

Chapter 7

I went by Tiffany's job on the way home. The art gallery was absolutely fabulous. It wasn't what I envisioned but it was unique. They were different abstract pieces, sculptures and paintings. I saw something that I prayed she didn't pay a lot of money for. It looked like a pile of different soda cans in the shape of a woman. I loved the Egyptian exhibit. She explained because of the white archaeologists prejudices, the dynasty of the black pharaohs was hidden like some dirty little secret. And a lot of the findings were destroyed to hide the truth. The Kush dynasty rose up in 800 BC in what is known as today as Sudan. They were known for their gold, ivory and bows. Their military skills allow them to overthrow Egypt. They believed their mission was to put Egypt on the right spiritual path. I asked, "Why does the name Kush sound familiar?"

She laughed and said, "Don't you read your Bible? This is what I gathered and this is only my opinion. Cush with a C was the grandson of Noah. He was the son of Ham, Noah's youngest son. Ham was the only son that had a region named after him called Egypt also known as the Land of Ham. Cush means Ethiopia which means black. Ethiopia is the oldest Christian country. Ham's son Mizrayim, which means Egypt, settled in Egypt and Cush settled somewhere in Africa. So I said all of that to say, I believe the Kush dynasty, these black pharaohs were descendants of Noah. So when I see pictures or even movies like the one with Charlton Heston, which you know I love, with an all-white cast, it makes me mad. Let's tell the truth people!"

Wow, now that was a black history moment. Tiffany said she was going skating tonight and asked if I wanted to join her like old times. I was excited. It had been a little while since I've

been skatin'. I just needed to oil my wheels and wipe down my boots. I told her I'd meet her at the rink around 8 o'clock. I wanted to relax and have some fun before I started work soon.

The skating rink was packed, the music was loud and the neon lights were bright. I saw a few friends from college and even from the neighborhood. It was like a reunion. The DJ called "ladies only" on the floor. Tiffany, her sorority sisters and I jumped at the chance to show these kids how to roll. We skated backwards and forward. You couldn't tell us nothin'. We all dipped to the floor to do the big wheel. Of course the other kids tried to imitate us but they weren't in our league. This group in front of us tryin' to jump up in the air and turn around all at once fell flat on their faces. Reality set in for all of us as we picked ourselves up off the rink floor. I'm not a kid anymore and my body doesn't bounce back like I was a teen. We took a break and got a slice of pizza and something to drink. We talked about the things left to do for Daddy's party. The DJ called for "couples only" on the floor. These two young guys came over and asked if we wanted to skate with them. Tiffany jumped up and rolled off with one of them. I said, "No thanks I'm taking a break."

He had the nerve to sit down and say, "I'll take a break with you." He introduced himself and told me his life story. By the time he finished, Tiffany had skated three songs.

She came over to help me get rid of him. She told him, "You know my sister is being nice to you. She has a man. Times up. DJ called for men only so why don't you roll yourself to the floor. It was nice meeting you." We both laughed. I told her I was heading home in 30 minutes and I'll call her tomorrow. She said she was going to stay a while with her friends.

I got up early for my first day of work, although I wasn't really working, just setting up. I wanted everything exactly in its place. I wanted to sanitize and clean my booth. I don't trust others to clean the way I clean. When I got there, the owner Tia was already inside. She showed me around and went over policies and procedures. She was a single older woman with two teenagers. She'd been doing hair right out of high school. She handed me a key and told me she'd be in on Thursday. I was so excited. I was on my way to making real money. I labeled all of my products and put them in the storage closet. I'd bring in my curlers when I came back on Wednesday. I was responsible for the walk-ins and helping shampoo other clients until I built up my own clientele, per Tia's instructions. The funny thing is, I already had a small clientele. On Wednesdays, I had six standing appointments from the ladies at church and Thursdays, I had seven appointments with my sorors. Friday was my busy day with eight set appointments with Tiffany and her friends. Like clockwork, my 8 o'clock appointment came. I knew the other stylists were watching, so I had to show them I had skills. I had two touch-ups with color, one short cut and four roller sets. A couple of walk-ins came as well. A few of my appointments were late but I managed to get everyone out at a decent time. Tia came over to observe my work. She didn't say anything, just smiled. The rest of the week went off without a hitch. I told Tia in a couple weeks I needed the Saturday of my Dad's party off. I'd move my appointments to Friday. We had already discussed this prior to me starting. Of course some of the other stylists had an attitude because I was already requesting time off. They'd be okay.

