandmother on my mother's side. Somehow, I knew her, though I was less than a year old. I remember the cadence of voices around me—adults whispering about death, about a funeral, about the Windyplace. We were going to Mama New's house. They called her *deaf and dumb*. That's what the world said, because the world can be cruel and careless with names. But she was not dumb. Not even close. Her silence was never emptiness. It was discipline. It was a focus. It was the way her eyes carried the weight of a thousand conversations.

I remember standing outside her apartment the first time, finger over the doorbell, and the thought hit me like a whisper: *How is she going to hear me?* My own ignorance is showing itself. I pressed the button anyway.

And then—light. A sudden burst, sharp and clear, spilling out from under the door. That was her doorbell. That was how the world came calling, not with sound, but with light.

A moment later, she opened the door. She smiled with her whole face. Her hands moved quickly, her body alive with words my ears could never catch. She welcomed me, and somehow, I understood: *I see you. Come in.*

Deaf to the Light

She didn't need a voice to be heard. She didn't need ears to listen. She had a language that demanded you slow down, come closer, pay attention.

I watched her that day, the way her hands moved like poetry, the way her eyes carried whole conversations without a single sound. Her world was quieter, yes, but it was also sharper, more deliberate. Every gesture had weight. Every pause had meaning.

I thought to myself—maybe she isn't the one missing anything. Maybe it's the rest of us, rushing through life, deaf to the light.

Because what she taught me was this: silence is not absence. Silence is presence. It is the space where truth gathers, where you can see what's been overlooked, where you can feel what's been ignored.

I grew up believing that to be heard, you had to speak louder, fight harder, push your way into the room. But she showed me another way. She showed me that listening is its own kind of power. That attention is its own kind of love.

Her language—unspoken, unhurried—was a mirror. It forced me to confront my own noise, my own rushing, my own blindness. And in that mirror, I saw the truth: the world doesn't always need more sound. Sometimes it needs more stillness.

That day stayed with me. It reminded me that the people we call “different” are often the ones carrying the wisdom we've lost. And it made me vow—when the world grows too loud, when my own voice strains to be heard—I will remember her. I will remember to slow down. To look closer. To pay attention.

Because the light is always there. The question is whether we're willing to see it.

The room was crowded, alive with voices and laughter, bodies pressed close, the air heavy with food and perfume. We greeted everyone. There were so many people. After dinner, Mama handed me a purse from Mama New. She told me to say thank you. But neither one of us could speak. How would I say thank you?

I crawled over the ottoman, which to me was a mountain, climbing past people's legs and their own purses to reach her. When I finally stood before Mama New, I held the purse up like an offering. My fingers traced every inch of it—black patent vinyl, pink lining, a snap-close top. I didn't know it then, but I was romancing the purse, learning its language, making it mine.

When I opened it to show her the lining, she dropped a handful of coins inside. The sound was sharp, deliberate, like a blessing. I thought, *I should show everyone in the room my purse*. And I did. One by one, they dropped coins in. By the end of the night, I had a purse full of money.

That night, I slept with the purse beside me. Mama could not take it away. I held it tight, believing I had discovered the secret to life. I thought, *I will smile, and people will give me money for the rest of my life*. That was my plan. That was my dream.

But life taught me otherwise. Smiles don't always bring coins. Smiles don't always bring kindness. Sometimes they bring silence. Sometimes they bring doors slammed shut.

Still, that purse was my first lesson in power. It showed me that attention could be currency, that presence could be rewarded. It taught me that even a child could command a room—not with words, but with wonder.

Years later, when the world demanded I fight harder, speak louder, prove myself again and again, I remembered that purse. I remembered the way coins fell into it, the way people responded to my joy. And I understood: survival is not just about money. It's about finding the thing you can hold onto, the thing no one can take from you.

For me, it was that purse. For me, it was the belief that even in silence, I could be seen.

Roly Poly Down the Stairs

My brother was older, wild in the way boys are when no one has the time or strength to reel them in. He found an old black inner tube, heavy and thick, still reeking of the tire it used to be. He looked at me with that mischievous grin—the kind that lets you know you're about to be the entertainment, not the audience.

“Get in,” he said. I said “NO”.

I was too young to argue. Maybe one or two, barely enough words to form sentences, but old enough to understand that saying no never stopped anything. I felt his hand on my head, and he shoved me inside that tube. The rubber swallowed my little body, pressing in on all sides.

And then he rolled me.

Down the steps.

The world turned into a blur—cement, metal, cement, metal. The clanging of rubber against walls and steps echoed so loud I thought the whole building must've heard me. My body slammed against the sides, bouncing around like a rag doll. The drop in my stomach was endless, like I'd fallen into some hole where no one cared if I climbed back out. I screamed, but the sound stayed trapped inside the rubber, ricocheting back into my own ears.

When the tube finally landed at the bottom, it spit me out on the filthy floor. Dizzy, scraped, tears streaking my face, I stumbled back up the stairs on shaky legs. I was a baby with the weight of survival already pressing down on my chest.

I found Mama in the apartment, busy in the way mothers in the projects are—always tired, always working at something, or just trying to rest between battles. I tugged at her dress, words tumbling out of my mouth, half baby talk, half plea for someone to see me.

“Mommy... he... he rolled me...” I cried. My chest was heavy with the need to be saved.

She looked at me, her face flat, eyes somewhere far away. “Yeah, yeah,” she said, her voice carrying no urgency, but a little sympathy.

That was it.

No questions. No hug. No discipline for my brother. She turned back to whatever she was doing, and I was left standing there, small and invisible.

Maybe she didn't understand me—I could barely talk. Maybe she was too worn-out to care. Or maybe, in a place where survival was the only priority, a child's tears didn't count as an emergency.

Yet another time, I learned what it meant to cry out and not be heard. To carry pain too big for words and too small for anyone else to notice. My voice was trying to break through, but the world taught me early: sometimes your cries just echo in the hallway, unanswered, until you learn to hold them in.

Rotten Teeth

It was winter, the kind of winter that swallowed whole streets and dared you to keep moving. My mother and I had to catch the bus, a long ride that rattled my little body with every turn. When we finally stepped down onto the street, the world was nothing but white. Snow towered higher than me, walls of it, endless, stretching as far as I could see.

For a moment, I stood frozen, my breath coming out in little clouds, wondering how on earth I would ever make it through.

I was small—so small—and when we stepped off that bus, all I could see was snow. Mountains of it, piled up on both sides of the street. It was taller than me, whiter than anything I'd ever seen, stretching out like a wall I couldn't climb. For a moment, I just stood there, frozen, wondering how we'd ever make it through.

Then came my mother's arms, swooping down like an eagle. Strong, sure, certain. She picked me up as if I weighed nothing at all. And with her head bent against the wind, she trampled through the snow, every step sinking deep but never stopping. She carried me, her breath ragged, her coat smelling of cold air and determination, until the dentist's office appeared before us like some gray, looming salvation.

Inside, it wasn't warm. It wasn't kind. Just the cold chair swallowing me up, the hiss of the gas, and the sharp knowing of what was coming: they would pull every single one of my baby teeth that day.

I was just a little girl, maybe two, maybe three, and my teeth were already rotten. All of them. My mother knew it—she had false teeth of her own—and she recognized the signs. Back then, there wasn't the sleek, humming technology of today. No pretty colors, no laughing gas masks shaped like a balloon. There was just one thing: the gas.

They laid me back in that cold chair, my tiny body swallowed up by it. The mask came down, the hiss in my ears, and the world tilted away from me. I remember slipping under, the edges of everything soft and blurred, like a dream I didn't want to have.

That's how I lost my first teeth—every single one—before I even knew what it was like to keep them.

When I woke from the gas, I opened my eyes to terror: a big, hairy hand was inside my mouth. Fingers pulling, stretching, claiming my little body as if it were theirs. I thrashed, kicked, screamed with everything I had inside me. My mother wasn't there to catch me. It was just me and the fear.

Mom had false teeth as long as I can remember. She recognized my baby teeth were rotten and had the dentist pull them all out at once. Only gas was used to put me to sleep. I can still see the dentist's huge, hairy arm dangling from my mouth. I'm trying to pull his arm out of my mouth while screaming bloody murder. Mom said she could hear me screaming all the way in the lobby. She had to get my teeth fixed.

The dentist leaned in, his voice calm, too calm. "Be cool, baby." That's what he said, as if I was supposed to know how to be cool when my mouth was being emptied. Then came the hiss again, more gas pressing down on me, stealing my fight, stealing my breath, until all I could see was black.

That was the day I learned what it meant to be powerless, and what it meant to survive anyway.

My mother had false teeth. I don't remember when she told me, but I remember the way she'd take them out at night, her gums collapsing in on themselves, her face suddenly older, softer, almost unrecognizable. She'd tap the teeth against a glass of water, set them down, and say, "*Don't end up like me.*"

I remember being small in that big chair, my legs not even dangling—they were too short to reach. The mask pressed over my face, the rubbery smell filling my nose. My heart pounded, but I screamed at the top of my lungs and tried to remove the dentist's big, hairy hand from my mouth. Somewhere deep down I knew this was what had to be done. The world fuzzed at the edges, and then it was gone.

When I woke, there were gaps where my teeth used to be. My mouth felt foreign, sore, like something had been stolen from me. My mother hovered, her false teeth clicking as she worried her tongue across them. She looked at me and shook her head like she had failed me. But the truth was, it wasn't failure—it was inheritance.

Bad teeth ran through us like a curse. She wore hers in a glass. I wore mine in a memory, a story of being too young to remember yet old enough to carry the pain.

That was my introduction to pain and vanity, to shame and survival. Before I even started school, I knew what it felt like to lose part of yourself, to wake up changed.

I knew, even then, my mother and I were bound by more than blood, we were bound by teeth.

That was the day my teeth were taken. That was the day I learned what it felt like to be powerless, and yet to fight anyway.

When I woke the next morning, my mouth felt like an open wound. My gums were raw, tender, and so sensitive that I could barely sip water. No teeth to bite, no teeth to chew, just the throb of emptiness where something had once been.

My mother stood over me, her eyes sharp, her voice low with that kind of authority you didn't question. "No sugar. No candy. No gum." It wasn't a suggestion. It was a command, a lifelong commitment sealed in that moment.

I was too young to understand addiction, too young to know about the pull of sweetness, but I knew about pain. My sore gums taught me what sugar could do, what it had already done. Every ache in my mouth was a warning, every pulse of soreness a reminder of what had been taken from me.

I listened. I obeyed. Candy was no longer for me. Gum was no longer for me. Sugar was the enemy, and my empty mouth was the proof.

That was the bargain my childhood made: no teeth, no sweets, and a lifetime of remembering the day they were all taken.

Years passed. I grew, I healed, and new teeth came in—straight, white, strong. By the time I reached my twenties, I had a smile that made people pause. Strangers would tell me how beautiful my teeth were, not knowing the price I'd paid for them.

One day, I found myself back in a dentist's chair. Older now, grown, no longer that little girl who had kicked and screamed under the weight of gas and hairy hands. This time, I was calm. This time, I was in control.

The dentist examined me and nodded, impressed. My teeth were healthy, solid. I could feel the pride swell in me, but also something else—an understanding I didn't have as a child.

When it was over, I stood, reached out my hand, and shook his. My voice was steady when I said, "Thank you."

It wasn't just gratitude for the teeth themselves—it was for the lesson, for the pain that had taught me discipline, for the strength it took to endure and come out the other side with something beautiful to show for it.

That was the full circle: the child who screamed, and the woman who smiled.

Chapter Two: The Projects

They said it was the future. They said it was the answer.

Sixty-three brand new buildings rising out of sixty acres of land. Eleven stories each, three apartments stacked tight on one end, three on the other, and a big double in the middle like it was a prize. Over ten thousand people packed in, families stacked like canned goods on a grocery shelf. They called it an experiment in urban housing. We called it home.

Concrete walls. Concrete floors. Iron guardrails lined every walkway like ribs in a steel cage. The elevator sat in the middle way entrance, but it only stopped on the first, fifth, and tenth floors. You exited on the floor closest to the floor you lived on and walked up or down a couple of flights of stairs. Didn't matter if you were eight months pregnant or carrying two bags of groceries and a screaming toddler—you walked. Those stairs carried stories in their dust.

Bars lined every hallway window. Not decorative, not for show. Bars to keep us in. Bars to remind us what we were: not residents, but prisoners of poverty. Looking out those barred windows, you couldn't help but feel the weight of it—the promise that the world was out there, just out of reach, and somebody had already decided you didn't deserve it. The bars kept us from falling or jumping out of the window.

Still, life beat on inside those walls. Babies cried, mothers cooked, fathers disappeared, and children learned fast what it meant to survive. The hallways smelled of fried chicken, cigarette smoke, Pine-Sol, and piss—all at once. You'd step out your door, and the world would hit you in the face, a whole orchestra of life and struggle.

In the summer, the courtyard filled with kids—jump ropes slapping the pavement, boys tossing footballs too close to parked cars, teenagers leaning against the iron rails pretending to be men. In the winter, the walls closed in tighter. You'd hear more fights, more screams, more silence—the dangerous kind.

They called it an experiment, and we were the lab rats. They built it to see what would happen when you boxed people in with concrete and iron, when you put bars on the only windows that offered light. Chemicals were distributed in the air by airplanes. We could see it and smell it. The smell of the chemicals was enough to choke us. We learned to run inside when this happened. It is in the air. How can we possibly avoid it? Many people became ill after the air fragrance was released. They wanted to see if we'd break.

And maybe we did, in ways you couldn't see. But we also endured. We laughed in those stairwells. We danced at block parties in the summer heat. We would culminate in a

celebration. Blasting boom boxes with the latest tunes. We made something out of nothing. We dreamed, even when dreaming felt like a sin against the concrete walls.

The buildings were supposed to stand tall and proud, but even brand new, they looked tired, like they already knew what was coming—the decay, the crime, the headlines. But for us, those buildings were more than an experiment. They were proof of our survival. Proof that even behind bars, even on concrete floors, even with iron closing us in—we lived.

Living in a place like that was its own kind of rebellion.

We lived in a three-bedroom, one-bath apartment in the projects on the 9th floor. The city is Noplace and the state is Noname. This is where I was born. Noplace, Noname, somewhere in space and time. Six kids stacked on top of one another like laundry nobody ever finished folding. Four big sisters, one big brother, and then me. The baby, the youngest. A dresser drawer was my bed. The one who had to make space where there was no space. The two oldest girls moved out as soon as possible, which made more room in the house, but I forgot, because I was very young.

Our 3-way bunk beds are still one of a kind today. Hollow, Falana, and I shared a room and bunk beds. Falana was on top, I was in the middle, and Hollow was on the bottom bunk that could be rolled underneath to create more space during the day. Falana jumped down onto Hollow's bunk, and of course, I followed. EZ had his own room, and my parents had theirs.

Four older sisters and one older brother completed the family. This is the rank according to age. Genesis and Sunny lived out of town as far as I can remember. They never lived in the same house. Big sister #1 is Genesis. Big sister #2 is Sunny. I don't know them at this point. Big sister #3 is Hollow, eight years old. Big brother fits here, Ezekiel (EZ), 6 years old. Big sister #4 is Falana, 5 years old. Last but not least, me, Trinity. I am daughter #5, child #6. My alcoholic, abusive, unemployed father lived with us. Mom worked in the cafeteria at a school. We were extremely poor. Many times, the leftover lunches Mom brought home from school were our dinner. Mom would clean the rich people's house as a second job on the weekends. Since I had 4 big sisters, a hand-me-down dress was like new to me. I still get excited today, if you give me something that's not brand new, used.

Petals on the Carpet

The first memory I carry of my sister is not in the kitchen of our home, or on the front steps where we played, but in a church filled with perfume, starch, and expectation. It was her wedding day. I was four years old, her flower girl. Too young to understand love, but old enough to know when something was important.

They dressed me in white tights that itched my legs, a frilly dress that made me feel like a doll, and shoes that pinched my toes. On my head sat a bow so stiff it leaned as if it wanted to escape. But what mattered most to me was the basket. A ribbon-wrapped wicker basket lined with lace, filled with rose petals soft as whispers. It was mine—or so I thought.

I clutched it like treasure, imagining the ways I could keep it. I'd fill it with crayons, shiny rocks, maybe even the candy I sometimes received from my siblings. That basket wasn't just a prop to me; it was a possibility.

But just before we walked down the aisle, Mom leaned close and whispered, "*Throw the flowers on the carpet.*"

I froze. My eyes widened. Her words didn't make sense. Throw them? On the ground? In my world, you didn't throw anything on the ground unless you wanted punishment. Mama ran our house with an iron fist. The rules were the Ten Commandments. No food wasted. No trash on the floor. No crumbs left for roaches to come marching in. To litter was to sin. Yet here was Mama herself—telling me to do the unthinkable, permitting me—no, an order—to scatter beauty all over the aisle.

I obeyed, but each handful of petals felt like betrayal. My hand reached into the basket, and with each toss, I looked back, waiting for her to snatch me up and hiss, "*Girl, what are you doing? Pick that up!*" But no scolding came. Instead, the church air shifted. People smiled. Women whispered to each other about how sweet I looked. The petals weren't trash at all. They were decorations. My breaking of the rules was not just tolerated—it was celebrated.

And then my sister appeared.

She stepped into the aisle like a vision. Her dress was white satin, clinging and floating all at once, the veil trailing behind her like it had a mind of its own. She was radiant, though at four I didn't know the word. What I knew was that everyone looked at her, not just with their eyes but with their whole bodies. Heads turned. Shoulders leaned. Breaths caught.

She was no longer just my sister. She was a bride. A woman stepping into a new life, one that had nothing to do with our crowded apartment, our noisy siblings, or Mama's rules. For the first time, I saw her as someone apart from me, someone untouchable. She was dressed like a princess—white lace and satin that seemed too perfect to touch. I didn't yet understand the weight of the moment, but I understood beauty, and she glowed with it.

There I was—four years old, leading her down the aisle, scattering petals I didn't understand, learning my first lesson in contradiction: sometimes even the rules bend for beauty, for ceremony, for love.

Afterward, the church rang with laughter and clapping, and I sat on a pew staring at my empty basket, grieving a little. Not for the wedding, not for the change, but for the basket I could not keep. I didn't yet know how many things in life would be like that—mine for a moment, then gone.

That was my first memory of my sister: glowing in lace, moving forward while I led the way, dropping pieces of beauty I didn't know I was supposed to let go of. A few years later, she visited us with her husband and a new bouncing baby boy. The first one in the family who is younger than me. The first grandson. I really became invisible to my mother then.

Ear Piercing

The living room smelled of summer—sunlight streaming through the half-open blinds, dust motes dancing in the golden shafts, and the faint scent of my mother's lemon-scented cleaner lingering on the floor. Sunny, sister number two, burst in like a whirlwind, dragging our cousin Jade behind her. Their giggles echoed off the walls, bouncing between the old couch and the cracked coffee table.

"Girls need earrings," Sunny announced, her voice sharp and certain. "And we're starting with the youngest."

I froze. My small legs dangled over the edge of the couch cushion, barely touching the carpet. "Me?" My voice trembled, a little squeak in the quiet room.

"Yes, you," Jade said, bouncing on her toes. "You'll thank us later."