I spoke with Leah. She was so excited about Daddy's party. We were all looking forward to meeting her friend. She'd be home for a few days. I spoke with Sandra. She said she didn't know yet if they were going to be able to come to the party. But they would send Daddy a gift.

Everyone knows he loves the mixed cheeses and sausage basket. All of the arrangements were just about done. I was so proud of Daddy.

To hear him talk about his humble beginnings and to see him now, makes me appreciate all that we had growing up. He is the oldest of three. Uncle David was the middle wild child and Lizzy was the baby girl. Their parents were married at a young age. His father was an alcoholic. He never put his hands on any of them. But he degraded everyone. Eventually he left the family. Daddy vowed he would never be like him. Their mother worked in a local school cafeteria. She didn't make a lot of money. Daddy had to grow up fast. He became the man of the house while tryin' to finish school, work and take care of his mom and sister. He said money was tight. They ate a lot of government cheese sandwiches, beans and hotdogs. His favorite was toasted cheese bread sprinkled with sugar on top. Uncle David was in and out of detention homes. I guess he was rebelling because their father left. Daddy always worried whether one day he was going to get a call sayin' Uncle David was found shot in the head dead. Daddy bailed him out of jail so many times he could barely pay for night school. Finally he told his brother to get himself together and no one in the family would be bailing him out of jail anymore. Of course Uncle David didn't believe him. Three months later he called collect to their mom asking for bail money. With a heavy heart she hung up the phone. He had to stay in jail 30 days. The judge gave him a choice, either go to the Army, or stay in jail because this was his third offense. Naturally he went to the service without saying goodbye to anyone.

Meanwhile Daddy continued to work and go to night school while still taking care of the family. Aunt Lizzy graduated from high school and got a scholarship to Grambling State University. Daddy graduated the following year with a Bachelor of Science in biology. He started working at a diagnostic company right out of school. This was around the time he and

Mama started dating while she was still in school. His mother's health was declining related to a major stroke she had several months prior but didn't fully recover as expected. Daddy went to the hospital daily. Even Mama started going to the hospital with Daddy. She would read the newspaper to her. She would smile as Mama read the comics. Her favorite was the Family Circus. Aunt Lizzy came to visit her on the weekends. She would do her hair and paint her nails. She had two sisters that came during the week to sit with her and read with her. Their mom's health continued to get worse. The family decided to put her in a nursing rehabilitation center to get the care she needed. Daddy said that was the hardest decision he ever had to make. He felt like he failed his mother. But his aunts told him he was doing the right thing for her. One weekend the doctor came in and told the family how surprised he was that based on their mom's condition she was still holding on. They were all thinkin' the same thing but no one wanted to say it. Their mother was waiting to see her son David. She had a Scripture verse framed in her kitchen Daddy said she quoted all the time. "But for me and my household we will serve the Lord." Another week passed then Daddy got the call he was dreading. His mom wasn't going to make it through the night. It was time to say goodbye. Everyone went straight to the hospital. Daddy and Aunt Lizzy spoke with the doctors while Mama went straight to her room to find a man dressed in a service uniform holding Grandma Betty and singing. He took his gold cross necklace from around his neck and placed it in her hands and said, "But for me and my household we will serve the Lord. Mama, please forgive me. I love you," When Daddy and Aunt Lizzy came into the room, the look on their faces told Mama he was David. With the last of her strength, their mom gently caressed Uncle David's face and glanced at all of them with a look of content. A single tear rolled down her face as she closed her eyes.

It was the weekend of the party. Daddy was told that Mama was taking him out shopping and then to a movie. He got a few cards in the mail from Aunt Lizzy and Uncle David's family to keep him in the dark. While they were out to dinner, everyone would come over but park at the end of the block and wait in the backyard. Daddy built a gazebo and finished it just in time. That's where the DJ would be. A few years before he cleared out the land that was behind our house. We have the largest backyard in the neighborhood. Tiffany even found someone to do fireworks. All of the food was ordered. Mama ordered a huge tent just in case it rained. We rented tables, chairs and covers. Mama wanted everything to be perfect. Tiffany had all of the decorations. Leah sent money home to help with the cost. My cousin was designing a cake with pictures of Daddy at different periods of his life. I ordered a little bit of everything. I ordered ribs, chicken, crab balls, red beans and rice, gumbo, deviled eggs and green beans. These were a few of Daddy's favorites. Two of his buddies were bringing all of the liquor and ice. So far about 60 people had RSVP'd. We'd have a packed yard. Leah and her friend Carlos would fly in the day of the party and get a room at the Hyatt hotel. Even though we are all adults we don't shack up with our boyfriends at Mama and Daddy's house. No ring no room. I was stayin' with Mama and Daddy to help with the party. Eric was coming to the party and then going back home when it ended. Uncle David and Aunt Lizzy with all of their families were booked at the Marriott and due to arrive the morning of the party. Mama and Daddy would leave around two in the afternoon heading for the mall and then to the movies. The family was meeting at the house around 3 o'clock to set up. The guests would be at the house by 6 o'clock and Mama would bring Daddy back at 7 o'clock.