From somewhere behind them, a bag appeared. Ice cubes rattled in a small dish, a raw potato lay on the counter, and there it was—the needle, threaded like a tiny, menacing sword. My stomach twisted. I had seen needles at the doctor's office, but never like this.

"Sit," Sunny commanded, guiding me to the floor. My knees buckled. I tried to pull away, but four hands pressed me down. One on each arm, another on my legs, and someone holding my shoulders like I was a stubborn animal.

"First, the ice," Jade chirped. She pressed it to my ear. Cold bit so hard I gasped, my breath puffing out in a tiny cloud in the warm room. My ear turned red as the chill crept inside.

Next came the potato. "For sterilization," Sunny said. The cold, damp weight pressed against my skin. I could feel the juice seeping into my ear, sticky and strange, like something alive.

“Ready?” they asked together, smiling down at me.

I shook my head violently. “No! I don’t want to!”

The needle pierced my ear in a flash. Pain shot through me like fire. I screamed, my voice cracking, hoarse before I could finish the first word. Blood pooled into the potato, and the thread remained, a tiny mark of the chaos we had just endured.

Sunny leaned over me, peering at the tiny ear she had claimed. “Look at her. So tiny, so perfect,” she said, laughing as she brushed a stray strand of hair from my face. “Let’s do the other ear,” she said. “NNNOOO,” I screamed as they repeated the same body hold on me.

For days, I was furious. I rubbed the new thread in my ear and remembered the four pairs of hands holding me down, the cold bite of ice, the sticky potato, and the sharp sting of the needle. But slowly, pride grew. When I slipped on my first earrings, they sparkled in the sunlight like tiny victories.

Now and then, when I wear earrings, I remember the smells, the sounds, the laughter, the struggle. I remember the hands that held me down, and the love hidden in the chaos. Pain and beauty existed together in that room, and I carried both forward, tucked behind my ears.

The Physical

Mama took me to get a routine physical. When we went to the back, where the doctor was, he was standing against the wall. A big, fat, ugly man. He wasn’t even wearing a white coat. When he saw me, he ran over to me and put his hand down my panties and touched my untouchable. My eyes went straight to my mother’s eyes; she was frozen, dead. My eyes shifted to the doctor’s eyes. I thought if you don’t get your hand off of me, I am going to kick you so hard. I know he understood my look because he snatched his hand back quickly. I realized Mama provided for me with all her might. She would never stand up for my rights or hers. I can’t come to her for help. She would whip and scold us (children), but was always meek and humble with everyone else. There was no communication between us. I am boiling angry at this point. You are supposed to protect me. I didn’t have those kinds of parents. Mother would not even protect herself. How can I expect her to protect me? I realize I am on my own. I am a child, but it’s time to accept responsibility for myself.

We walked home in complete silence.

No eye contact.

no holding hands.

Nothing.

Chapter Three: My Miracle

Christmas didn't come easy in our house. It came with worry and prayer. Mama stretched pennies until they screamed. It came with struggle wrapped in hope, with whispered prayers, and Mama's hands stretched so thin they might have torn.

Mama had that look in her eyes again. She was praying with her mouth closed. It was December, and the cold was biting through the thin windows of our apartment. They echoed that they were hungry too. I could see her sitting at the kitchen table, elbows on her knees, staring at the floor like the answer might rise from those scuffed tiles. Christmas was coming. And she didn't have it to give.

I didn't understand money then, not really. I just knew when things were heavy. The air would change. The laughter in the house would quiet down, and Mama's voice would soften when she talked to herself. "Lord, just let me make something happen," she whispered.

We had a live Christmas tree, shiny balls, tinsel, and the smell of pine. Daddy always managed to bring home a live Christmas tree, no matter what bills were unpaid. He'd wrestle it through the doorway, smelling of pine and cold air.

Then one afternoon, Mom put on her coat—the thick brown one that had seen better winters—and told us to sit tight. "I'll be right back," she said. Her tone didn't invite questions, but her eyes... her eyes carried hope.

When she returned, her arms were full. Big brown bags with the red shield of the Salvation Army printed on the side. Her cheeks were red from the cold, her nose running, her breath short—but she was smiling, really smiling.

She laid those bags on the floor like treasures. "Go to bed, Santa Claus is coming," she said, her voice trembling just a little.

Christmas morning, when I unwrapped my one gift, I saw her face. A life-sized black doll, taller than me, her skin brown like mine, her curls soft as velvet, her eyes wide and bright, which opened and closed, reflecting a light I hadn't yet seen in myself. Back then, black dolls were nearly invisible. Paralleling the world's refusal to view us in beauty. But there she was. My best friend. My baby. My Miracle. I named her Miracle. I carried her everywhere, confiding secrets, rocking her to sleep, loving her with a devotion I had nowhere else to put. She was beautiful in a way that startled me, because back then, black dolls were unheard of. The world didn't think little girls like me should see ourselves reflected in beauty. I felt something I didn't have words for at the time. I felt it for the first time—that I mattered. That someone thought I was worthy of something rare. That doll talked to me without speaking a word. I was enough.

I loved that doll the way a child loves something she cannot live without. I called her Miracle. That was my baby. She was taller than me the day I got her, and still, I carried her everywhere. Even when the bus was crowded, even when the room was barely big enough for me, I insisted on taking her with me. She sat beside me at the table, leaned against the wall while I did my homework, and slept in my bed. It was proof that she and I had lived life together.

As I grew, we shared everything. We wore the same clothes, my tiny dresses draping over her stiff frame, and I remember the day I outgrew one of my favorite dresses and realized—my baby could still fit inside it. I giggled and hugged her, imagining her wearing it with the same pride I felt. It was as if she carried a little piece of me wherever she went, just as I carried her everywhere I could. I'd set her up at the kitchen table with me, whisper to her secrets I couldn't tell my sisters, rock her to sleep like she was flesh and blood. In a world that rarely gave me anything, she became proof that I could have something beautiful. Proof that I could be something beautiful.

Now, I am larger than she is. Her arms no longer wrap fully around me, but the love hasn't shrunk. If anything, it has grown—because she taught me how to nurture, how to treasure, how to hold onto something even when life tries to take it from you.

That doll, my Miracle, was never just plastic. She was my mirror, my confidante, my first lesson in love, and my first understanding of loss. She taught me to cherish what is fragile, to carry it close, and to make room in the world—even when there barely seems to be any.

That's when I learned the truth about Christmas. Mama was Santa Claus. Not the man in the red suit. It wasn't the North Pole. It wasn't a sleigh in the sky. Not the myth we were told. It was Mama, making miracles out of nothing, her hands tired, her spirit determined. I didn't just learn Mama was Santa Claus that year. I realized she was a magician. A warrior. A woman who refused to let poverty steal the wonder from her children's eyes.

I remember Momma watching us, her face soft and wet, the corners of her mouth lifted. That was her gift—the sight of our joy.

And that night, when the lights were out and the toys were scattered across the floor, I heard her in the kitchen again. Quiet. Thanking God.

She made Christmas out of nothing. Out of faith. Out of love. And for one night, in the middle of lack, in the middle of want, in the middle of everything we didn't have, Mama gave us Christmas.

And even now, every time I see that red Salvation Army sign, I think of charity. I think of Momma—arms full, heart fuller—walking home through the cold, carrying Christmas.

I watched Mama, too. She had a way of turning lack into abundance. She'd hum while stringing lights around that pine tree Daddy hauled in, her fingers moving with a kind of grace that didn't match the tired lines in her face. We didn't have fancy ornaments, just hand-me-downs and a few ornaments Mama saved from years before, but under her touch, that tree sparkled, as if it belonged in a magazine.

The living room smelled of pine and collard greens simmering on the stove. The floor was cold, the kind of cold that seeped up through your feet, but the glow of that tree warmed me in places heat couldn't reach. My sisters and I huddled close, our hands outstretched as if the lights themselves could bless us.

Mama wasn't just decorating a tree. She was decorating our lives with whatever beauty she could find, covering up the cracks and the broken places, insisting that we deserved something lovely to look at.

And every year, without fail, Dad got drunk and fought with the Christmas tree and knocking the Christmas tree, ornaments and needles, scattering like confetti across the floor. Needles scattered across the wooden floor, poking at our bare feet. Ornaments rolled under the couch and bounced off the walls. Mama would shake her head, but when she was finished with it, that tree stood like royalty in our small living room—glittering lights, tinsel shining, an altar of beauty in a place that knew so much struggle.

For one night, our house glowed. For one night, we had enough. And at the center of it all, in my arms, was my baby doll—taller than me, darker than me, but teaching me the most important lesson: that I was worth loving. And for one night, in the middle of lack, in the middle of want, in the middle of everything we didn't have, Mama gave us Christmas.

TOO TIRED

It seems I only saw Mama in passing — like a shadow moving through the house. She was always tired. Or maybe just tired of me. There was never enough time. She made sure my needs were met.

She didn't hug me. Didn't look me in the eyes. I used to wonder if she'd run out of love by the time she got to me. She'd already used up her supply on my sisters and her husband.

Mama always said I was like my father. I didn't know what that meant. In my mind, that meant she thought I was mean and evil. My behavior was offensive. She thought I abused drugs and alcohol. But how could I be? I was just a child. When I asked

questions, I got silence. Or laughter. Or anger. She'd giggle sometimes, like I should've known better. Other times, she'd snap, her words sharp enough to cut.

I learned early that bad behavior got her attention. It wasn't the kind I wanted, but at least it meant she saw me.

Learning to Stand Alone

Preschool was only half a day. The room smelled like paste and warm milk, and everything around me was small—tiny tables, tiny chairs, tiny cups with our names written in crayon. In the mornings, I went to school. The afternoons were back at the hole in the wall with Dad.

By then, I was old enough to talk—old enough to tell what was happening around me. Old enough to notice that no one was coming to help me tie my shoes or wipe my tears. Even if I told my mother what was happening to me, nothing would be done. She would not protect me.

The first week, I waited by the window for Mama, only to be taken to my dad. I didn't cry out loud. I just watched, learning the rhythm of the day—the snack time, nap time, the cleanup song. Each day, I got a little quieter inside, a little more used to doing things on my own. At least, I was safe in the mornings.

Kindergarten

Kindergarten was supposed to be my fresh start. But really, it felt like a rerun. I had already done two years of preschool because of the way my birthday landed—late in the year, like I was always standing just offstage, waiting for someone to call my name. By the time kindergarten came around, I could read, write my name, and sing all the days of the week in two different melodies. I thought I was ahead.

But the first day I walked into that cinder-block classroom with its crayon-smelling air, I felt that familiar weight on my chest—the one that whispered *You're never really ahead. You're just early to the same old pain.* The other kids were wild, unbroken, still believing the world clapped for them just for showing up. I watched them the way you watch birds who don't know there are hunters. My fresh start had already been used up somewhere else. I wasn't ahead. I was just early. Early to another lesson, another room where the real test wasn't the alphabet on the wall but whether I could carry myself through another year of pretending everything was fine.

Kindergarten felt like a whole new world, no more half days. No more going home before lunch. This was *big kid school*—all day, five days a week—and there were so *many* of us. There were more students than I'd ever seen in one room. The noise hit me first—voices bouncing off the walls, laughter, crying, questions flying through the air like

paper planes. The building loomed larger than my preschool, with hallways that stretched like rivers and classrooms that buzzed like beehives. I stepped into a world that felt both thrilling and terrifying. No more hole in the wall. I stayed at school all day and no longer needed a babysitter.

At recess, I stood by the fence at first, the sun hot on my face, the air thick with the sound of jump ropes hitting pavement. Then a girl with two missing teeth and pink barrettes asked if I wanted to play. Her name was Ruby. Just like that, I wasn't invisible anymore.

We chased each other around the playground until the bell rang. That was the first time I felt what it meant to make a friend on my own—to step into a world that didn't know me and still find a place.

By the end of the day, I was tired but, proud. No tears. No fear. Just me, standing a little taller, knowing I had made it through the whole day by myself.

That was the beginning of learning how to survive in rooms bigger than me, of finding my voice in places that didn't ask for it. It was the quiet birth of strength—born not from comfort, but from necessity.

We shared cookies and laughed when Ruby spilled her juice. It wasn't preschool anymore, and I wasn't the shy little girl in the corner trying to disappear.

I didn't know it then, but that first day was teaching me something bigger than reading or numbers. It was teaching me how to *show up* in new rooms, how to be brave enough to make space for myself among strangers.

Preschool had been small. Familiar. Just a handful of kids, all of us like puzzle pieces that fit together. But kindergarten? It was a crowd. A sea of new faces, voices, and personalities. I felt swallowed up at first, like a whisper in a thunderstorm.

Ruby and I played tag at recess, shared crayons, and swapped stories about our dolls. I learned that friendship doesn't need years to grow. Sometimes, it just needed a smile and a shared snack.

Kindergarten taught me more than letters and numbers. It taught me how to find my voice in a crowd. How to listen, how to laugh, and how to reach out when the world feels too big. That first day was the beginning of something beautiful—not just school, but connection. Walking home after school, I told Falana all about it—the crayons, the songs, the friends. She smiled, listening, her hand warm around mine. We attended the same school, so she would walk me to kindergarten, then go to her classroom.

Then came the board.

I remember the teacher writing on it, chalk scratching, the room full of eager little faces following along. But to me, it was just smears of white against green. I squinted. I leaned in. I dragged my chair closer and closer until I could almost feel the chalk dust fall on my skin. The whispers came. The looks. “Why is she sitting up there?” As if closeness to the board was a choice, I wanted to be marked differently.

It wasn’t that I didn’t know how to read—I could devour a page of words in a heartbeat. It was that I couldn’t see.

The headaches came next. A dull throb after school, my eyes were tired from the constant strain. My mother thought I was being dramatic. My father didn’t notice at all. But eventually, the teacher said, “*Get her eyes checked.*”

The doctor’s office was a cold place, with metal instruments. The smell of rubbing alcohol was so sharp that it made me sit up straighter. He sat me in the big black chair that felt like it belonged to grown men, not little girls. Then came the clicking of lenses in front of my face. “Better? Worse? Better? Worse?” The rhythm of it was hypnotic. And then—clarity. As if God had wiped His thumb across my eyes.

They fitted me for glasses, back when glasses were made of real glass. Heavy, unforgiving, slipping down the bridge of my nose. They pinched behind my ears and made me feel like I was carrying windows on my face. But when I walked out of that office, the world had edges. The trees had leaves, instead of just a blur of green. The chalk on the board stood sharp and proud, not some secret code meant to keep me out.

Kindergarten was the year I learned that sometimes you’re not dumb, not slow, not less-than. Sometimes, you need the right lens to see the world clearly.

And those glass lenses, heavy as they were, gave me back a world I didn’t even know I was missing. The Teacher discovered I needed glasses. She realized I could read, so she sat me closer to the board. When I returned to class with my glasses, my teacher didn’t recognize me. She was the one who suggested that I get my eyes examined. My mom stopped by school later that day to check on me and my new glasses. My vision was slanted until I adjusted to the glasses. Stepping off the sidewalk was tricky. During that time, glasses were made of real glass. My glasses’ lenses were thick, the color was blue, and the frame was cat-eyed shaped. If the lenses weren’t so thick I might have been styling. Instead, I looked like a nerd.

The Mud Rescue

It happened right outside the schoolyard.

The mud hole.

That morning, Ruby was walking with the rest of the kids, the chatter and laughter bubbling like music in the air.

But Ruby wanted to take a shortcut. Just a few steps off the path, through the side of the fence where the grass grew thin, and the ground looked darker. Ruby thought she could make it.

The moment her right foot hit that soft ground, she heard the sound — a slow, wet *schluuup* — and she sank. Not all at once, but slow enough to understand what was happening. Her other foot followed, and suddenly she was knee-deep in mud that clung to her like it had been waiting for her all along.

The other kids screamed and laughed. “She’s stuck! She’s stuck!” She tried to pull herself out, but the mud was greedy. It swallowed her whole shoe.

She felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment, but before she could cry, she saw them — the safety patrol. They were eighth graders, the heroes of the schoolyard. They wore orange belts and badges that gleamed in the morning sun. To us, they resembled soldiers marching to battle.

“Hold on, I got you!” one of them shouted.

He marched right up to Ruby in his work boots, which were no match for the mud. Her little hands trembled as he lifted her and told her to put her arms around his neck. The mud made a sound like it didn’t want to let go — *slurp, pop* — and then, with one last tug, she was free. And just like that, he lifted Ruby, cradled her in his arms like a baby, and carried her through the school gates. We all followed behind, cheering and teasing. Ruby had the biggest smile on her face, as she looked like a princess being carried by a knight in shining armor, her hero. Another safety patrol pulled her shoes out of the mud. When we got to the front steps, the teacher gasped. “Lord, have mercy, what happened to you?”

Ruby didn’t have words. Her eyes were wide, and all we could do was laugh — that kind of laugh that comes from shock and joy all at once.

They cleaned her up in the nurse’s office and cleaned her shoes. We applauded her when she returned to class to let her know we were glad she was ok.

That day, I learned something: sometimes, life will pull you down into the mud, but there’s always somebody watching, ready to reach out a hand — or carry you the rest of the way.

And every time it rained after that, Ruby walked a little slower by that spot, remembering the sound of her shoes disappearing and the feeling of being rescued — soggy socks, embarrassed, and absolutely alive.

School and learning were enjoyable for me. I always made good grades and had perfect attendance. I was always the teacher's pet because of my good behavior and grades. Fighting to protect myself was normal because most people were angry. Even though, we were considered to be poor project children, I feel we had smart teachers until the new teachers arrived and decided to experiment with us.

Summer wasn't rest—it was routine. Mama signed us up for everything that kept our names on a list and our bodies out of the projects. Summer school, camp, church programs—she believed idleness was dangerous, and maybe she was right. Mama didn't have much, but she had rules and reason. So, we were always moving—marching in heat waves, writing book reports with sticky fingers, making lanyards that tangled like our lives. I made the jar to preserve my jacks. I still have them today. The iron kind, that they don't make anymore. We usually had a week or two off before we returned to school.

Chapter Four: Family Encounters

Daddy's Sober Moments

There were these brief, shimmering moments when my daddy was sober. You could almost smell the difference in the air. The house felt lighter, quieter. Even the walls themselves were holding their breath. I never trusted those moments at first—not until I could see it in his eyes. When the haze cleared and his words came smooth, not slurred. That's when I knew Daddy was back, even if just for a little while. Daddy was a handsome man. Tall, slim, and chocolate with a great smile. I see how Mama was attracted to his looks.

One of those rare mornings, he came home with something in his pocket. He sat down in his chair, the one that leaned to the right from years of use, and called me over. "Come here, baby girl."

I walked slowly. Daddy's tone could turn in a heartbeat, so I learned to move carefully, like testing ice. But that day, he smiled—a real smile, the kind that reached his eyes. He pulled out a watch. My father bought me my first watch. The only gift he ever gave me. It wasn't a child's watch—no cartoon characters or plastic bands. It was heavy, adult-sized, with a thick leather strap too large for my tiny wrist, and the face small as a cookie. "This is for you," he said, placing it on my wrist. "You gotta know what time it is if you gon' make somethin' of yourself." I didn't say a word. I just stared at it, my first real watch, new and mine. The light caught it just right, making it shine like a diamond. But the truth is, the watch slipped up my arm like a clunky bracelet, too big and too foreign to feel like mine. It glided all the way to my shoulder when I held my arm out for him to see.

"You fancy now," he chuckled.

I smiled so hard my cheeks hurt. I held it with trembling hands, unsure whether to feel proud or ashamed. It was a gesture that felt both hopeful and hollow—like a bridge built halfway across a river.

Mom noticed right away. She didn't say much, but she replaced the band with a smaller one. It fit snugly after that. She had a way of smoothing over the jagged edges of our lives, of translating my father's fractured attempts at love into something I could carry.

For that moment, I didn't see the man who hurt me at childbirth. I saw the father who wanted to make his little girl happy. My father, a man whose presence in my life was often marked by silence or rage, had handed me something that felt... intentional. He was trying to say something without words. I wanted to believe it meant he saw me. That he loved me. Maybe, just maybe, this was the beginning of something new between us.

The Magic in the Oven

On his good days, Daddy was gentle. He'd sit at the kitchen table, elbows resting on the cracked vinyl, watching me fuss with my Easy-Bake Oven. That little plastic thing with a light bulb was my pride and joy.

I'd mix the batter, stirring with the frenzy of a mad scientist in a lab, convinced I was on the brink of invention. Then I'd slide the pan into the oven, closing the door like sealing a secret.

Almost immediately, the air shifted—sweet, warm, tinged with the edge of something nearly burnt. It wrapped around me, a perfume of promise. I'd crouch low, peeking through that tiny window, eyes wide, waiting for the magic to happen.

The glass fogged, the oven hummed, and I held my breath. In that moment, it wasn't just cake rising—it was possibility. It was proof that even in the smallest kitchen, with the simplest ingredients, transformation was real.

When I pulled it out, I'd cut him and Miracle, my doll, a piece with my plastic knife, hands trembling a bit because it was never quite done in the middle. He'd take a bite, chew slowly, and make a face like it was the best thing he'd ever tasted.

"Mmm," he'd hum. "Tastes like a real bakery."

I knew he was lying. I knew it didn't taste good. But it didn't matter. What mattered was that he ate it. He ate every crumb.

Then came the barrettes. Oh, he was patient for those. I'd sit behind him on the couch, along with Baby, knees pressing into the cushion, a pile of colorful barrettes beside me—stars, hearts, butterflies. His hair was thick and stubborn, and the comb would snag every few inches.

"Ow!" he'd hiss, then laugh. "You tryna snatch my scalp, girl?"

"Hold still," I'd say, like a professional stylist. "Beauty takes time."

He'd sit there, pretending to be serious while I decorated his hair like a Christmas tree. Pink ones near his temples, blue ones down the back, and one shiny gold clip right at the top. When I was done, I'd stand in front of him, hands on my hips, and say, "You look handsome."

He'd tilt his head, eyes soft, lips curling into a smile. "You think so?"

"I know so."

He'd laugh, a deep, rolling sound that filled the room like music. For a second, everything bad disappeared. The bottles, the yelling, the knocking over the Christmas

tree—it all faded. What was left was this: a father and daughter, a watch ticking softly in the background, a plate of half-baked cake crumbs, and a grown man wearing pink barrettes because it made his little girl happy.

Those were Daddy's sober moments.

They didn't come often, and they never stayed long. But when they did, I memorized them—the way his laughter sounded, the calm in his voice, the warmth of his hand when he passed me that watch.

Because I knew the storm would come again. It always did. But those moments—those *sober moments*—they were the light I kept tucked in my pocket, like a secret.

And sometimes, when the world felt too heavy, I'd look down at my wrist and whisper to myself, *You gotta know what time it is.*

It was time to remember the good.

Looking back, those tiny cakes symbolized more than just baked goods; they were my attempts to win his approval, even amidst the pain. I was told that Dad only had a 6th-grade education. I saw him reading a book a couple of times. He was really handy with his hands, fixing things and cooking. To this day, he has made the best smothered potatoes I have ever had. I tried so hard to communicate with him. His mind was so demonic that it just wasn't possible.

The Rich People's House

Mama worked in the rich people's house like it was hers, though it never was. She polished their silver until her hands ached, ironed their linens crisp as paper, and spoke in that careful, measured tone she used when she didn't want her voice to sound *too Black*. The house was too big for one family, with windows tall as church doors and carpets soft enough to swallow your feet.

I was small, and every time she brought me along, I was both invisible and exposed. I didn't belong anywhere in that house, not in the gleam of the marble floor or the reflection of those wide, gold-framed mirrors.

The two little boys who lived there—blond hair, blue eyes, soft hands—had toys newer than anything I'd ever seen. Toys that hadn't passed through five cousins first. They let me play sometimes, but even in play, I knew the line. My braids, my hand-me-down dress, Mama's watchful eyes from the corner—every detail whispered, *you don't live here.*

"Don't touch anything that's not yours," she'd say, her voice stiff and trembling with respect. She worked here on the weekends. I refused to let her leave me with Daddy anymore, so I had to stay the weekend too.

Still, for a few moments in their big green yard, I pretended we were the same. Pretended I was just another child under the same sun, laughing without weight.

That's when the dog appeared.

A massive St. Bernard, its shadow as long as a man's fear. To me, it wasn't a dog—it was a mountain lion, a beast from some nightmare that had found its way into the daylight. My chest tightened. The world stood still.

But the boys didn't freeze. They ran. They ran like they'd done it before, like they knew where safety lived. Through bushes, over fences—they vanished like smoke.

I ran too, chasing their footsteps, chasing safety.

Then—pain.

The barbed wire bit deep, slicing from my knee to my hip. I looked down and saw the red. So much red. It poured out like my body was trying to tell the world. The grass beneath me had turned the color of warning.

I didn't scream right away. That's the part I still remember—the silence before the sound. The boys were gone, tucked back into comfort. I was left behind, bleeding, marked by the truth of where I stood.

Mama came running, her face tight with panic, then shame, then that familiar silence she carried like armor. She rushed to the boys first, her arms wrapping around them, checking for wounds they didn't have.

And there I was, limping toward her, blood painting my leg on the rich man's perfect lawn.

She told me to hush. It wasn't that deep.

The cut was deep. Mama wrapped it herself with whatever she could find. No hospital. No doctor. Just home remedies and time. The scar stayed—still stays, long after the wound healed, long after the house faded from our lives.

It's a line carved into me, a reminder that danger doesn't always come from lions or dogs. Sometimes it comes from the chase—running toward safety in a world that was never built to keep you safe.

And yet—I lived.

Even now, when I trace that thin line on my thigh, I smile. Survival was in me from the beginning.

I was angry. Angry at those boys. They received hugs from my mother that I never did. One day, I hit one of them. Just once. He bawled like a baby. I didn't mean to hurt him—

but for one small second, I wanted him to feel what I felt every day. The sting of being unseen.

I should've pampered him, wiped his tears, told him it was okay—but I didn't. I was glad he was upset. His pain was a drop compared to my ocean.

He ran crying to his father, his brother yelling too. We were about the same age.

Within the hour, the man had Mama and me in the car, driving us home. No bus that day. Normally, he'd drop us at the bus stop, but this time he drove us all the way back to the projects.

No one said a word on that ride. I didn't think about the consequences. I was very sorry. The silence was thick. guilt. goodbye.

That was the last time we were at the rich people's house. I didn't realize what the consequences would be. When someone hurt me, nothing happened. I saw children being protected. My own mama was protecting them. I was the one without protection. I was the one who did not matter.

And though I left their world behind, I carried something with me—
not their toys, not their kindness,
but proof that I could bleed, heal, and still stand, even if I didn't matter to Mama.

Dance, Dance, Dance

At about six years old, the world was still new, but my heart already knew how to race. At Sunny's wedding reception, the music wrapped around me like a blanket. My cousin, a few years older than me, and I danced the night away—me, a little girl with bows and barrettes, him patient enough to keep spinning me across that floor until my legs ached. For the first time in my life, I was the life of the party.

After the music faded, Sunny handed me another job: *"Go pick up the empty cups from the tables."*

I remember standing there with my small hands, my stomach tight. Because at one of those tables sat a man. A grown man, fine as could be to my six-year-old eyes. His shirt pressed, his laugh deep, his eyes sharp enough to see straight through me. I was terrified. Terrified of being seen.

But duty was duty, so I gathered courage in my chest, ran over quickly, and scooped up the cups like I was stealing them. Before I could dart away, he stopped me.

He said, "You move like somebody who's fought for every bit of joy in their body. You're not just a good dancer—you're a story in motion."

Those words knocked the air right out of me. My knees buckled. My little body didn't know what to do with such praise, from *him* of all people. I gave him the biggest smile I had and whispered, "Thank you." To this day, I can still see his face. Handsome. Strong. Kind. I am melting even now.

Several years later, Sunny came home to visit. But she wasn't the sister I remembered from the wedding. She walked through that door with a big belly, round and full of life, and for a moment, I didn't recognize her at all. I had forgotten her.

But when she wrapped me in her arms, memory rushed back. She smelled like perfume and the outside air. She told Mama she was sleeping with me that night. I didn't know what to say. I couldn't protest—Mama had already agreed.

That night, as we lay side by side in the dark, I whispered my prayers the way I always did—quiet, quick, hoping God would hear the parts I didn't dare say out loud. But then I felt her. Felt her warmth pressing in, her arms folding around me like I was still her baby doll she could tuck under her chin and protect from the world.

And though I didn't understand all the changes in her—her moods slipping like weather, her silence stretching long, that belly rising like it had its own secret—I felt myself leaning in. But when her belly brushed my back, humming with a heartbeat that didn't belong to either of us, I stayed in her arms. I let myself be held. Because some nights, that was the only thing either of us knew how to do. I didn't know what to make of any of it. All I knew was that when she pulled me close, I went. Because love, even the complicated kind, has a gravity you can't fight.

I loved her back.

Because that's what sisters do: they bend the rules of your small world, confuse you, carry you, and sometimes disappear until they return unrecognizable. But when they reach for you in the dark, you reach back.

Mini-me

Hollow obeyed Mom. She seemed like an empty shell to me. She hated everything and everybody. Hollow was negative. She never had anything good to say. That's how she coped with our neglect. She was Mama's mini-me, the one who carried out Mama's word like the gospel. She was the oldest at home, Mama's shadow, Mama's echo, Mama's extra set of hands. If Mama said "do," Hollow did. There was no room for backtalk, no space for refusal.

She scrubbed floors, cooked rice, ironed clothes, and when Mama's voice turned sharp, she was the one who stepped forward and made Mama's orders real. And sometimes those orders had my name on them.

When I fumbled over my ABCs or stumbled through my multiplication tables, Mama's eyes flicked across the room and landed on Hollow. "Hit her with the switch."

And Hollow obeyed.

I can still feel it now—that sting across my legs, that heat rising in my cheeks, not just from the lash of the switch but from the betrayal of it. My sister's hand, carrying out Mama's anger. My sister's arm, raised against me because I couldn't remember that seven times eight was fifty-six. The teachers could spank you, too, and all the mothers in the projects.

I wanted to hate her in those moments. I wanted to cry out, *You're not my mama!* But I couldn't, because I knew she had no choice. She was not protected. She didn't want to be Mama's enforcer. She was just a girl herself, caught between fear of Mama and my punishment.

So, I took the sting, bit my lip, and tried harder the next time. I wasn't going to get beaten anymore. So, I learned fast. Everyone could spank you back then. Your parents, the teachers, and all the mothers in the project. We were a village. They would use tree branches, belts, extension cords, broom handles, rolling pins, skillets, whatever was in arm's reach. My mouth was washed out with soap. I don't use bad language today because of it. I behave today because of the discipline that was enforced.

Looking back, I know Hollow was surviving. Obedience was her armor. She wasn't just Mama's extra hands—she was Mama's shield, taking on the weight of keeping us in line, carrying out the punishments that weren't hers to give. She was raising children who were not hers.

And though my legs burned and my pride ached, I could not blame Hollow.

That was our childhood: love tangled up with pain; obedience tangled up with survival. Hollow was Mama's extra hands. And sometimes, those hands fell heavy on me.

EZ

EZ played with me when he could. I guess he realized early on he wasn't getting a brother, and I was the next best thing. We made our own kind of fun — raw, loud, and full of imagination. We'd strip off our shirts and holler like Tarzan, our voices bouncing off the brick walls of the projects, echoing through the courtyard like a jungle call.

He was strong, lean, and fast — always moving, always testing his limits. I tried to keep up. We'd run sprints in the courtyard, him backwards, me forward, and he'd still beat me every single time. He'd laugh, not to mock me, but to push me. That laugh carried pride, like he saw something in me — maybe the same fight that burned in him. We would play Uno, back then it was Crazy 8. He made me study the dictionary. We spent as

much time together as he had. He was a very positive role model in my life until I learned he was saying bad things behind my back. This taught me to trust no one, for he was the closest person to me in life.

EZ wasn't like most boys in our neighborhood. He tested *genius* on the SMART IQ test. That word alone — *genius* — sounded like gold. Coaches and teachers targeted him like bees to honey, whispering about scholarships and private schools. Before long, he went away to private school. He was sent where opportunity lived, and kids like us rarely went.

At home, his absence was a quiet ache. The girls had chores, curfews, and rules that wrapped around us like barbed wire. EZ had freedom. He could come and go. He could breathe. And when he *was* home, he shared a piece of that freedom with me.

One day, I told him I wanted to be an accountant — I don't even remember where I pulled that dream from. Maybe a half-heard line from a sitcom, or the way adults said the word like it meant a real life, a steady one. He didn't laugh. Didn't brush it away the way grown folks sometimes do when children reach for things bigger than the room they're standing in.

He just nodded, slowly thoughtfully, weighing it in his spirit. "Well then, you need to learn 10-key by touch" he shouted.

He grabbed the landline phone — the old beige one with the cord stretched thin from being pulled around too many corners. He showed me how to tap out numbers without looking. "Do it until your fingers remember," he said.

So, I did. And somewhere between the clicks of the buttons and the rhythm he taught me, I realized it was more than numbers. He was giving me discipline. Focus. A private language made of order and quiet control. A way to walk through the world without shaking. I didn't realize then that he was handing me a blueprint for my whole life. A way to keep myself steady when the world around me was anything but.

EZ was accepted into a private school, then college; his name was carried in envelopes with crests and scholarships. We didn't see him much after that. The space between us grew like distance on a map — from city blocks to miles and years.

But one thing stayed true. He was nothing like my father.

My father tore things down — trust, peace, sometimes himself. EZ built. With words, with motion, with belief. He built a way out, and in some quiet, stubborn way, I followed his blueprint — even when he wasn't there to see it.

Mousey

Falana kept me upset. Beating me up, tearing at me like she was trying to pull the very breath out of my body. She'd destroy my things—rip them, break them, hide them, to watch me cry. There was a glimmer in her eye when my tears came. She had won something. My pain was her prize.

She called me *Mousey*.

Mousey, because my two front teeth were missing, and then they came in too big for my small face. The words clung to me like lint I couldn't shake off. Every time I looked in the mirror, I saw what she saw—too much tooth, too little girl. I hated my reflection then. Hated how my own smile betrayed me, giving her one more weapon to use. I learned she named me from birth, my real name.

She had been the baby for five long years—five years of being the center of attention, wrapped in love and laughter and the easy rhythm of being adored. Then I came. I broke her pattern. I disrupted her light. I didn't mean to, but I did.

And she never forgave me for it.

Now here I am, standing in the shadow of her resentment, trying to make sense of it all, trying to understand how my simple *existence* could offend someone so deeply.

But that's the thing about growing up in a house full of unspoken hurts—sometimes the fight isn't about what's happening, it's about what's missing.

She wanted to be seen.

She wanted to be safe.

And somewhere between those two truths, love got lost.

She ended up protecting me.

No one else could beat me up.

It was strange, the way love lived in that house—twisted, hidden under black and blue bruises and sharp words. She could make me cry before breakfast, but if someone else tried to, she was right there, standing in front of me like a wall made of fire.

She'd square her shoulders, eyes blazing, and say, "*You got a problem with my sister, you got a problem with me.*" And just like that, my tormentor became my defender. The same hands that pushed me down were the ones that pulled me back up when the world got too rough.

That's the thing about family—especially in the kind of world we grew up in. Love didn't always come soft. Sometimes it came wearing armor, with bruised knuckles and a warning stare.

She may have called me *Mousey*, but no one else dared to. Because underneath all that jealousy, that noise, that need to be seen first—she loved me. When my teeth grew in, I was no longer Mousey.

And in her own wild, broken way,
she made sure the world knew
I wasn't alone.

Street Lights at Eleven

Granddaddy was Mom's father. Mom cleaned his filthy house ever so often. Granddaddy had a way of mixing up the world. His girlfriends were always younger than Mom, and that fact hung in the air like smoke no one wanted to breathe. One summer, he packed us all into the car—my mother, his girlfriend, and me—and said we were going to Coldplace.

The air was tense. My mother's jaw stayed tight, her hands folded in her lap. The girlfriend sat beside him, laughing too loudly at his jokes, her bracelets jingling like she was happy to be anywhere but home. I sat in the backseat, watching the road roll out before us.

Granddaddy ran a red light. I said from the back seat, "You ran a red light". He explained to me that the red lights were flashing.

Back in the day, the street lights were turned off at 11:00 pm. All the children had to be at home by 11:00 pm. That was the signal—the world outside went dark, and the night belonged to whoever was brave enough to step into it. For us, it meant curfews enforced not by parents, but by the city itself. When the lights blinked out, you knew it was time to go home, time to tuck yourself into safety.

But I remember the hush that followed, the way shadows stretched longer, the way silence pressed against the houses. It wasn't just darkness—it was a reminder that the world had rules, that childhood had boundaries. And yet, in that darkness, I felt possibility. I felt the thrill of being awake when the lights went out, of imagining what might happen if I stayed outside just a little longer.

"You can read?" he asked. Yes, I replied. Granddaddy looked at me through the rearview mirror and said, "Read the signs."

I squinted at the passing words. *Stop. Yield. Exit 23. Gas Food Lodging.*

He told me to sit up front, and his girlfriend sat in the back with mom. He told me to read all the signs to get us to Coldplace.

At first, it felt like a game, sounding out each one. But his voice grew firm, almost proud:

“If you can read the signs, you can go anywhere in the world.”

It was his way of teaching me that reading wasn't just for books—it was survival, it was freedom, it was the only map I'd ever really need.

I remember my mother's silence, the way she never corrected him or added anything. I remember the girlfriend's perfume filling the car, sweet and sharp. But most of all, I remember how those green highway signs became my passport. Every word I unlocked was a road stretching farther than the town we were trapped in.

That day, with my mother and his girlfriend in the backseat, Granddaddy gave me the key to a world much bigger than our car ride. And though he made choices that broke hearts and stirred gossip, those words—*read the signs*—have never stopped carrying me forward. If you can read, you can go anywhere.

Uncle

Dad had one younger brother—my uncle. He was single, restless, and always drifting through life with a bottle close by. Most nights, he showed up long after we were asleep. He'd show up late at night, smelling of gin and street air. He never knocked softly; he'd swing the door open like we were his personal audience, pulling us out of bed to talk. He'd grab my arm playfully, tugging me from sleep.