The day finally arrived. I called Mama early that morning just as I always did so Daddy wouldn't suspect anything. My bag was packed. I cleaned my place and picked up a few last

minute items. I called the DJ, the caterers and the rental company to confirm everything. I arrived at the house at 2:45. Mama and Daddy had just left. I called everyone to tell them to come over. It was a miracle everyone including the vendors were right on schedule. Tiffany and Leah arrived shortly after I did. It was like we were three little girls again, gigglin' and being silly. The white tent with the lights, the covered tables and chairs looked so elegant. It looked like someone was getting married. Once again my cousin did an awesome job with the three tier cake. She had beautiful pictures of Daddy when he was a teen, graduating from college, walking Aunt Lizzy down the aisle, his wedding, our family, Grandma Betty, Uncle David and Aunt Lizzy. Mama told Daddy I was stopping by to drop something off for her. So just like we planned Mama would call the house and ask if I wanted something to eat. This was the signal they were on their way home. At 6:40 p.m. I got the call. I had the DJ announce that they were on their way home. Just about everyone was there including Uncle Mac and Uncle Joe. Uncle David and his wife Tonya and their two sons were already dancing up a storm. Aunt Lizzy and her family arrived just in time. I was in the living room window watching for them. Finally I saw their car coming.

I signaled to Leah and she signaled the DJ. The music was off and the lights were out. We all ran out the back door. I heard Mama asking Daddy to sit with her out back in the gazebo. He told her he would grab two glasses and a bottle of wine. Mama came out first. And about five minutes later Daddy came out and we screamed, "Surprise!" He was so shocked. He almost dropped everything in his hands. Mama ran up and planted the biggest kiss on him. All he could do was look around with a look of surprise on his face. He spotted his brother and sister. With his arms open wide he ran through the crowd to embrace them. He held on to them for dear life. The DJ cranked up the music, we blessed the food and danced the night away. We had the

longest Soul Train line. My cousin Sean was in charge of taking pictures. He DJs as well but I wanted him to just take photos. I told him to make sure he got a lot of family photos. Daddy couldn't believe that we did all of this for him. He didn't want to admit it, but he loved the food. Daddy thinks he's the only cook in town. Daddy went around to every guest to say hello.

Uncle David asked to make the toast. With a humble voice he said, "Hello everyone. My name is David. I'm Daniel's younger brother. I wanted to say a few words in honor of my big brother. When we were kids our father left us at a young age. I was so angry at the world; I took it out on my own family. I put them through hell, especially Daniel. But through it all Daniel never gave up on me, even when I gave up on myself. He became the father figure in our lives. He didn't ask for that job but he did it with God's strength and grace. When I came home to see our mother for the last time it was Daniel who tracked me down. I never told you big brother, but you saved my life. I fought you every step of the way and for that, I'm sorry. Because of you I'm the man I am today and I thank you. I love you Daniel and I know Mama would be proud of the man you have become, the family man you are and all of your accomplishments. Everyone raise your glasses... to Daniel."

Daddy had tears in his eyes. The fireworks show began while the DJ played Daddy's favorite tunes. Daddy couldn't stop thanking us. Eric and I danced the night away. We finally met Carlos. He was nice. He didn't look like anything we had imagined. He was Hispanic. We didn't care as long as Leah was happy. As the party was winding down the guys decided to walk down to Smitty's bar on the corner while we helped Mama clean up. I was glad everything went well. I was getting tired and had a bad headache. The last of the guests were gone and it was just me, Mama and my sisters like old times.

Each of our purple stones began to light up. An eerie feeling came over all of us. Mama told us to go into the house. As we got up we heard a voice say, “Well, well, well, hello ladies.”

Tiffany demanded to know who she was. I looked up and it was Catherine from Eric’s job. Hell Naw! I asked her, “Why are you here? This is a family function and you’re not invited!”

Tiffany asked, “Is this the bitch that showed up at Eric’s place?”

I shook my head. Mama was being nice and polite by asking, “Sweetheart is there something we can do for you? This is a private party.”

I told her to leave. Catherine had a strange look on her face. She had the nerve to say, “But I am family.”

Tiffany jumped up to hit her but Leah intervened. I told her, “If you don’t get the hell out of here we’re all gonna beat yo ass. I don’t know what sick game you’re planning but I’ve had enough of you.”

She looked at Mama and asked, “You don’t recognize me?”

Mama asked, “I’m sorry should I recognize you Catherine?”

Catherine had this devilish smile and replied, “You sure you don’t recognize me, Mama? My name isn’t Catherine, its Teresa.”

Leah yelled, “Bitch is you crazy? Maybe you got some bad weed but get the hell out now!”

I turned to see Mama's response and noticed a puzzled look on her face as though this wasn't a far-fetched idea. I snapped. I started choking her. But the glare from the light inside of her blouse was blinding. She pulled it out. Around her neck was our purple family stone. Tiffany snatched it off and demanded where she got the necklace from. I had to loosen the grip of my hand from around her neck.

"Gram-T gave it to her," Mama said as she removed my hands from her neck.

Tiffany grabbed an empty bottle and cracked it on one of the tables. She held it to Catherine's face and said, "You betta start talkin' bitch!" Leah removed the bottle from her hand.

I wasn't sure what Mama said so I asked her to repeat herself. Mama looked pale as snow like she saw a ghost. With a look of regret and tears in her eyes, she poured out her heart. "She got the family stone from Gram-T."

What the hell! Catherine started laughin' not from joy but from a place of vengeance. She said, "Ah yo precious mama didn't tell you about me, your other sister?"

"Bitch you ain't related to us. You tryin' to say Mama cheated on my daddy?" Tiffany yelled. Leah was tryin' to hold back Tiffany but it was almost impossible.

"Oh no, yo precious mama has a good little reputation. Her little dirty secret was safe until now. It seems no one had a clue about your mama, not even you all. Look at her now: married, living in a beautiful home, three successful daughters and loved by her community. You got the perfect little life. You've done well for yourself."

Leah asked, "Catherine who the hell are you and what do you want?"

She replied, “My name is Teresa! I was born in Alabama a few years before you Renee. My adoptive parents did the best with what they had. But I wanted more and I deserve more. I never thought I belonged in my family as a child until I received a letter at the age of twelve explaining who I was and where I came from. I got a letter every year on my birthday. This woman explained she helped set up my adoption and knew my birth family. She always talked about the unique women in our family. And someday I would come to know this for myself. But she never mentioned anything about my birth parents or why they gave me up. I assume I wasn’t good enough. I wasn’t pretty enough. I wasn’t part of the plan. So they threw me out like trash. Isn’t that true, Mama? I didn’t fit into your perfect plan. A week before my 13th birthday I got a package with a three-page letter, an old book and a beautiful purple stone necklace wrapped in tissue paper. The letter explained our gifts and where they came from. The letter also explained the woman who set up the adoption and writing the letters was Thelma Sullivan or as you guys call her Gram-T. The necklace belonged to one of her sisters. But the only thing I struggled with was the letter said my birth mom would come find me when she was ready and that she loved me. Each year I waited for her to come get me. She never showed up. But Gram-T continued to write me yearly until the letters suddenly stopped. I had no way of finding her, only the postmarks from her letters. Eventually I was able to find her death certificate. I was devastated. She was the only one who loved me. Isn’t that right Mama because you never came for me? You are a selfish bitch!”

Before I was able to punch her in the face, Mama jumped in the way. We didn’t know what to believe. Mama looked her dead in the eyes and said, “No Teresa, that’s not right at all. You’ve got it all wrong.” Suddenly Mama’s stone turned blue in color. She grabbed Teresa’s hand and said these words,

“By the ancestors that came before us and the gifts that have been placed in our trust

I bind you with love and all the spirit’s might, I pray you listen with your ears and not by sight

May the winds slow down time this very night and wisdom is shown in our sight.”

The wind started to blow hard and lightning cracked across the sky. Mama bound Teresa disabling her gifts just in case she tried to retaliate. Mama also slowed down time. She didn’t want the men to come back from the bar in the middle of our family reunion.

I looked at Mama and asked was it all true?