“Stop, Uncle,” I'd whisper.

“You didn't even open your eyes,” he'd tease. “How do you know it's me?”

And that was his magic. He made chaos feel like a game. He made a cramped bedroom in the projects feel like a stage. He pressed a few dollars into my hand every time. The money was folded so tight it carried the heat from his palm.

“What you gon' be when you grow up?” he'd ask, slouching at the edge of my bed like he was settling in for a show, as my future mattered to him more than his own.

Then he'd tease, “Five girls? Y'all ought to be the Jackson 5.”

I'd roll my eyes. “If you heard us sing, you'd know why we're not.” I'd laugh.

But he wouldn't let it go. “Would you like to fly a plane? You can be anything you want.” Anything. I could not believe.

He could make that word feel real—even though his own dreams were scattered somewhere between a liquor bottle and the long nights he wandered through. He made “anything” sound possible. A word bigger than the walls we lived in; bigger than the violence we were raised under. He was pouring into my future even as he was slowly drinking away his own.

I must've looked at him like he'd lost his mind. I was too young for a license, but I knew how to drive. In the projects, that counted more than paperwork anyway.

Behind the wheel, I felt a kind of power—hands gripping something bigger than me, feet pressing pedals that carried me forward. It wasn't about freedom in the way people talk about it, with open highways and endless skies. It was survival. It was knowing that if Mama needed a ride, if trouble came, if life demanded it, I could move. I could act.

The projects had their own rules. Paperwork didn't mean much when the lights went out at eleven, when the rent was late, when the world outside didn't care if you had permission. What mattered was whether you could do it. Whether you could step up. Whether you could keep going.

So yes, I drove. Too young, too small, too unlicensed. But in that moment, I wasn't just a kid behind the wheel. I was someone proving I could carry weight, proving I could navigate more than streets—I could navigate life.

Then one Saturday—daylight sliding in like it knew our address—he came in the morning. “Come here,” he said, a strange energy in his voice. He walked me to the window, pointed down eleven stories.

There it was, his car.

A blue two-tone Seville, shining like it didn't belong to any life I knew. Just sitting in the middle of the street, engine running.

“Go park my car,” he said.

As if it were the most normal request in the world.

I stared at him. I didn't have a license. I barely had permission to dream. But I could drive. Mama, Hollow, or Falana could not drive. In the projects, kids learned survival before they learned rules.

When I reached the car, the keys were still in the ignition, the engine purring like a promise. That car was luxury—*soft seats, smooth lines, a smell like money and bad decisions*. I slid in, hands trembling the way a child trembles when the world suddenly hands her a responsibility too big for her size.

I parked it. Gently. Proud of myself.

And when I walked back inside, I kept glancing over my shoulder because I couldn't believe it hadn't been stolen. Not in our neighborhood. Not that car. In the projects, a car like that was usually gone before you blinked.

Looking back, I think he trusted me in a way no one else did. Maybe he saw something in me—strength, courage, a future—that he never found in himself.

Sometimes the broken people are the ones who tell you you're whole. And sometimes their belief in you becomes the only reason you learn to believe in yourself.

Chapter Five: The Long Walk to Peace

Sunday mornings in the projects carried a hush so rare it felt borrowed. The kind of stillness that made you whisper, even outside. The kind that only came once a week, like the world took a breath before starting again. The air smelled faintly of pine-sol, and Sunday dinner preparations, fried bologna, ham bones soaking, and greens simmering. Mothers' voices floated through cracked windows—soft scoldings mixed with the hum of gospel on the radio and calling children by full names, not nicknames. That's how you knew it was the Lord's Day.

My dress was pink that morning, stiff with starch, the hem brushing against my knees. My socks had little lace frills that scratched, and my patent leather shoes pinched at the toes—but that was holiness, too. Mama stood behind me, straightened my collar, and gave me a look that said, *Walk right*. She never said much before church; her silence was its own kind of prayer.

We, the children, walked alone. My siblings said I kept saying there's a cab when I first started walking with them. That's how they learned Mom caught a cab. Dad never attended church. The walk to church was twenty blocks of peace. Twenty blocks where no one cursed, no one fought, and even the dogs rested. No dice rolling on the stoop, no arguments slicing through the air. The men who stayed out too late were inside, sleeping off their sins. And for that brief walk to church, the concrete felt holy. We'd pass the iron guardrails and the rusted swings that squeaked like they were praying too. The air had a rhythm to it—the click of heels, the hum of hymns under breath, the soft clap of Bible pages against palms. Even the broken glass on the ground seemed to glitter cleaner in the morning sun.

The church sat on the corner like an old woman with stories to tell—paint chipping, windows smudged with years of song and prayer. It was a four-family flat that someone, somewhere along the way, decided to make holy ground. You could smell the Spirit before you even opened the door—fried chicken from the fellowship dinners, old hymnals, Pine-Sol, and the faint sweetness of someone's Sunday perfume.

Across the street, the liquor store stood tall and proud, like sin staring salvation in the face. On hot days, the men leaned against its walls, brown paper bags hiding their confessions. They'd watch us walk by, all pressed and polished, hair ribbons flying, Bibles clutched to our chests. Momma made sure we looked like church even when we didn't feel like it.

We were the choir, the ushers, and the congregation, too. The church wasn't big enough for extras—everybody had a role. The three pastors, both good men, took turns preaching fire into the small crowd. They treated me with respect. They never touched me inappropriately. They didn't chase after my sisters. Their wives played the piano,

taught Sunday school, and collected and counted the offering along with Mama. We had fans that were made of cardboard with a picture on them, stapled to a stick. The deacon and his wife were steady as Sunday, always there before anyone else, setting up the folding chairs and making sure the fans worked.

Then there was the pastor's son—the youngest one in the church, one year younger than me. He had that quiet kind of smile, the kind that made you feel seen even when you were trying to hide. We didn't talk much, just shared the same hymnal, the edges soft from so many hands turning the pages.

Momma loved that church. It was family. She believed in that place. She believed, that God could show up anywhere, even in a four-family flat between a liquor store and a laundromat.

Maybe he did.

Because in that little corner church, surrounded by broken bottles and broken people, there was something whole. Something sacred. Something that held us together when everything else was falling apart.

The music always felt slow to me—like it was walking with a limp, dragging one foot behind the other. Every song stretched out longer than I thought it needed to, and the beat never seemed to catch fire the way the music on the radio did. The members were mostly over fifty, their voices heavy with years, their hands clapping just a second behind the beat.

But they sang with something I didn't understand yet—a kind of ache that came from living too long and losing too much. I used to sit there thinking, *why can't we sing something faster?* Something that made me want to move.

Momma leaned down one Sunday, her hand resting on my knee, and said softly, "Baby, don't listen to the music. Listen to the words."

When I did, I heard something new—stories tucked inside the verses, hope stitched between the lines. Songs about burdens being lifted, about joy coming in the morning, about a God who wouldn't let go no matter how far you fell.

The old folks' voices didn't sound so tired anymore. They sounded wise. Like they knew something I hadn't lived long enough to understand.

I started humming the words around the house, learning them one by one. *I once was lost, but now I'm found...* I didn't fully know what that meant, but it made me feel safe—like maybe being found was something that could happen to me, too.

Before long, I wasn't just listening. I was singing. Loud. From the belly. For the first time, I wasn't thinking about the tempo or the tune. I was thinking about how the words made me feel—like I belonged to something bigger than that little flat on the corner.

Sister Hummingbird couldn't read a lick. Couldn't follow a hymn book or call out a verse. But when her turn came to pray, she didn't need words. She'd close her eyes, tilt her head back, and let out this low hum—soft at first, like a mother rocking a baby. Then it would rise, fuller, trembling, until it wrapped itself around every soul in that room.

No piano, no drums—just that sound. Pure and raw, like something that had been living in her bones for years.

Her voice didn't need lyrics. It carried the kind of truth words couldn't touch. It was pain, and praise tangled together, moaning and music at once. She'd hum through her tears, and before long, the whole church would be crying too—Deacon with his hand over his eyes, the pastors rocking side to side, and even me, just a little girl on the front row, feeling something deep I couldn't name.

The church lady used to whisper, "That's the Spirit, baby. That's God."

And I believed her. Because in that moment, the air changed. It felt thick, alive, like you could reach out and touch heaven. The floors creaked under the weight of it, the walls shivered, and for a little while, all the noise of the world disappeared.

That four-family flat became holy ground. Not because it was fancy or grand, but because Sister Hummingbird, who couldn't read a word, could still call down God with a hum. In that moment, I believed peace was something you could touch, something that lived in the air if you stayed still long enough.

The church was just the beginning. Sunday wasn't Sunday without the walk to Grandma's house, Daddy's mama. We'd already walked twenty blocks to get to church that morning, shoes polished but worn, the sun pressing soft and warm against our backs in the summer, cold in the winter. By the time the benediction came, my feet ached, but I knew better than to complain. Momma said shut up, and when words weren't enough, she'd send the evil eye from the choir stand. That look could slice through the hymns, cut past the organ, and land squarely on us like a warning bell. It meant to behave. It meant don't test her.

We'd sit there, squirming in the pews, trying to swallow our laughter, trying not to move too much. But the choir stand was high ground—she could see everything. When her eyes locked on us, it was like the whole church went silent, even if the music kept playing.

That stare carried more weight than any belt or switch. It was discipline wrapped in dignity, a reminder that even in God's house, you didn't embarrass Momma.

After church, we'd start that last stretch — five more blocks to Grandma's house. Twenty-five in all. Each block felt longer than the previous one. There was a rhythm to it. The shuffle of our shoes on cracked sidewalks, the smell of dinners already cooking in someone else's kitchen. Fried chicken. Collard greens. Cornbread. The whole neighborhood seemed to be cooking at once, each house sending up its own hymn of Sunday joy.

Grandma lived in a newly built project. I saw how clean and pretty it started. When she opened that door, it felt like stepping into heaven. Steam rose from pots on the stove — greens simmering, ham hocks bobbing like baptized souls, cornbread cooling on the counter. The air was thick with love and lard.

"Come on in, babies," she'd say, her voice a melody of strength and sweetness. Grandma received the children along with the only Granddad we knew, our step-grandfather. Granddad played games with us. Whatever weight we carried through the week melted right there in her kitchen.

We'd crowd around the table, elbows touching, laughter spilling. Grandma never measured anything — she just *knew*. A pinch of this, a handful of that. The chicken was golden and crisp, the macaroni thick with cheese that stretched like silk when you pulled it apart.

By the time we finished eating, the sun was low, painting everything gold, and quiet. The walk home — all twenty-five blocks of it — felt different. Slower. Sleepier. Bellies full, hearts full. I'd lag behind a little, dragging my feet, wishing we could stay at Grandma's house forever.

But even that long walk home was part of the blessing. Twenty-five blocks of love, of family, of Sunday peace before Monday's world came calling again.

Peace in the projects never lasted past sundown.

By the time we walked home that evening, the stillness was gone—snatched up by noise and heat. Sirens wailed somewhere close. A fight broke out near the playground. Dodge City, passing the playground, someone started shooting. Run for your life and try to hide if you can. The two girls would run together, and I would run with EZ because I was slow, and he was fast as we darted between the playground to avoid the bullets. By the time we reached our building, the smell of gunpowder was already mixing with the dinner smoke. EZ's hand tightened around mine, and my Bible, once held soft against my chest, became a shield. Men stood in clusters again, their laughter sharp, their eyes harder now. Music blasted from the windows. Babies cried. Somebody's mother yelled out a window, cussing a man who wouldn't come home.

The same sidewalks that had carried us to church that morning now felt like enemy grounds.

When we finally reached our apartment, we locked the door behind us, double-bolting it. The smell of dinner—our leftover chicken and rice—hung in the air, and I could still hear shouting from the courtyard below. I could hear Sister Hummingbird humming and moaning.

And I thought—maybe faith is just that.

The sound of one woman humming against the storm.

Holding on to her song when the world outside keeps forgetting the words.

I couldn't walk and carry Miracle, too. I had to leave her at home. When that nephew was visiting, I could not turn my back on Miracle. He would be all over her, kissing her and grinding on top of her. Where did he learn that so young? I protected my baby. He had to leave her alone, or I was going to slap him.

Chapter Six: A House of Mixed Messages

Dad's footsteps were enough to silence a room. Heavy, deliberate, like even the floorboards were scared to creak under him. He carried his meanness like a weapon, always loaded, always ready for the next target. And the targets were never strangers. Never the people at church or the neighbors outside. His rage lived at home. It had our names carved into it.

To the world, he was charming. Helpful. Polite. The kind of man who'd hold the door open for someone else's mama but slam it in his own child's face. But to me, he wasn't just angry—he was evil. That's the word I used as a child, before I learned softer language to describe hard things. He seemed to enjoy the power of fear, how a single glare could make us scatter like roaches when the light comes on. How his voice could slice through a room sharper than any blade.

Mama, though... Mama was a puzzle with too many missing pieces. She wasn't cruel. She wasn't cold. She was confused. She'd line us up on Sunday mornings like she was preparing soldiers for battle—brushing lint off our dresses and little suits, tying bows, licking her thumb to smooth down a stray hair. "Y'all better act right in God's house," she'd say, voice stern but tired.

Then she'd march us into church like we were her pride and joy. Front pew. Always the front pew. She'd sing "Amazing Grace" with her eyes closed, swaying just enough to look holy, like she believed every word washing over her. The sunlight through the stained-glass windows made her look soft, almost angelic. You'd never know that twelve hours earlier, she'd been curled up in the corner of the bedroom, waiting for his storm to pass.

On Sundays, she worshiped like she was trying to drown out the echoes of last night's yelling. Hands lifted, whispering "Yes, Lord," while the black-and-blue fingerprints on her arms told a different kind of scripture. A scripture written in silence and survival.

I never understood her. Not then. At home, she did not fight. None. She could watch him spit venom across a room, watch us shrink back into corners, and she'd say nothing except, "Don't talk back to your father," even when he was dead wrong. Especially when he was wrong. She stood for nothing, and to a child, that felt like betrayal. It felt like she chose him over us every single time.

To a child, that was confusion.

I'd sit in Sunday school and listen to stories about David fighting Goliath, Moses standing up to Pharaoh, and Jesus driving out demons. All these people in the Bible stood for something. But Mama? She stood for nothing. She let the giant in our house roam free. She let Pharaoh live under our roof. She let the demon eat at us day by day.

The message didn't match the life.

The nights were the hardest. Fear grew different in the dark—taller, louder, less patient. I remember one night after church, when the hymns were still stuck in my throat, I asked her why she stayed. Why did she allow him to do all he did? She hushed me quickly, eyes darting around like the devil himself was eavesdropping.

"You don't understand, baby," she whispered. "God will fix it in His time."

But God's time felt slow. Too slow. While we waited for heaven to move, hell lived in our kitchen. His voice booming, his footsteps shaking the floors, his anger spilling over onto all of us like hot grease popping from a pan. And Mama's answer was prayer.

That was the confusion: a father who tore us down, and a mother who built nothing in its place. A home full of fear on Saturday night and full of church songs on Sunday morning. Two worlds. Same people. No rescue.

And somewhere between those two worlds, I learned how to hold my breath. How to read footsteps. How to disappear in plain sight.

How to survive in a house that preached salvation but lived in sin.

The Librarian

The first day I met Miss Walker, the librarian, was unforgettable.

The library became my safe place. My sanctuary. My secret world made of whispers and pages.

I was in the first grade, but the books I carried to the counter were never from the baby shelf. I had no interest in picture books with talking bears or little red wagons. My books came from the third, fourth, even fifth-grade section—the ones with chapters that stretched long and words that made me stop and think.

Miss Walker noticed.

She was a tall woman with glasses that caught the light just right and a voice that could hush a room like a Sunday sermon. She leaned over the counter, peering down at me, because I was so small my eyes barely cleared the edge of the wood.

"You picked these?" she asked, sliding the books toward her.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, clutching my hands tight, ready to defend my treasures in case she tried to take them back.

Her eyebrows lifted. Then she said, "Read to me."

Right there—under the hum of the fluorescent lights and the sweet musty smell of old pages—I opened one of the books and began to read. My voice trembled at first, then grew stronger, like it had been waiting for someone to call it forward.

Miss Walker listened. Really *listened*. Her chin rested on her palm, eyes soft but sharp, following every word that fell from my lips. When I finished the page, she nodded slowly, as if she'd just uncovered something rare and precious.

“You belong in these books,” she said. “Don’t let anyone tell you different.”

That moment sank into me like sunlight through glass. I walked out of that library with my arms full of heavy books, and my chest puffed out high. She hadn’t just permitted me—she’d given me proof. Proof that I wasn’t reaching too high. Proof that I could stretch beyond the limits people tried to hand me.

From then on, I went to the library after school. I stayed until it closed. Nobody bothered the little girl with the big books.

In Will Smith’s movie *Independence Day*, there’s a scene where he shoots the little girl carrying big books. I laughed the first time I saw it and thought, Hey, *that was me, Will*, the little girl with too many words and not enough space to fit them all.

At home, I’d crawl into my secret place—my bunk bed—and read for hours, intrigued by stories that carried me away from noise, from fear, from the ache of being unseen.

No one could find me there. No one would bother me.

That’s where I learned how to be alone.

That’s where I learned being invisible could feel like safety.

Because the truth was—no one was looking for me anyway.

But the books were.

And Miss Walker was.

And for a little Black girl with a big imagination and a heart too heavy for her age, that was enough.

Mama’s Weekend Job

Mama got another housekeeping job on the weekends. It was closer to home this time. The couple who lived there were older, with no children running around.

I was almost as tall as Mama now. When the lady opened the door and saw us, she smiled and said, “Oh, good, you brought your daughter. Teach her early to clean houses.”

Mama didn't say a word. Her lips pressed together like she was swallowing something hard.

I thought I had to clean too.

But once we got inside, Mama turned to me and said, "Sit on the couch and don't move. I'm polishing the silver so you don't have to. You are going to college."

Her words stopped me. They filled the room like sunlight sneaking through the curtains.

This time, she caught my eyes and held them. Just for a second. I didn't dare move.

I raised my hand, like in school, and asked if I could go to the restroom. Then I sat back down with my books — ready to read, ready to be everything she worked for.

Favorite Games

Jacks and Double Dutch were my world. My rhythm. My escape. My proof that joy could live even in concrete places.

I'd sit cross-legged on the floor, my little hands cupping those cool iron jacks—real ones, the kind with weight and grit, not the hollow plastic things they make today. At camp, I made a jar just for them, a safe place to store my treasures. I still have that jar. And every time I shake it, that rattling sound pulls me straight back to when the world was smaller, and happiness fit in a handful of metal stars.

Falana and my older best friend were the only ones who could beat me. They had that kind of confidence I admired—bold, sure, unbothered. But I was determined. My baby finger stayed scraped raw, sometimes down to the skin, from slamming those jacks against the concrete floor. When we played on smoother ground—linoleum, tile—I could really fly. The ball would bounce once, twice, my hand would flash, and I'd scoop them up like magic.

Sometimes I'd pause the game, dust on my knees, sweat on my forehead, and run inside to watch *The Flintstones*. Animation fascinated me—how drawings could move, talk, live. For thirty minutes, I disappeared into that colorful world. And then I'd run right back outside, the ball and jacks waiting for me like old friends.

Those games taught me rhythm, focus, and how to keep going even when my fingers bled. They taught me joy. And even now, when I see a little girl bouncing a ball or a jump rope slapping the sidewalk, I feel it—that tug of memory, that spark of play that still lives inside me.

Scared Straight

In the second grade, a girl in my class was murdered. They found her body in the incinerator, cut into small pieces. After that, my family made sure they knew where I was at all times. I didn't argue. I was too scared. The world no longer felt safe. I was willing to stay in the house or play close to the apartment — anywhere that kept me near home. The classroom felt different after that. Quieter. Even the troublemakers sat still for a while. The teacher's voice trembled when she spoke, trying to hold herself together for us. We didn't talk about it much, but we all knew. Her empty desk said everything. The seat where she used to laugh, the pencil marks she left behind — they became sacred, like we weren't allowed to touch them.

Outside, the grown-ups spoke in whispers, their faces tight with worry. Parents started walking their kids to school again, holding their hands a little longer before letting go. Every creak in the hallway made me jump. I started counting my steps from the door to the corner, memorizing the safest path. Childhood didn't feel like childhood anymore. It felt like survival.

The girl who was killed wasn't nice. She was a bully. Everybody knew it. She liked to bother people, pick fights just to see them squirm. Still, she was one of us — a kid. I never thought anyone could hurt her. She seemed untouchable, loud, and fearless.

The man who killed her was different. He was slow, people said. Quiet. He never bothered anyone. He'd walk around the projects with his head down, mumbling to himself. Nobody paid him much attention. Then one day, he became the monster in every parent's nightmare.

After that, everything shifted. The kids stopped laughing so loudly. The parents started looking twice at everyone. I didn't know who to be afraid of — the bullies or the quiet ones. All I knew was that danger could come from anywhere.

Chapter Seven: Pink Panties

Falana went to the same school as I did for a few years. Falana was so pretty and mean. She was mean because men were always wanting to attack her, and she wasn't having it. The principals and teachers at school would approach her, and she was in grade school. Boys followed us home in hopes of finding favor with Falana. Everywhere we went, men were attracted to her. We were the closest in age and were together after school.

Falana would walk to school and home with me every day. The school wasn't far — just across the courtyard, then a small street, and we were there. It wasn't the distance that made the walk feel long; it was the danger. Bad people lingered between those few steps, waiting for a moment to take advantage. So, every afternoon, I'd wait for her at our meeting place, and we'd walk home together.

Many days, boys trailed behind us, trying to win Falana's affection. She was beautiful and fearless — the kind of girl who drew attention without asking for it. This particular day, one of those boys, from what we called the **gangsta family*, was shouting her name. His people were known for crime and chaos in the projects. Ten brothers, seven sisters — a whole army. Everyone feared them. Nobody dared cross them.

But Falana wasn't "everybody."

When she met me in front of the school that day, a crowd of kids was following close behind her. The **gangsta boy* was yelling and cursing, his face twisted with anger. I didn't know what had happened inside the school, but it was clear everyone expected a fight.

Falana said nothing. She just grabbed my hand, and we started across the street toward home. The courtyard was nothing but dirt where grass should've been. We were almost safe when I couldn't hold my tongue any longer. I turned and screamed at him, "Leave my sister alone!"

He didn't hesitate — his fist landed square on my jaw, knocking me down into the dirt.

Before I could even cry out, Falana was on him like white on rice. I'll never forget the sight: her miniskirt flying, pink panties flashing as she moved, fists pounding, dust rising. Her body swayed in rhythm — fierce, fast, and unrelenting. She had on a miniskirt with pink panties. All I could see was Falana's bottom swaying back & forth in the air with her pretty pink panties peeking out, as if to say peek-a-boo, I see you. Dust was flying everywhere, and the boy was on the ground as she beat him black and blue. I wanted to run and get help, but there was no help to be found. The boy went down, and Falana didn't stop. She beat him black and blue right there in the courtyard.

The crowd was frozen — part shock, part awe.

When it was finally over, two of his brothers pulled her off him. The boy was crying, his face streaked with dirt and blood. The blow knocked me down, but my jaw did not swell like the **gangsta boy's* face looked when Falana was done with him. I held my breath. Certainly, they'd attack us both. But instead, the brothers stepped aside, making a path for us to walk through. Falana didn't say a word. She wasn't even dirty. She just took my hand, and we walked home.

That was the last time anyone followed us.

The word spread fast — how Falana beat one of the **gangsta boys* fair and square. Even his brothers said he deserved it. I didn't swell where he hit me, but he carried the black and blue bruises to prove what happens when you mess with Falana.

After that, people looked at us differently. They gave us space. And for the first time, walking home felt safe.

When we got home that evening, the sun was slipping low, brushing the buildings with that tired orange light that only comes after something big has happened. The courtyard was quiet — too quiet. Word had already traveled faster than we could walk. Faces peeked out from cracked windows and screen doors, watching us pass like we were royalty or trouble, depending on who you asked.

After dinner, when it was just the two of us in our room, Falana checked my face again. She touched my chin gently. "You okay, Mouse?" she asked, calling me by the nickname she gave me years before.

"I'm fine," I whispered. "You didn't have to do that."

She looked at me like she was seeing something I couldn't. "Yes, I did. People like that only understand power. You show fear once, and they'll never leave you alone."

That night I couldn't sleep. I kept replaying the fight in my head — the dust, the noise, the way everyone just stood there watching. I realized how small we were in a world that could turn dangerous in a heartbeat. I realized we weren't helpless. Falana showed me that. She carried herself like she had armor no one could see. The next morning, when we walked across the courtyard to school, nobody said a word. The same boys who used to whisper and laugh now moved out of our way. Even the *gangsta family* nodded when they saw us — not with friendliness, but with respect.

From that day on, people thought twice before they bothered us. And I thought twice before underestimating my sister.

She wasn't just my protector — she was my lesson in strength.

Looking back, that was the day I learned what courage looked like in a girl's body. Not the kind that comes from fighting, but the kind that comes from refusing to be afraid — even when everyone else is.

Ruby's family moved out of the projects, and she went to a different school. My friend was gone. I didn't run and play with the other children. I stayed to myself. I still had Miracle, my doll, and the library, my books. A new boy came to the school. We started playing together. His big sister wasn't having it. We were in the 3rd grade, and she was in the 5th grade. She would punch me hard, and laugh. Obviously, she didn't know about Falana.

Falana was in the 7th grade. I took Falana to her class and pointed this girl out to her while she was having class, and she didn't see us peeping through the window on the door. That was the last time I saw her and her brother. What did Falana do? I never asked. Just as quickly as they appeared, they left. Years later, it dawned on me they probably moved.

Miracle Disappeared

I came home looking for Baby, my doll. She was gone.

Her little body used to sit right on the corner of my bed—legs stretched out like she was waiting for me. I didn't have many things that were mine, but she was. I would talk to her when the walls got too close, when nobody else listened.

I searched the bed, under the pillow, behind the door, even in the dirty clothes basket. Gone. All gone.

My heart started to pound like I had lost a real person. Maybe I did. That doll held every secret; every tear I didn't want to let Mama see. Every whisper of "you're going to be alright." She gave me the mirror I didn't know I needed, proof of my own worth, proof of my beauty, proof that I belonged.

Hollow was in High school. She had taken my doll without my permission. She took her to school, parading her around like a prize. And then, just like that, she told me someone broke into her locker, and stole her. And that was the end. No doll. No apology. Just gone.

I stood there, small and still, trying to understand how something could disappear just because someone decided they wanted it.

What I lost that day was bigger than a doll. It was trust. Because when your sister, your own blood, takes something sacred from you, you learn fast that the world isn't safe. Not outside your home, not even inside it.

That night, the house felt emptier. I laid down on my bed, facing the wall, and imagined her right where she used to be. I whispered goodnight to the space she left behind.

And for the first time, I realized things you love don't always get to stay. Sometimes they're taken—quietly, like they never mattered. But you remember them anyway.

Because they were yours.

But here's the thing: I still love dolls. Maybe because of her. Maybe despite her. I collect them now—my shelves filled with brown-skinned beauties, treasures that belong to me and me alone. Every doll is a promise kept to the little girl I was. The one who cried silent tears over a loss nobody else thought mattered.

Even if she was stolen, she never left me. Nothing in this world belonged to me. Whatever I have, someone can take it without any consequences. Much anger is burning inside of me. I became very distant from Hollow after this incident. I felt worthless to her.

A few Christmases later, I received a new doll — a chocolate-colored beauty with long legs and shiny hair, the kind that came in a carrying case with tiny hangers for her fashionable clothes. She wasn't Baby, but she was pretty.

I smiled like I was supposed to. Everyone seemed happy that I finally had a new one. But I knew she wasn't the same. Baby had been mine. She'd held my secrets, my tears, my stories when no one else was listening.

This new doll was perfect — too perfect. She smelled like plastic and perfume, not home. I kept her dressed up and neat, on display. I played with her, but I never really got attached to her because she was not lifelike. You can't replace the first thing that ever made you feel safe.

The Summer Christmas Disappeared

There's one summer I will never forget—not because it was especially magical, but because it quietly slipped away, piece by piece, right under our noses.

It was the summer Sunny came home to visit with her two children from out of state. She hadn't been back in a long time, and we were all excited to have them in the house. We cooked too much food, and laughed a lot. There was this unspoken hope that, for a few days at least, everything could feel like family again.

But after she left, things felt... off.

At first, it was subtle. My model doll was missing—not just the doll, but the little carrying case and all her tiny clothes I'd carefully collected. Then Falana noticed that her organ was gone. And the board games—ones we would always play—were nowhere to be found. We checked closets, corners, and even the trash bins. There was no evidence of a break-in. But our belongings were gone.

No note. No explanation. Just... gone. Again, my doll is gone.

I don't remember us talking about it much afterward. It was easier to let it blur into the background, like a family secret nobody wanted to name. We all quietly swallowed our disappointment. Maybe out of love. Maybe out of disbelief. Maybe out of habit.

A few years later, we went to visit Sunny in the Coldplace. Her kids greeted us at the door, all grins and excitement. We hugged like everything was fine. We sat in her kitchen and laughed. I walked into her daughter's room. There, like ghosts frozen in time, were our Christmas presents. My model chocolate doll. The case. The clothes. Sitting on a shelf as they'd always belonged there. The little organ tucked in a corner. Board games are stacked neatly under the bed.

I stood in that doorway, staring.

Her daughter, my niece, was years younger than I was when I got that doll. She held it in her arms, admiring her most treasured thing. Her eyes were full of that innocent kind of joy. She didn't know the story behind it. How could she?

And I—I couldn't take it back.

None of us could.

We left everything there. Maybe out of grace. Maybe out of shock. But mostly, I think, because it wasn't her fault. She didn't steal a Christmas. She just inherited one.

That moment stayed with me. Not because of the doll or the games or the missing gifts, but because of what it taught me: Sometimes the people you love will hurt you in ways they'll never admit. And sometimes you let things go—not because it's fair, but because love asks you to protect what's innocent, even when what's right feels like a stone in your gut.

We never got that Christmas back.

But we never let it take away who we were, either.

The Trumpet

One day, Falana brought a coronet home from school. She said it was heavy, the case leaving little red lines in her hand. But when I opened it, the brass shone like gold in the afternoon light. I lifted it to my lips and blew. The sound startled us both — wild and broken, but alive.

Falana moved on to the piano soon after, her fingers always wanting something soft to touch. But I stayed with the trumpet. That horn became my voice when words got stuck in my throat.

We didn't have instruments at our school. My Band Director ordered me a brand-new trumpet. I was the very first person to own it. It was more beautiful than the coronet with

the dents. At school, music class was the one time I could make noise. At home, mama would say, “Stop all that noise. You are making everybody deaf.” When all the schools came together, our band was a sea of sound — drums, flutes, horns, all of us trying to be heard above the noise of our own lives.

I played for years. The trumpet steadied me when my thoughts ran wild. It gave me something to hold when everything else slipped away.

My band director told me about an audition at another school. I was still in grade school—maybe sixth grade. No one could go with me, but I decided I would try. I mustered up enough courage to catch the bus and go alone.

When I got there, all the other children had their parents with them. I looked around and suddenly felt embarrassed. The noise of instruments warming up filled the room, but all I could hear was the sound of my own heart pounding. I got scared. I didn’t want to look lost or out of place, so I quietly turned around and left.

That was a long, sad bus ride home. I felt like I had let myself down—and my band director, too. When I told my band director what happened, he looked at me with kind eyes and said he should have gone with me. I told him I was sorry, but I think he already knew how brave I’d been to try. He knew my mother. He actually was very fond of her. He favored her. Mama never paid him any attention. She was at least 10 years his senior. The band director tried his best to keep me playing the trumpet. He saw something in me—maybe discipline, maybe talent, just stubbornness. But that horn felt heavy in my hands, the mouthpiece cold against my lips, the sound never quite matching the music in my head.

I’d puff my cheeks, press the valves, and watch the notes scatter like pigeons startled from a sidewalk. He’d stand there, patient but firm, insisting I stay with it. “You’ve got the lungs for it,” he said. “You’ve got the fight.”

But in the projects, fights were everywhere. The fight was for survival. And the trumpet wasn’t survival—it was struggle dressed up as art. Still, I kept blowing, kept trying, because sometimes you don’t quit when someone believes in you. Sometimes you keep going to prove you can.

Years later, I realized that the trumpet wasn’t about music. It was about endurance. It was about learning to hold on when the sound doesn’t come easy, when the world tells you to quit. The band director wasn’t just teaching me notes—he was teaching me resilience.

I made it to senior band my freshman year of high school. I couldn’t stay focused on it.

Chapter Eight: The New Same Place

Everyone in the projects had to move.

One morning, the word just spread like smoke—*they are tearing down our side of the projects*. Nobody knew when, nobody knew where, but we all knew it was coming. You could feel it in the air, like the last day of school before summer—only this wasn't freedom. This was an eviction wearing a city badge.

Mama said we were moving to the other side of the projects. It sounded nearby, but it felt like another world.

When we moved to the other side of the projects, I thought everything would be different. New walls, new people, new start. But when we got there, the same families were already unpacking, just like us.

It was almost funny—like somebody picked up our whole building and dropped it on the other side of the street. Miss Johnson was still yelling at her boys from the window. Mr. Willie still sat on the steps with his brown paper bag, calling everybody *baby girl*. The same kids still ran up and down the hallways, their laughter echoing off new walls that already looked old.

Perhaps we didn't move at all. The projects just turned themselves around.

I knew we had brought our lives with us—same troubles, same stories, just a different backdrop.

Still, there was comfort in it. Familiar faces made it easier to breathe. You knew who was safe, who to stay away from, whose mama would feed you if yours was late coming home.

It wasn't a new beginning. It was a continuation. The same people, trying again, hoping this side of the projects might treat them a little kinder than the last.

I stood outside watching the neighbors carry boxes, mattresses, and plastic bags stuffed with everything they owned. Kids were crying over toys they couldn't find. Someone's curtains hung from a window like a goodbye wave.

When we got to the new side, the buildings looked the same—same cracked steps, same smell of grease and bleach—but it didn't *feel* the same. The air felt heavier, it knew we were starting over, whether we wanted to or not.

I sat on the new steps, watching the sun go down between the buildings, trying to remember what home used to feel like.

That's when it hit me—home wasn't the place. It was the people, the noise, the routine of what I knew. But the projects, no matter which side you lived on, always found a way to remind you: nothing stays still for long. Not even the poor.

The Day the Projects Fell

The powers that be decided the projects had to go. They said it was because of the crime, the drugs, the violence — but it felt like they were trying to erase us too. Thousands of people stacked on top of one another. All pushed into one corner of the city. We were the problem that needed to be cleaned up.

Everybody had to move.

The school stayed open. I still walked those same cracked sidewalks, past boarded-up doors and hollowed-out buildings that used to hum with life.

Demolition day, we were in class.

Not miles away, not in some forgotten corner of the city, but right across the street from the elementary school. We sat at our desks, the chalk squeaking on the board, while men outside set charges into the bones of buildings that had once held families. Not even a hundred feet away from where we learned our ABCs.

There was no concern for our safety. No evacuation. No warning. Just the rattling windows, the trembling floors, and the sound of walls giving way to dust and ruin.

It resembled the sky itself cracking open. The blast threw us to the floor. The earth roared and shook beneath us. For a moment, I thought the world was ending.

When we scrambled to our feet and looked out the window, we saw it — the building collapsing in on itself, floor by floor, a mountain of dust rising to swallow the sky.

When the final bell rang, we gathered our things as if nothing had happened. We had to walk home through the wreckage — broken glass crunching under our shoes, dust thick in the air, pieces of our old life scattered everywhere. The smell of concrete and smoke hung heavy. Windows gone. Doors gone. People gone.

No one thought to stop us. No one thought to say, *Children shouldn't be walking through rubble*. It was as if our lives were as disposable as the buildings they were tearing down.

We had to walk home through the wreckage — broken glass crunching under our shoes, dust thick in the air, pieces of our old life scattered everywhere. The smell of concrete and smoke hung heavy. Windows gone. Doors gone. People gone.

It was like walking through a graveyard of memories.

And yet, in that walk—through broken concrete and drifting ash, I learned how invisible we were to the people in charge, and how strong we had to be to keep walking anyway.

We were just kids, but every step through that debris was proof that survival had already become our second language.

Once again, I felt so mistreated.

They could've waited. They could've done it on a weekend, after school hours — when we weren't sitting in those desks, hearts pounding out of our chests. But they didn't. It was like nobody cared how it felt to be us — the ones left to watch our world crumble in real time.

The developers called it *progress*.

But to me, it was destruction. An experiment gone bad.

One classmate said it was awesome. He enjoyed the way the building collapsed on command. He talked about, the angles, the timing, the precision. He saw something different. It was designed to fall. HHHMMM...

He said one day he wanted to be the one to build things — or maybe destroy them. I understand his point of view. I only saw loss. But he saw a possibility.

And maybe that's what life in the projects taught us — how two people can stand in the same dust and see two completely different tomorrows. I needed a brighter tomorrow.

After the demolition, what was left didn't feel like home anymore. It felt like a ghost town.

Buildings stood half-broken, their windows hollow like empty eyes watching us walk by. Curtains fluttered in the wind where walls used to be. The air still carried that dry, burnt smell of dust and concrete. You could taste it when you breathed.

We had to walk past it every day to get home — the same path that used to be filled with laughter, jump rope songs, music from open windows. Now it was quiet. Too quiet. The kind of quiet that makes you feel someone is following you.

Sometimes I'd look for faces I used to know — the old man who played chess by the stairs, the girl who sold candy out of her backpack, the mothers sitting on milk crates braiding hair. But all of them were gone. Just echoes left behind.

We were still there, walking through it all — children picking our way through what used to be our world.

Shortly after that, we had to move again, because they were eliminating the remaining buildings. I didn't know we were moving until "moving day". Grab what you can and go. We were the last family to move from the building. It was the deadline to evacuate the premises. The electricity was cut off in the whole building. That meant the elevators

...didn't work.

The movers and my sisters started dropping things from the 10th and 11th floor windows—mattresses, chairs, boxes, whatever they could. It was faster that way. They tied ropes, sheets, blankets, towels, coats, rugs, and anything together to help lower the heavy items without breaking them. The stairwell was too dark, too narrow, too far, and too dangerous to carry everything down.

We had to walk down the dark stairwell, step by step, carrying as much as we could from the 11th floor. The air was thick with dust and memories. I could still hear the echo of kids running up and down those stairs, the laughter that filled the halls. Now it was silent—except for the sound of our footsteps.

I carried a box of my things—some personal items, books, and a few clothes—but it felt heavier with every floor we descended. When we finally reached the bottom, I turned around and looked up one last time. The building stood there like a giant shell, empty and forgotten, waiting for its turn to crumble.

Mama didn't say much. She just kept moving, determined to get us out before sunset. I ran back and forth, peeking out the window, trying to spot which of our things had survived the fall. It felt like we were tearing pieces of our life out by the roots and tossing them away. One of the ugly, old, fat movers wanted to put his hands on me. I'm in grade school, but I was built like my sisters. I punched him and stayed around my family to avoid him. I forgot about him while we were trying to move. My assignment was to watch the truck downstairs. I took my box and went downstairs. After a while, the movers are at the truck, loading and packing. Suddenly, fatso shows up. I screamed and balled my fists up preparing to fight. He was about to fight me, when Falana threw a bucket of water out of the 10th-floor window and barely missed him. We looked up and she screamed, "Leave her alone!!!" He was afraid after that. I was so happy! Thank you, Falana. She was the only one to stand up for me. When she came downstairs, I saw her pointing her finger in the mover's face. That was the last time I saw him. What did Falana do? I never asked. The rest of the movers continued loading and packing the truck. Finally, we had everything we could carry on the truck. We all piled in the truck to travel a few miles up the road to the next project, our new home.

By this time, I am used to things being taken from me. It hurt, but it was familiar. No one cried. So, I didn't either.

Chapter Nine: School

Junior High

After everyone moved out of the projects, the school was closed. That was the time to destroy the buildings when no one was inside or around. I had a few choices of schools to attend. One school was right across the street — but Mama worked there, and that alone was reason enough for me not to attend there. The other school was about three blocks away. It was for the students from the other side. They were bused to the school. We couldn't attend the school even though it was much closer to us. Mama had worked there once in the cafeteria. Genesis was a teacher and had worked there before. They knew the principal, and he allowed me to attend the school.

It was the first real shift in my life — a good one. The new school was a junior high. Seventh through ninth grades only. We had advisories and changed classes, like in high school. The students were bright, polished, kind — not perfect, but different. I made real friends there, some who still live in the corners of my life even now. My best friend from 7th grade and I added a best friend from the 8th grade. We became the three bears, the three little pigs, the three stooges, the three musketeers, and today, we are The Three Wise Women. My band director taught at this school too. I was able to continue playing the trumpet. I tried to sign up for dance class instead, which was the same time as band class. My band director came to dance and encouraged me to come back to the band.

I became popular, something I never expected. That year, they voted me *The Most Intelligent Girl in the Seventh Grade*. I didn't even vote for myself — I voted for my friend. When they called my name, I froze, certain it had to be a mistake. *Intelligent*. Not the *prettiest girl* or *best smile*. The most intelligent.

Grown men were attracted to me like my sisters now. People had always told me I was pretty, with my straight, pearly white, teeth, thick, kinky hair, chocolate skin, and big behind before big behinds were in. But this... this meant something deeper. It felt like my eyes had finally lifted from hell just long enough to catch a bit of light. People saw more than a sex toy when they looked at me.

In junior high, I met my true love. He was kind — the kind of boy who saw me when I didn't want to be seen. But I couldn't let him in. I was angry, afraid, and busy fighting off grown men. I didn't want to ruin his life because mine already felt broken.

I didn't know how to love him, so I did the only thing I could — I put him in the friend zone. He stayed there, patiently, like a light I couldn't face. We're still friends today. He never judged me, never asked for more than I could give. Even now, when I think of that time, I realize some people come into your life to show you what love looks like — even when you're too damaged to receive it.

When my sister got pregnant, she made me take birth control pills. I didn't understand what was happening, only that her mistake became my warning. She took me to the free clinic to get my little pink pack. I took them because she said I had to, because she was older and already carrying the consequences. I didn't know much about love or men, but I learned early that a woman's body was something to manage, to protect, to fear.

When Falana got pregnant, she made me take birth control pills. I wasn't even thinking about boys. I took them for two years before I ever had relations. She said she was protecting me, but it felt like she was protecting herself—from the look Mama gave her, from the whispers, from another reminder of what went wrong. I swallowed those pills every day, not because I needed them, but because fear was something passed down like hand-me-down clothes.

The HappyPlace Trip

Genesis was a seventh-grade teacher in Nobody, Bigtown. She decided to take her class on a trip to the HappyPlace. We would vacation for a week of fun. Since I was in seventh grade too, she invited me to come along.

It was my first time traveling away from home alone. I packed my things days before, folding and unfolding them again to feel ready. I could hardly sleep the night before. Mama gave me ten dollars for the trip — ten whole dollars. That was the first time she had ever given me that much money. I held it like it was gold.

When I arrived in Nobody, Bigtown, Genesis asked, "How much money did mama send?"

I smiled proudly. "Ten dollars."

She paused, then said, "Is that all? My students have a hundred dollars to spend."

The words hit me hard, like a slap I didn't see coming. My smile fell before I could catch it. I looked out the window so no one could see my face. Ten dollars suddenly felt like a secret I should've kept.

But Genesis must've seen something in my eyes. All week, she made sure I had everything the other kids had — snacks, tickets, souvenirs. She even bought trinkets for my sisters back home. I didn't know what to say. I didn't ask her to. She just did. I just watched her, trying to understand why she would do that for me.

That day, I learned how humiliation can sit in your chest like a stone — and how kindness can lift it, even just a little kindness.

I had fought so long against negative thoughts — now I was trying to think of *none at all*. Just quiet. Just peace.

Those good memories — the laughter between classes, the teachers who said my name representing someone worthy — they carried me through the nights when my father stumbled in, drunk again, and my mother turned away, pretending not to see.

Still, the fire burns. Quiet, steady, alive inside me.

One evening, Daddy was beating Mama's head against the concrete floor again. Her screams resembled death cries. Falana, Hollow, and I were in our bedroom, crying. The crying you try to swallow so nobody hears.

Falana said she was going to help Mama. Hollow told her not to. "Mama chooses Daddy over us," she whispered. Falana didn't listen. She ran out of the room.

A crash followed. Then silence.

When she came back, her chest was heaving, her eyes wide. "I knocked him down," she said.

Mama came in right behind her, face streaked with blood, sweat, and tears. She pointed at Falana and said, "If you ever interfere again, I'll put you out."

And just like that, something inside me shut down. I went numb — not angry, not scared, just *nothing*. I could not understand Mama's heart, the way she kept choosing him over us, over herself.

From that night on, we learned how to suffer in silence. Words dried up. Emotions got folded neatly and tucked away like clothes we couldn't fit anymore. Negative thoughts, negative feelings — all hushed.

I was born into that negativity, baptized in it. But I kept reaching for zero. For nothingness. For peace.

Baby boy

Falana announced she was pregnant by the worst boy in her high school. It should've been a scandal, but in our house, life didn't slow down for anyone—not even for a baby. As her belly grew round and full, we kept moving through our days. And Falana, Lord, she was still beautiful. Men would call out to her on the street, "Hey, pretty pregnant girl!" as if the glow made her shine even more.

One Saturday, she and I were playing cards on the bed. Falana suddenly froze and said, "My clothes are wet." Before we could even wonder about it, Genesis called. Falana told her what was happening, and Genesis screamed through the phone, "Your water broke! It's time for the baby to come! Get to the hospital!"

It was just Dad, Falana, and me at home. She kept trying to change clothes, but every outfit was soaked within minutes. Dad rushed her into a cab, and the two of them left

me standing in the doorway. I had never been that close to a birth before; I was terrified of everything I didn't know.

Mama came home just after they left. She grabbed her purse, ready to run out the door, but when she heard the news, I broke down. I begged her not to leave me alone because I was scared. She stayed. We sat together in a long, heavy silence.

Then the phone rang. Dad said Falana had the baby as soon as they arrived at the hospital. No waiting, no long labor—just bam, he was here. A boy. Healthy. Perfect.

I took my whole life savings—ten dollars—and bought him a brand-new outfit to come home in. I wasn't allowed to go to the hospital, so Mama took the little green suit to him. And a couple of days later, when I walked through the door after school, there he was, my nephew. The first baby ever born into the house with me. He was so beautiful in that little green outfit I'd bought him. Falana let him wear it every day until he grew out of it—maybe ten days. Oh, how I loved that baby.

Motherhood wrapped itself around Falana like a crown. She looked like a grown woman now—glowing, fuller, more beautiful than I had ever seen her.

And then, about a year later, Sunny came to visit with her children. We laughed and talked. But when she walked downstairs to her car to leave, Falana was ready. She had her bags packed, the baby's things packed, and in a blink, they were in the backseat, driving away with Sunny. Gone. Just like that. I felt the loss settle into my chest like another pain growing up as I waved goodbye. Nothing belongs to me. It doesn't matter how I feel.

That left Hollow and me in the house with my parents. The rooms felt bigger. Emptier. I had my own room now with a bathroom. Yeah, in the projects I had a bathroom in my bedroom.

Ready 2 Roll

I didn't realize it at first, but now Dad is searching for a new target.

At night, the house would go still. Too still. The kind of quiet that made the walls feel alive, listening. I slept with a lead pipe under the covers, fully dressed, jeans, socks, T-shirt, shoes. No pajamas. Pajamas were for girls who could sleep without fear.

I wanted to be ready. Ready to run.

That lead pipe was my protection, my piece of peace. I found it in the alley behind the building one day—cold, heavy, perfect. I kept it tucked right by my leg when I slept. I'd touch it before closing my eyes, to remind myself I wasn't helpless.

My father knew it too. He knew if he came into my room, I wouldn't freeze. I wasn't a little girl anymore. I'd swing my lead pipe. I'd scream. I'd make him remember my name. So, he left me alone.

Mama would pass by in the mornings, shake her head, and make a little joke. "You sleep ready to roll," she'd say, half laughing, half confused.

I'd grunt. It was easier than explaining the truth.

She never asked why I was sleeping that way. Never asked why I didn't wear a nightgown anymore, why I slept with my sneakers on my feet.

Maybe she didn't want to know. Maybe she already did.

So, I kept my clothes on. I kept my pipe close. Every night was a test of fear, of faith, of how long I could live in a house that was supposed to protect me but never did.

And in that strange stillness, I learned to live — half-awake, half-armored.

9th grade

Freshman year, I attended the same high school everyone in my family graduated from, The Project High School. The name alone carried weight. It wasn't just a building with classrooms and lockers; it was a rite of passage, a place where generations before me had carved out their survival, their pride, their stories.

Walking through those doors, I felt the ghosts of cousins, uncles, and sisters who had sat in those same desks, walked those same halls. Their laughter, their struggles, their victories seemed stitched into the walls. For them, graduating wasn't just about diplomas—it was about proving something to the world, proving that kids from the projects could rise, could endure, could claim a future.

For me, it was pressure and promise all at once. I carried their legacy like a backpack heavier than my books. Every test, every practice, every hallway fight or whispered prayer felt like part of a larger story I had inherited.

The Project High School wasn't glamorous. The paint peeled, the lockers jammed, and the textbooks were worn thin. But it was ours. And stepping into that place, I knew I wasn't just starting high school—I was stepping into a tradition, one that demanded I add my own chapter to the family's story.

The location and name had changed. They walked to school. I caught the bus instead of walking; it was too far. I didn't want to be at the project school all day. I signed up to be a co-op. I went to project school in the morning and co-op school in the afternoon. In my senior year, I would go to work in the afternoon. All the public schools had co-ops. There were many students from different schools. I met many people and made new

friends. I enjoyed my classes at the co-op school. They were challenging. Students focused more on learning than fighting.

My teen years were a storm. I learned to smile when I was hurting, laugh when I wanted to cry. Boys liked me, but I didn't trust them. I could feel danger in a look, hear it in a voice. I dressed plain on purpose, trying to disappear, in the crowd. Some days it worked. Some days it didn't.

I watched other girls fall in love, carefree, holding hands in the hallway like the world couldn't touch them. I wanted that. I wanted to believe in that kind of safety. But every time someone got too close, I pulled away. My body remembered things my heart hadn't healed from. I didn't know how to explain that to anyone.

So, I buried myself in surviving — school, friends, pretending. I had people around me, but emptiness was still my shadow. I was introduced to Mary Jane (marijuana) and alcohol. At first, it was curiosity—then it was comfort. I enjoyed getting high. It relaxed my mind and body. It made me forget all the bad things that were happening to me and helped me to be quiet and go with the flow. After hearing my mother constantly say I am like my dad, I did not feel bad about my behavior because this is what she repeated to me daily. I was able to maintain my grades and stay out of trouble. The goal was to stay away from my parents. When I realized I liked drinking and drugging, I tried to outsmart it. I started pouring water into my cup, pretending I was in control. I smoked just enough to stay calm, just enough to stay me. Mary Jane seemed to slow down the thoughts in my head. I told myself I wasn't like Daddy. I couldn't be. I didn't care who thought I was—I *knew* I wasn't.

When Falana got pregnant, she made me take birth control pills. I didn't understand what was happening, only that her mistake became my warning. She took me to the free clinic to get my little pink pack of pills. I took them because she said I had to, because she was older and already carrying the consequences. I took them for two years before I ever had relations. She said she was protecting me. She was right to protect me because we had to constantly keep our guards up. I swallowed those pills every day, not because I needed them, but because fear was something passed down like hand-me-down clothes. I didn't know much about love or men, but I learned early that a woman's body was something to manage, to protect, to fear. I scare straight easily.

Many people were attracted to me for various reasons. I had a boyfriend, a junior. I'm a freshman. I fell for the gifts, the good looks, the way he moved like he owned the hallway. He was on the football team, and he knew how to talk — smooth, sweet, a voice that promised better. For a while, I wanted to believe in him. I wanted that easy story.

Then the mask came off. The sweet talk turned sharp. Jealousy rose. The gifts came with strings. He kept accusing me of having other boyfriends. He was the one with multiple girlfriends. He had a fan club because he was good at sports. All the girls were jealous of me and wanted to fight me, but they were afraid to approach me. It was too much fussing and arguing when he was the guilty party. I didn't care about the other girls. He was not my future. I wanted out. I told him so. He didn't like being told no. He cornered me in hallways, in cars, in places where there were no witnesses. He tried to scare me with threats. One day, he slapped me. You can only slap me once, and you'd better expect to be slapped back. I fought back against him. I fought with everything I had — with my fists, with my voice, with the promise in my throat that he would not do any harm to me. I threatened him. I meant it. I slammed the door in his face, and left him on the porch. Mama wanted to know why I wasn't letting him inside. I told her he slapped me. She let him into the apartment. To me, she was on his side. I could have stayed quiet as Mama did. But I wasn't going to be another silent wound. I wanted him out of my life, and I got him out. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't neat. But he got the message that I wasn't the one.

For the first time, I gave Mama a few choice words — a piece of my mind I'd been saving for years. My voice shook, not from fear, but from release. All those swallowed feelings, all the times I nodded and stayed quiet — they finally came out. I didn't know if I was speaking to her or to the little girl inside me who'd been too afraid to speak at all. I wasn't her little girl in that moment. I was somebody tired of being told to hush.

My next boyfriend was different. He was kind — steady in a way that felt safe. He worked a full-time job while in high school. That kind of responsibility was rare. I admired that about him. We were together for 5 years, long enough for people to start whispering about marriage. Everyone thought it was only a matter of time. But love isn't enough when you can't understand one another or agree on anything. We had a communication problem. He'd tell his brother and his friend things he should have told me. I'd find out after the fact, standing there pretending not to be hurt. I wanted him to see me, to trust me with his truth. But he couldn't — or maybe he didn't want to.

So, he could be with them since that's who he listened to. It was difficult leaving him because he would try to make things right. He didn't want to break up. He was starting to prosper financially. People were shocked. They thought I was walking away from something perfect. But I knew better. I'd already seen what silence could do to a woman's spirit. I wasn't going to live inside that quiet again. Not all money is good money. I learned that real fast.

I started placing the good guys — the kind ones, the potential husbands — in the friend zone. It felt safer that way. If they stayed, my friends, we could always be friends. They wouldn't turn into someone I had to fight off or walk away from.

They stayed close, these good men. Some still call, still check on me after all these years. Maybe they saw what I was trying to hide — the girl who wanted love but didn't trust it, the woman who learned to protect herself by keeping her heart behind a fence.

Sometimes I wonder if I did it right — if saving myself also meant I kept love at a distance too long. Maybe one day, I'll learn to love. Not the kind that breaks you down, but the kind that feels like peace.

During my sophomore year, I received a scholarship to spend the summer among *the rich and the beautiful*. That's what I called them. Usually, the students were juniors when they received this honor. My parents couldn't afford the plane ticket, but the school covered everything — the flight, the dorm, the classes, even a summer job. The counselor said we earned it. He knew we would help each other. Miriam and I were two poor Black girls with the opportunity of a lifetime.

We clung to each other like sisters, wide-eyed and unsure, stepping into a world that didn't expect to see us there. My dorm looked like a hotel. My roommate was wealthy. The kind of wealth you could smell in her lotion, see in the way her room looked like she'd been there forever. When she found out she had to share the suite with me, her face dropped. But once she saw I was kind and didn't care, she softened. By the end of the summer, we were friends. She explained to me that she came every summer because her parents wanted to get rid of her. She even drove her pretty red sports car to the campus. That was the story of many of the wealthy students there. To me, it appeared they had everything, but they wanted the same thing I did. Attention, Love, and respect from our parents. I thought her red sports car meant *I love you*. She said they gave it to her to get her out of their face, and that's the same reason she was at the school every summer, along with the other regulars. I didn't tell her my story, but it was obvious I didn't have as many material things as she did. I told her I wanted the same thing from my parents, and it was an honor for me to attend the school for the summer.

My class was Play Production — my dream. I wanted to be an actress, to tell stories that touched people emotionally. Everyone else in the class had singing and dancing lessons, private tutors, fancy training. Everyone played the piano, everyone except me. I came with my raw talent from church and school programs. Still, I showed up ready to work. I couldn't run home like at the trumpet audition. I wasn't afraid this time. No running. The experience was great. Practicing our roles, designing, and setting up the stage was really exciting. My role was a nurse. I had a few lines and a monologue. The critics hated everyone in the play except me. The school newspaper featured my picture in it. I was a star. Everyone on campus knew me after that. In our first play, I was cast as the nurse. When the student critics wrote their reviews, they hated everyone in the play — except me. I was honored. I felt seen. I thought I had talent. 😊

In the second play, I was just an extra. I gave everything I had anyway. When grades came out, I got a C. It stung. I had never made a C before. I always made A's. Considering I didn't have lessons like everyone else, I was satisfied. My roommate's cousin was in my acting class. He loved me at first sight, the first night. You should have seen my roommate's face when he walked me back to the dorm. She tried to hide her surprise, but it showed — the slight raise of her eyebrows, the pause before she spoke. For a moment, I saw her measuring me again, deciding what kind of girl I was. But she didn't say a word. She just nodded, smiled even.

Something in me shifted that night. I realized I didn't have to shrink for anyone — not because of where I came from, not because of what I didn't have. I could belong anywhere my feet stood. That summer taught me that I didn't have to *wish* for a different life. I could *build* one.

On weekends, Miriam and I caught the train into the city — shopping, exploring, pretending we belonged there. I saw a possibility in my life. When summer ended and I came back home. The projects looked tired, smaller somehow. But I was changed. I had tasted another kind of life — one that whispered, *there's more waiting for you*.

This was my first time travelling so far away from home alone for the whole summer. I was so grateful for this opportunity. Life was better. Then I returned home.

Returning to the project school after coming from *The Rich and the Beautiful* made everything feel small — boring, even unacceptable. The hallways smelled the same, the gossip hadn't changed, and the dreams felt too thin for me now.

I'd already seen what life could look like somewhere else — where people spoke with confidence and expected things to go right for them. Back here, expectation was a luxury.

I went to the football and basketball games with my sisters when they were in high school. I'd already been to several proms. None of it excited me anymore. It was like watching reruns of a show I used to love — I already knew how it ended.

Honor society

Senior year, I was inducted into the Honor Society.

My teachers couldn't figure me out—how I could be so rebellious, drinking and drugging, and still make the honor roll.

They didn't know the chaos that lived under my calm.

The morning of the ceremony, I should've stayed home. I was so embarrassed I didn't go to the rehearsals. I hadn't gone to a single rehearsal, didn't know where to stand or when to smile. I was ashamed of being in the honor society.

The teacher in charge yelled at me, and I yelled right back.

We went at it like two tired souls trying to prove who was right.
I hadn't eaten breakfast, and by the time the ceremony started, I was running on fumes—anger, pride, and nothing else.

We had to stand the whole time.
The lights were hot, the air heavy, and before I knew it, my knees gave out.
I passed out right there on the stage.

The show went on without me.

I'm sorry for ruining the ceremony—for making a scene on a day meant for celebration.
But the truth is, I should've stayed home.
No one in my family came anyway.
Everyone in my family was smart. My success wasn't special.
It was expected. No big deal.

While other students looked out into the crowd and saw love smiling back at them,
I saw empty seats. And that kind of silence can break something inside you.

Everyone came to the graduation.
They smiled, clapped, and told me how proud they were.
I ranked number three in the class—not bad for a girl who wasn't trying.

That summer, Mama said I could be free now,
free because I'd be working for the rest of my life.
Freedom felt heavy.
It looked like long days with nothing to do
and long nights with everything I shouldn't.

I drank.
I drugged.
The world spun, and I let it.

My supplier was a woman who thought she owned me.
She'd look me in the eye, grin like she knew my future, and say,
“You're not going to college.”
She said it like a prophecy,
as if she was already cashing in on my downfall.

I'd laugh back—half-drunk, half-defiant—
and tell her she didn't know me.
But sometimes, late at night,
I wondered why she wanted me to fail.

I'd laugh right back at her,
drink her drink, smoke her smoke,
like I had nothing to lose and everything to prove.

But when the day came to leave for college,
I was gone.
No goodbyes. No looking back.
Just me and my suitcase,
leaving behind the nights that almost swallowed me whole.

Goodbye to the drinks.
Goodbye to the drugs.
Goodbye to everybody who didn't believe I'd make it out.

They were angry,
but I didn't care.
Let them be.

My family had programmed me for college—
that was the mission,
the expectation stitched into every report card and lecture.
So when I left, it wasn't a celebration.
It was a send-off,
like they were watching a train leave on time.

No tears. No hugs.
Just a quiet understanding—
I was doing what I was supposed to do.
And somehow, that made it feel smaller.

I was out of the house like everyone else.
No fanfare, no parade.
Just another bird pushed from the nest because that's what happens when you grow
up.
Mama didn't cry.
She'd done her part—kept me alive, kept me moving, kept me busy enough not to
break.
Now it was my turn to figure out who I was without her rules and routines.

Leaving didn't feel like freedom;
it felt like drifting—
like I was supposed to know how to fly,
but nobody had ever shown me how.

College

At the very last minute, I received a full four-year scholarship paying for everything. It was the only college that had accepted me, but it did not give me money. I had planned to work. That was truly a great gift. I followed my heart. College was very challenging. Unlike high school, I had to study. I went to college where EZ lived because I knew he would help me with my studies. Hollow was living there too. The school had a great accounting program. Upon graduation, I would have earned a bachelor's and a master's degree. For one year, we were both in college. He would only attend class to take the final exam and get an A for the class. I was struggling to go to class every day and needed a tutor. I was so mad at him. I caught the bus to his house to make him go to class. He was at home in bed. He thought I was hilarious. He went to class that one day.

When I first met Faith—my college buddy, my unexpected blessing—I gave her a piece of my mind. I thought she was looking down on me because I came from the projects. She just laughed and handed me a piece of hers right back. That was Faith, a sharp tongue, soft heart.

I thought she was weird at first, the way her eyes rolled around like she saw more than the rest of us. But she kept showing up, being herself. One day, we took a long ride—twenty minutes that felt like two hours—and drove past this beautiful house with big windows and a yard that looked like it had never known struggle. She pointed and said, “That’s where I live.”

Her family was wealthy compared to mine, but that wasn’t what shook me. What moved me was how much they loved each other. You could feel it as soon as you stepped in the door—warm, loud, together.

Faith was the oldest. She told me early on, “Whatever we do, we do it together—even if it’s wrong.” And she meant that. She had my back in ways I didn’t even realize I needed. Sometimes she didn’t agree with what I was doing, but she went along anyway—partly to protect me, partly to keep me out of trouble I couldn’t see coming.

The nightclubs and parties didn’t matter as much. We started going to her parents’ house instead. Father, mother, sisters, and that little brother who could play the piano like he had secrets in his fingertips. They welcomed me as I belonged there. Their kindness blessed me in ways I still feel today.

When I got the referral to move into my own apartment, the first person I thought about was Faith. I referred her too, and she ended up moving into the same building. That brought us even closer. Two girls from two different worlds, somehow choosing each other.

And after all these years, we’re still friends.

One snowy day, Hollow trusted me with her car. The back end was so lightweight it slid, spinning me into a pole. I braced myself for her anger—I knew it was coming. But for once, it didn't. She didn't get angry at all. She was more concerned about my safety.

EZ called me one morning, his voice already telling the story before the words even came.

"Uncle's gone," he said. "Somebody robbed him. Killed him."

Just like that. No softness. No warning. The kind of news that lands in your chest like a brick and sits there.

He asked if I wanted to come home for the funeral, but I couldn't bring myself to go. I wanted to hold on to the version of him that only we got to see—the flawed man, the funny man, the one who stumbled through life but still managed to love us in his own crooked way.

And Lord, the last time I saw him—

He favored a whole character out of someone else's imagination.

That pleather coat he swore was really leather. The one with that sad little patch of "dog fur" around the collar, like it was trying its best to be mink. He strutted in it too, like he owned the street, the city, the world.

And his hair...

Somebody had tried to perm it, bless their heart, but it went left instead of right. Straight as a ruler—but lime green. Not neon, not pastel—**lime**. Like a highlighter. Like he'd dipped his head in a bowl of Kool-Aid and said, "Yeah, that's it. That's the one."

What a vision.

What a way to remember him—bold, loud, messy, unforgettable.

Just like he lived. I remember the laughter and the love.

Marvin Gaye

When Marvin Gaye's father killed him, I mourned like I'd lost someone I knew. It hit too close. I wasn't just crying for him — I was crying for us. For me, for Mama, for my sisters. I knew what it felt like to live with a man who could snap, a man whose anger could fill a room like smoke. Every shout from my father made my stomach twist. Every silence afterward felt dangerous. When I heard the news about Marvin Gaye, I couldn't breathe. I remember sitting there, numb, listening to the radio. It felt like the world had confirmed my greatest fear — that a father really could kill his child. Marvin's story wasn't just his. It was the nightmare that lived in our house every day.

Chapter Ten: The Family Secrets

Dad's Damages

Now that I'm older, I can finally see the wreckage for what it was—the way Daddy's hands and habits left different cracks in each one of us. Back then, it was just life. Now, it's evidence.

Rumors suggested that Dad's mother was a lady of the night. It was never said outright, never spoken plain, but whispered in pieces, the way families pass down shame like it's a heirloom silver—wrapped, hidden, but still heavy in the drawer. He didn't know his real father, not even a name. Just shadows of men, silhouettes slipping through memory.

Mama said he used to complain—constantly, bitterly—about the many men entering and exiting the house when he was young. How their footsteps didn't match, how their voices were unfamiliar, how none of them stayed long enough to be called anything more than a visitor. He grew up watching doors open and close like a wound that wouldn't heal, learning early that people leave, that trust is fragile, that love is transactional.

Sometimes I wonder if the anger he carried, that sharp-edged rage he used like a shield and a weapon, was forged in those nights. A little boy lying awake, listening to strangers breathe in the next room, maybe in his room, trying to make sense of why nothing in his world stayed still. A child who learned to brace, to flinch, to expect disappointment before it arrived.

It doesn't excuse what he became. But it explains the shadows behind his eyes. It explains the emptiness he tried to fill with control, with fear, with power over the people who could not walk away from him the way those men did.

His childhood wasn't just hard—it was humiliating. And the humiliation left a mark on him that became a mark on all of us.

Mama's grandparents raised her in a home where the women had no rights or opinions. Their house wasn't just ruled — it was governed, like an old country kingdom where men spoke, and women obeyed. The air itself seemed to carry the command: **stay small, stay silent, stay grateful for whatever you're given.**

Mama grew up watching the women in her family fold themselves down to fit inside the narrow expectations set for them. She learned early that questions were disrespectful, desires were sinful, and having a voice was dangerous. The women didn't laugh too loudly, and they were not allowed to disagree. They lived their lives with eyes lowered, hands busy, and dreams tucked into the hem of their aprons.

She used to tell us stories about how decisions were made at the dinner table—men talking over plates of food while the women hovered in the doorway, waiting to be dismissed like hired help. Her grandmother moved like a shadow in her own home, her strength visible only in the quiet, secret ways she held the family together. Mama absorbed all of that—the silence, the sacrifice, the way a woman could disappear without ever leaving the room.

I think that house raised her to believe she didn't have the right to want anything more. It taught her to endure instead of challenge, to bend instead of break away. And that legacy followed her into motherhood, into the choices she made, into the way she stayed with a man who hurt her.

Not because she loved the pain, but because she had been taught that a woman's suffering was normal. Expected. Even honorable. You stay married no matter what. Mama would say she was a glutton for punishment. She never said it with pride—more like a tired confession, the kind that slips out when someone finally admits they've been carrying their own hurt like a backpack full of stones.

She'd shake her head, half-laughing, half-defeated, as if she couldn't quite believe how many times she had stayed, how many times she had forgiven what should have never been done. It was her way of naming the cycle she couldn't break, the way she kept returning to the same wounds like she expected them to hurt less the next time.

But underneath her words was something softer, sadder: a woman who had been raised to endure everything and question nothing. A woman who thought suffering was her duty, her inheritance. A woman who learned to blame herself for the pain she lived through instead of recognizing the cruelty that caused it.

When she said she was a glutton for punishment, what she really meant was this: **she didn't know she deserved better.**

Mama walked into adulthood already trained to survive in silence. And in her own way, she passed that lesson on to us—until we learned to ask why.

Genesis was home visiting with her baby while her husband served overseas. Daddy tried to attack her, bold as anything, like she was his to reach for. Genesis called her husband long-distance, her voice shaking across oceans. He sent his father straight to our apartment door, and that was the last night Genesis ever stayed under Mama and Daddy's roof.

Sunny, Lord... she carried her wound on her sleeve. She called herself Daddy's girlfriend, half-joking, half-truth. Daddy would slip into her bed in the dark while she slept beside Genesis, Mama in the next room pretending not to hear life breaking open. Folks

around the neighborhood whispered that Sunny was fast, promiscuous. They never knew the real story. They never knew the cost.

Daddy hurt Hollow as a baby. He destroyed her so badly that she carried it for life. Female problems for life. Twisted womb, Daddy called her, like he had named the damage himself.

EZ escaped the worst by being away at school most of the year. But even he wasn't spared. One visit home, Daddy tried to swing on him. EZ hit him once in the chest, and Daddy folded to the floor like wet laundry. Whenever EZ came around after that, Daddy kept quiet. Fear will humble a man faster than love ever could.

Falana, though... she fought. She was the only one who came back at him with fire. She told Mama everything Daddy was doing. Mama didn't flinch. Didn't blink. Didn't lift a hand. Silence was her shield, her prison, and her permission. Falana tried to poison Daddy once. She pulled a gun on him another time. She even fought Mama. Screaming, begging her to see, to believe, to choose us. But Mama stayed loyal to her blind spot.

And Falana... she carried her own shame heavily. The family thought the boy from school got her pregnant. That lie was easier to live with than the truth—that Daddy was the father of her baby.

These events became the foundation on which my life was built. Pain ruled my family, and from that soil grew fear, anger, and hatred. That was the atmosphere that raised me. Yet somehow, even as a child, I knew to talk to Jehovah. I spoke to Him when no one else would listen.

As I grew older, I was told to be silent. *What goes on in this house stays in this house.* My voice became dangerous. My truth became forbidden.

My family introduced me as “the last pea in the shell. We didn't want her, but we had to have her.” Those words settled into my bones. I felt unwanted, tolerated rather than loved. I was born into a negative environment and raised on rejection.

I carried questions no child should have to ask:
Why did you have me if you didn't want me?
Why am I here if my existence was a burden?

Those questions followed me for years, shaping how I saw myself and the world—yet even then, something inside me refused to disappear.

Now that I'm old enough to stand back and look at it all, I see how each of us walked away with our own limp. Our own private scar from the same man.

As a result of all those damaging events, my heart grew heavy—too heavy for a person to carry. It wasn't just broken; it felt shattered beyond anything I knew how to piece back together. I walked around with a quiet ache inside me, something lodged deep, like grief that never had a funeral. I learned early how to keep my face straight. How to move through school, church, and family gatherings as if I wasn't splintering on the inside. But the truth was simple: my heart had been broken past repair long before I even understood what a whole one was supposed to feel like.

My heart was carrying a weight I didn't have the language for. A heaviness that settled in my chest and refused to lift. I tried to focus on school—bury myself in books, lectures, anything—but pain has a way of following you like a shadow. I was struggling, but, I was still managing.

By my second year of college, the dorms filled fast, and I needed somewhere to land. Hollow lived close to campus. Close enough to help, close enough to hurt. Too many rules. Too much rent. She knew I had a scholarship and treated it like an extra paycheck with her name on it.

EZ was married with a child. He and his wife opened their door to me. One of her friends referred me to an apartment I had already applied for, and that referral made all the difference. After six months, suddenly, I had a place off campus. No bunk beds. No shared walls. No voices. Just me. My thoughts. And a silence so loud it followed me from room to room.

EZ got me a weekend job at his company. Just Saturdays and Sundays. Just enough money to pass for stable. I learned how to look okay. How to say I was fine without moving my lips.

I wasn't living.

I was managing.

Until Mama disappeared.

Days passed. Then weeks. When you grow up in chaos, silence feels dangerous. I finally called someone back home and asked them to find her. When she called me later, she whispered she had left the house to stay with a friend because of Daddy. My peace—what little I had—shattered again. My mind never rested. Negative thoughts played on repeat, dragging me through memories I didn't ask for.

My peace was always disturbed because, I always had negative thoughts playing in my head. I couldn't focus on my studies or enjoy college. I was surviving until I didn't hear

from Mama for a long time. I finally called someone to find her. She said she left the house to stay with a friend because of Daddy.

My senior year, everything fell apart. I couldn't concentrate. Couldn't enjoy college. Couldn't even pretend anymore. I was failing my classes, sinking fast, and eventually I lost my scholarship. So close to graduation. And still—nothing from Mama.

One day, I called the house. Daddy answered.

Daddy never answers the phone.

His voice was sharp, almost suspicious as he asked, "Where's your mama?" That sent fire through me. I hung up, shaking. Something wasn't right. I called around until someone found her.

When she finally got to a phone that night, she told me Daddy had tried to hurt her again. She ran out of the house with nothing but fear pushing her feet. She left the home she paid for—every bill, every note—because her life was on the line. Hearing that broke something open in me. Any thoughts I had left about school just dissolved. My mind was gone.

I flunked out and went back home, defeated but determined. I told myself I'd finish school from home, one semester at a time if I had to. I didn't want to go back—not to that house, not to that history—but something in me felt pulled. My heart was telling me Mama needed me.

I sat out one semester, then enrolled in a local college. Daddy was still drinking, still using, but the fighting had stopped. Still, he wanted me out of the house. Mama stood toe-to-toe with him. She told him I contributed more to the house than he ever did. And it was true. I had bought a car by then—my first car ever—and Mama lit up when she realized I could get her where she needed to go. She rode in that car like she had wings.

And somewhere in the middle of all that chaos and courage, Mama made a decision. Daddy had to go.

Daddy didn't leave easily.

When a man has built his whole kingdom on fear, he doesn't surrender the throne without a fight. But Mama had reached her breaking point. Something in her spirit had changed. The woman who used to tiptoe around his moods now stood firm, shoulders squared, voice steady. She wasn't yelling. She wasn't crying. She was done.

I watched it happen in real time—the shift in her. The way she moved through the house was with a clarity I'd never seen before. She was no longer asking him to stop drinking, no longer begging him to be decent. No longer hoping this time would be different. She

had seen death in his eyes too many times, and this time she saw her own life flash instead.

She said, **“He has to go.”**

And this time she meant it.

Daddy paced the house like a storm. Slamming cabinets, muttering under his breath, drinking, disappearing, returning. His chaos had a rhythm we’d lived with for years, but now Mama didn’t flinch. She always had a job. She had a daughter with a car. She had a plan. And she had finally realized that survival required more than endurance. It required escape.

I was juggling school, work, and this constant tension at home. Every night I came in from class, I scanned the rooms, listening for danger. Trauma teaches you to assess a room before you even shut the door. But even with all that fear simmering in the walls, there was also something new rising—hope. A tiny flicker, but steady enough that I felt it.

One morning, Mama told him straight out:

“You’re leaving this house.”

Daddy laughed like she was telling him the sky was green. He brushed her off and went about his day. But Mama didn’t back down. She wasn’t afraid of his anger anymore. Something stronger had replaced fear—her will to live.

And slowly, day by day, he realized she wasn’t bluffing.

SKELETON

One day, when I pulled up to the house, Dad was outside. He looked like a walking skeleton. His skin was ashy white, like the ash from the cigarettes he smoked. He looked like a skeleton out of the grave. He looked like something out of Michael Jackson's Thriller video. I walked past him as he approached the car. He followed me into the house, mumbling something. He was drunk, so I didn't try to understand him. Mama was in the house. When she saw me, she told me to heat the food in the microwave. She was so nervous. I felt very bad vibes. I wanted to leave the house, but I couldn't leave Mama. She didn't want me to leave. Dad was in rare form. He was screaming and yelling by himself. We went to the kitchen, and I put the food in the microwave for a few minutes. The microwave was in a corner. There was no room to run. No way out. I was watching the microwave, turning my back to my dad, trying to ignore him. As I turned around, he grabbed me by the throat, and I couldn't breathe. I fell to the ground, grasping for air. My eyesight was starting to fade as I fell to my knees, trying to reach for something to hold on to. Then I saw Mom hit Dad with the broom to get him off of me, just as I passed out. The pasture was so beautiful here. I could rest, sleep, and stay here forever. I went to a beautiful garden. There were flowers everywhere, as far as my eyes could see. It reminded me of the scene in The Wizard of Oz when they were in the field of lilies, and it put them to sleep. It was so beautiful and peaceful, such sweet peace. Suddenly, I heard my name being called. The voice said, "You have to go back". I replied, "I want to stay and sleep here forever". Suddenly, I was popped back into the living room of our house. The phone rang. Genesis was on the phone, calling from Bigtown. The neighbor called Genesis. She asked, "Did you kill Daddy?" "What? No", I was shocked. She proceeded to inform me that Dad was dead and Mama was in jail. I remembered Dad choking me. I was devastated by the news. I knew I had to turn myself in. It was unfair for Daddy to haunt us from the grave.

Immediately, I went to the City Jail and turned myself in. I asked the police to release my Mama because I was the one who committed the murder. I was fingerprinted, had a picture taken, and went through all the other necessary procedures. I could tell the employees didn't want to take me through the process, but it was their job. At first, the police and the warden had jokes. Mother and daughter in crime together, haha. But after a few minutes, they were saying that we were innocent. They said they could tell by our behavior that we were not criminals. They held both of us. The warden was a very beautiful, Amazon warrior-type of woman. Mother and daughter in crime together, she laughed. When she made her rounds and saw us behind bars, separate cells but next to each other, holding hands, dangling outside of the cell. I was praying. She said we were not criminals and offered Mama a bed. Mama refused because she wanted to stay with me. I admitted to the murder. After a few hours, which felt like days, Mom was released. I was left alone. I was scared, afraid, and cold. I grabbed the bars of the jail cell. I was

about to scream, when suddenly I felt a tap on my shoulder. When I turned toward the cell, I didn't see anyone, but I could feel a sweet, peaceful, warm presence all around me. I know it was the spirit of God engulfing me with a big hug to keep me warm and safe. I prayed without ceasing and trusted God. God asked me what I wanted. I wanted to graduate from college and walk away free without a record. EZ and Hollow came to the jailhouse. Only one person could visit. EZ came up to the visitor's station. He was able to make me laugh even at a time like this. It was 24 hours before I could appear before the judge.

By this time, Genesis had arrived from out of town. Genesis had a scheduled trip paid for by her company to Smartland. She cancelled it to fight on my behalf.

In 24 hours, Genesis, Mama, and our pastor were in the judge's chamber. My Mama, Genesis, and my pastor appeared in court for me. The judge stated he had never seen a pastor come out to support a murderer before. I must be innocent. The Judge released me into the care of the pastor and assigned counseling sessions for me to attend. It helped that I was in college and attended church regularly, confirmed through my family and pastor.

We hired a good lawyer. A real one.

There went my life's savings. Mama helped cover the rest. Between us, we scraped together hope and handed it over in installments.

When Genesis heard how much money we'd put up, she asked to borrow it. I remember blinking, slow, like my eyes needed time to catch up to what my ears had just heard. She always carried herself like money had never been a problem. She did well for herself. For her family. And still, she asked.

All I could think was, *does she understand my life is on the line?*
If we give her this money, what happens to me?

Mama didn't hesitate. She said no. Firm. Final. I loved her for that.

They sent me to counseling—two sessions. I listened, but I could tell something was missing. God wasn't in the room. Not in the counselor. Not in most of the people sitting in those chairs. I told my lawyer I couldn't do it. Mama said I should hush and go along.

But the lawyer got me excused.

I continued counseling with my pastor instead—the only place my spirit could breathe. I still had to report to my PO. Rules were rules.

The day of the trial, Hollow drove us—Mama and me. On that ride, for the first time, she spoke kindly. She said she believed me. She said the charges would be dropped. I held her words carefully, like glass.

On my twenty-fifth birthday, the judge threw the case out of court.

Just like that.

No charges.

No record.

Freedom.

God favored me. I knew it deep in my bones. Hallelujah didn't need to be shouted—it rose on its own.

I was still in college then, still standing, still moving forward. Graduation was finally in sight. God had answered my prayers.

Every year on my birthday, I remember.

Not the fear.

Not the waiting.

But the gift.

Freedom wrapped in grace.

Freedom didn't feel like shouting.

It felt like exhaling for the first time in years.

The case was gone, but the weight lingered. I still woke up listening for bad news. Still measured my steps. Still spoke softly, as trouble might overhear me. Deliverance doesn't erase memory—it teaches you how to live alongside it.

I went back to class differently. Older. Sharper. I sat in rooms where people complained about exams and parking tickets, and I wanted to tell them how close life can come to disappearing. How fast can your name turn into a number? I said nothing. I had learned when silence was safer.

God had carried me through the fire, but He hadn't promised me ease. He promised me purpose.

Graduation was coming. A future I hadn't dared to imagine was standing in front of me, asking if I was ready. I didn't know what was next. I only knew this:

I was still here.

I was still called.

And my life—my real life—was finally beginning.

Search Your Heart, Mind, Body, and Soul

To search your heart is to face the wounds you buried.

To search your mind is to confront the lies you were taught.

To search your body is to acknowledge every bruise it remembers.

To search your soul is to ask who you were before survival shaped you.

I spent years looking outward for the thing I thought would make me whole. Approval from my family. Praise from teachers. Love from people who only ever gave me pieces of themselves. I used to think love had to come from somebody else's mouth. From a man's hands. From my mama's approval. From the world saying *yes, you're good enough*. But the world never said yes. My mama didn't know how to say it. And the men I thought loved me only left bruises—some on my skin, some in places nobody could see. So, I grew up starving. Not for food—though there were nights I knew hunger—but for someone to point at me and say, *you matter*.

It took me years to realize I had to say it to myself.

I chased it like water in a desert, never realizing the well I needed was buried deep inside me.

It wasn't until the nights grew heavy, when the mirror stopped being just glass and turned into a truth-teller, that I heard the quiet whisper: *Search your heart*. So, I did. I looked into the cracks, the wounds, the little girl still waiting to be seen. She was scared, fragile, but she was still there. I wrapped her in forgiveness.

Search your mind, the whisper said next. My thoughts had been soldiers, marching to the drumbeat of shame, comparison, and doubt. I had to unlearn the lies, one by one. I had to teach my mind gentleness, remind it that I am more than my mistakes, that brilliance lives in me too.

Then came the body. The one I had judged, hidden, starved, punished. I laid hands on myself as if I were sacred—because I am. I thanked the stretch marks, the scars, the breath in my lungs. I started moving not to shrink, but to celebrate. For the first time, my body felt like home.

And finally, the soul. That eternal flame that no storm had managed to extinguish. I sat in silence, prayed, cried, listened. My soul was patient with me, waiting for me to remember her. And when I did, she lit me up from the inside out.

It wasn't an overnight transformation. It was a daily search. A daily choice. But somewhere in the rhythm of those searches, I found love. Real love. Not borrowed, not begged for, not half-given. Love that began and ended with me.

And once you taste that kind of love, you never forget it. You never lose it. Because it's not outside—it's stitched into your very being.

So, when I tell you to *search your heart, mind, body, and soul*, I'm telling you this: the love you've been waiting for is already yours.

Search Your Heart, Mind, Body, and Soul

There comes a point in life when the noise around you becomes too loud to ignore, but the noise inside you becomes even louder. That's when the real search begins—not for answers out in the world, but for the courage to sit still long enough to hear your own truth.

For most of my life, I had been moving. Running. Dodging. Surviving. I thought motion meant progress, and silence meant danger. But there was a day—maybe it wasn't a single day but a slow unraveling—when my heart, mind, body, and soul all demanded to be heard at the same time. And none of them were whispering anymore.

My **heart** spoke first. She was tired. Not tired from loving, but tired from holding everything in. Tired of beating through fear. Tired of pretending nothing hurt when everything did. My heart had its own memory, its own bruises, its own list of moments she had never healed from. I had never asked her what she needed. Survival didn't leave room for questions like that.

Then came my **mind**—sharp, restless, always calculating what to say, where to stand, how to protect myself before danger even arrived. My mind was a fortress built by a child who had to think like a grown woman. It took years to realize that intelligence born from trauma feels more like exhaustion than brilliance. My mind had been my shield, but it had also been my prison. I searched it anyway. Turning over the stories I had been told, the lies I had believed, the truths I was too afraid to speak out loud.

My **body** was last to speak, but when she did, she told the truth without stuttering. The body always does. She remembered every slammed door, every sleepless night, every time I slept fully dressed just to feel prepared. She remembered the moments my spirit tried to leave before I was ready. She remembered every attack I dodged and every wound I didn't. My body had kept score long before I knew the game had started. She had carried the weight, the fear, the tension in my jaw, the tightness in my chest, the running that never stopped even when I was standing still.

And then—quietly, almost shyly—my **soul** stepped forward. My soul had been whispering for years, but I was too busy surviving to hear her. She asked me the only question that mattered: *Who were you before the world taught you to shrink?* I didn't have an answer. Not then. But the search began right there, in that silence, where my soul finally had space to speak.

Searching your heart, mind, body, and soul is not a peaceful journey. It is a tearing open. It is looking at the child you used to be and admitting how much you abandoned her just to stay alive. It is confronting the parts of yourself you hoped no one would ever

notice. It is realizing that some of the damage wasn't your fault, but the healing is your responsibility.

But it is also power. Real power. The kind that doesn't come from pretending to be strong, but from deciding you no longer have to carry what was never yours.

And so, I searched—slowly, painfully, honestly. I didn't always like what I found. But every step toward myself was a step away from the chaos that raised me. Every truth I faced made room for a new one: that I deserved peace, not just survival. That I deserved joy, not just endurance. That I could build something whole out of the pieces I used to hide.

This was the beginning of my becoming—the moment I stopped running from myself and started searching for the woman I was always meant to be. Finally, I have reached ground ZERO. The next book is *Born in the Black and Blue, Ground Zero*.

Self-Journey: Study guide

1. To search your heart is to face the wounds you buried.
2. To search your mind is to confront the lies you were taught.
3. To search your body is to acknowledge every bruise it remembers.
4. To search your soul is to ask who you were before survival shaped you.

This guide encourages a deep, multi-faceted journey into self-awareness, aiming to uncover your authentic self and promote healing.

To use this as a study guide, approach each point as a prompt for reflection and self-inquiry:

1. **To search your heart is to face the wounds you buried.**

It means sitting with the memories you promised yourself you'd never revisit—the ones you prayed would dissolve with time. It's choosing to reopen the boxes taped shut in the corners of your chest, letting the truth breathe again. It is a quiet, trembling courage: looking at the places where love was mishandled, trust was broken, and innocence was taken too soon. Searching your heart isn't about blaming. It's about finally listening to the ache that has been whispering your name for decades.

Your heart remembers every goodbye, every silence, every promise broken before your eyes. This step asks you to sit with the memories you've packed away—the ones that shaped how you love, how you trust, and how you protect yourself.

Reflection Prompts:

- What memory have you avoided because it hurts too much?
- Which relationships shaped the way you give or withhold love today?
- When does your heart feel the heaviest?
- What does your heart need right now that you've never given it?

Self-Journey: Study Guide — Healing Edition

Your heart carries echoes—of betrayals, of disappointments, of childhood aches you never had language for. Healing begins when you finally turn toward the pain instead of turning away.

Affirmations for the Heart

- *My heart deserves honesty, tenderness, and rest.*
- *The pain I acknowledge loses its power to control me.*
- *I am allowed to outgrow the hurt that shaped me.*
- *My heart is learning to trust its own rhythm again.*

Healing Practices

Heart Check-In Ritual

Sit quietly with one hand on your chest. Breathe deeply. Ask your heart:

What are you still holding that isn't mine anymore?

Letter to the Wound

Write a letter to one of your buried hurts. Don't explain—just tell your truth.

Releasing Breathwork

Inhale for four counts, hold for four, exhale for six. Repeat ten times.

This helps the body let go of emotional residue stored in the chest.

- **Actionable Step:** Engage in contemplative practices like journaling or meditation to identify past emotional wounds and the coping mechanisms developed around them.

Journal Space:

Write freely. Don't edit yourself.

2. To search your mind is to confront the lies you were taught.

The lies that sounded like family rules. The lies that paraded as “that’s just how life is.” The lies that made you shrink to fit, apologize for existing, and doubt the brilliance everyone else could see. It means holding each belief up to the light and asking: *Who gave this to me? Why did I believe it? And does it still get to live here?* Searching your mind is reclaiming the power to think for yourself again—after years of letting fear and survival think for you.

Some lies came disguised as lessons. Some showed up as rules or family traditions. Some grew roots because you heard them so young, you didn’t know anything different. This part of the journey is about reclaiming the truth.

Reflection Prompts:

- What belief about yourself have you carried that never truly belonged to you?
- Who taught you a lie about your worth, intelligence, or potential?
- What thoughts repeat in your head that you know aren’t yours?
- What truth are you ready to replace those lies with?

Self-Journey: Study Guide — Healing Edition

The mind is a house with old rooms—some filled with inherited beliefs, others filled with survival thoughts. Searching your mind means deciding what stays and what must be evicted.

Affirmations for the Mind

- *Every thought is not a truth; I choose what I believe.*
- *My mind belongs to me—not to fear, not to old voices, not to the past.*
- *I am capable of rewriting the stories I grew up inside.*
- *I release any belief that shrinks me.*

Healing Practices

Rewrite the Narrative

Pick one negative belief about yourself. Write it down. Then write the **truth** beneath it.

Example:

Lie: I am difficult to love.

Truth: I was taught that by people who couldn’t love me well.

Mind Declutter Exercise

List thoughts you think every day.

Circle the ones that uplift you and cross out the ones that betray you.

Silence Practice

Spend 2 minutes a day in stillness. No phone, no noise. Let the mind settle so truth can rise.

- **Actionable Step:** Question deeply held beliefs and societal narratives. Determine which ideas genuinely resonate with your true self versus those that were imposed externally.

Journal Space:

Let your mind unravel the stories it's been holding.

3. **To search your body is to acknowledge every bruise it remembers.**

Not just the ones that faded from the skin, but the ones that settled in your hips, your shoulders, your posture, your sleep. Your body has always been the historian—it kept the score even when your heart tried to forget and your mind tried to erase. Searching your body means recognizing the tension you carry like armor, the flinch you never meant to learn, the exhaustion that comes from living on high alert. It is honoring the vessel that held you through every storm—and finally letting it rest.

Your body doesn't forget. It stores fear in your shoulders, grief in your stomach, anxiety in your breath. This step invites you to honor the physical places where survival took root.

Reflection Prompts:

- Where in your body do you carry tension, fear, or old memories?
- What part of your body feels safest? What part feels guarded?
- What physical responses do you notice when you feel threatened or overwhelmed?
- What does your body need from you—rest, nourishment, gentleness, forgiveness?

Self-Journey: Study Guide — Healing Edition

Your body has carried you through things you never should have experienced. It has been your shield, your witness, your companion. Healing begins when you stop ignoring the messages written in your muscles and bones.

Affirmations for the Body

- *My body is not my enemy; it is my historian.*
- *I honor the places where pain lived and the strength that kept me alive.*
- *My body deserves care, nourishment, and gentleness.*
- *I am learning to feel safe inside myself.*

Healing Practices

Body Mapping

On a blank page, draw the outline of a body.

Mark where you feel tension, heaviness, or numbness.

Next to each area, write what that part of you remembers.

Grounding Technique

Place both feet on the floor. Press down lightly.

Feel the weight in your legs.

Say to yourself: *I am here. I am safe right now.*

Self-Soothing Touch

Wrap your arms around yourself or place a hand on your heart and your stomach.

This signals to your nervous system that you are cared for.

- **Actionable Step:** Practice mindfulness and listen to your body's physical sensations. Acknowledge how stress and past trauma may be held physically and explore holistic healing modalities.

Journal Space:

Listen to what your body has been trying to say.

4. To search your soul is to ask who you were before survival shaped you. Before the fear. Before the responsibility. Before the expectations. Before life demanded that you grow up too fast. It is asking: *What did I love? What did I dream? Who was I trying to be before life taught me to disappear?* Searching your soul is peeling back the defenses, the roles, the masks—and finding the version of you who was never broken, only buried. The you who is still waiting to rise.

Self-Journey: Study Guide — Healing Edition

4. Search Your Soul

To search your soul is to ask who you were before survival shaped you.

Your soul is your untouched self—the one not defined by struggle, trauma, or expectation. It is where your imagination, innocence, and purpose live. Soul searching is remembering what life made you forget.

There is a version of you untouched by trauma, untouched by responsibility, untouched by fear—a self that existed before life demanded you become more than a child could handle. This step helps you meet that person again.

Reflection Prompts:

- Who were you before life got heavy?
- What did you dream about when no one was watching?
- What parts of yourself disappeared so you could survive?
- How can you begin to reclaim the pieces of your soul that were abandoned?

Affirmations for the Soul

- *My soul is older and wiser than my wounds.*
- *There is a part of me that trauma could not break.*
- *I am reconnecting with the person I was born to be.*
- *My soul is restoring itself, piece by piece.*

Healing Practices

Inner Child Encounter

Close your eyes and imagine your younger self standing in front of you.

Ask them: *What did you need that no one gave you?*

Promise to give it to them now.

Dream Retrieval

List three dreams you had before life got heavy.

Circle the one that still whispers to you.

Write one small step you can take to honor it this week.

Soul Ritual

Light a candle. Whisper something you want to reclaim—joy, peace, confidence, voice, softness.

Say it like a vow: *I am returning to myself.*

- **Actionable Step:** Reflect on your core values, passions, and intrinsic nature. This involves separating your fundamental self from the layers of personality developed purely for adaptation and survival.

Journal Space:

Be gentle. This is the softest part of the journey.

Angelia Williams is a powerhouse entrepreneur, mentor, and transformational leader with years of experience in business and personal development. Rising from a childhood marked by adversity, she built not only a successful career but a life rooted in purpose, courage, and unshakeable faith.

As a seasoned businesswoman in direct sales, Angelia has coached and inspired countless women to achieve financial independence, build generational wealth, and reach their full potential. Her approach blends practical strategy with deep soul work, helping others grow not only their businesses but also themselves.

Angelia's journey is one of resilience and rebirth. Through decades of inner healing and self-discovery, she learned how to transform wounds into wisdom, pain into purpose, and survival into leadership.

Whether she is speaking on stage, mentoring new leaders, or empowering women to believe in their own brilliance, Angelia stands as a testament to what is possible when determination meets destiny. She continues to build her legacy by pouring into others, reminding them that success is not defined by where you start—but by the courage to keep rising.