Mama responded to all of us, “Not in the way Teresa thinks it happened. One summer Gram-T’s step brother, Benny came to visit us. When Grandpa John, Gram-T’s father died, Grandma Emma married her second husband Michael. He had two sons, Benny and Carl. Benny was about 15 years older than me. He was supposed to be looking for a job and trying to relocate. But all he did was stay out late and drink. One afternoon while Papa and Gram-T were out, Benny pulled me down in the basement and did the unthinkable. He raped me. He fled the house immediately. When everyone returned home, I told them what happened. Everyone was looking for him. Eventually he was found dead and there was no need to tell the police. Your father and I had been dating for a while. He knew what happened and always supported me. But a few months after the rape I found out I was pregnant. I was shocked and scared. I knew it was Benny’s child, because your father and I weren’t sleeping together. I was young and trying to finish school. I couldn’t live with the guilt thinking somehow I was the reason for Benny’s death. Maybe I gave him the wrong impression and that’s why he raped me. I was losing my mind. Gram-T came to me and told me there was a woman named Josephine in town that could help with situations like these. She helped set up room and board and even delivered babies in the

homes to keep the girls from going to the hospital. This kept people from asking questions. In my last month, Gram-T and I went to Alabama and stayed with her sister until the baby was born. I held my baby and told her I loved her. I gave her my sister Faith's middle name, Teresa. Miss Josephine came that evening and said she found a home for my baby. I was brokenhearted. But I wanted the best family, the best love, and the best life for my baby girl without the shame. I loved you Teresa from your first breath. It wasn't a secret that I was raped, the whole town knew. I didn't want what happened to me be a reflection on you. I wanted you to have a good life without the gossip and whispers. That was done to our family for generations. I didn't want that for you. So I prayed to God to put you with a family where you would be loved, safe and learn about God. I returned to Louisiana with a heavy heart and empty hands. I finished school and got married the following year and relocated to Georgia."

Tears were running down Mama's face. I knew about the rape and even Benny's brother coming to find the child while I was in college. It wasn't me he was looking for. He was looking for Teresa. Leah and Tiffany were speechless. Teresa didn't believe Mama.

Mama continued, "On Gram-T's death bed she whispered in my ear, 'She loves you and is waiting on you when you're ready.' I felt like I let my mama down and most importantly I let you down Teresa. I know you don't believe me and I understand, but I'm asking you to forgive me for not letting you know that I loved you and not coming for you. Forgive me for being selfish and moving on with my life without you. In my heart, I thought you had everything I prayed for you and you didn't need me."

Teresa said nothing. She had a blank look on her face. I couldn't tell what she was thinking.

Leah asked, “So what’s next? I don’t understand why you’re here now Teresa. Did you come to spit in our mother’s face and tell her dirty little secret to the entire family and humiliate her? Or better yet did you come to try to cast some dark spell on to our family? You’re angry at all of us. None of this was our fault including Mama. There was only one person to blame and he’s dead.”

I had some questions myself. I asked, “So Catherine, I mean Teresa, when I first met you did you know who I was? Tryin’ to seduce Eric, was that a part of your plan?” Teresa still said nothing.

Finally, Tiffany yelled, “Look we don’t have all night. Why don’t we erase her memory and send her on her way?” I reminded Tiffany erasing someone’s memory is dangerous and we were not doing that.

Mama looked at Teresa and asked, “Teresa what do you want from me? How can I make this right if I can? I don’t know how to take the hurt you feel away. I can’t change the past.”

Teresa finally took a deep breath and said, “I don’t know what I want now. I hated you for a long time for not coming for me and starting a family and not including me. Gram-T told me about your husband and three daughters. We both thought you would eventually reach out to me but that time never came. So I hated you even more. My adoptive parents were good to me but I thought being with you would be better. Eventually I got past the hate. It fueled me to be perfect. So I could show you what you missed out on and that I was worth fighting for and keeping. Then I wanted revenge. I found out where everyone lived. I decided to destroy your lives. To answer what you’re probably thinking Renee, yes I planned to use Eric to get to you but you are always in the way. But then I figured you all didn’t know what happened and were just

as clueless as me. I'm not an evil person. I just wanted our mother to suffer. But I didn't know you were raped. Gram-T never said anything about what happened to you in her letters. I guess it wasn't for her to tell me. But you could have told me sooner when you came and got me. And I wouldn't have wasted all of this time hating you. I don't know what to think about you."

Ms. Bad Ass was cryin'. I almost felt sorry for her.

Mama told Teresa, "I can be here for you now if you want. We all can be here for you." Tiffany made a crazy grunt with a stupid look.

Teresa looked up at all of us and said, "No I don't fit in. This was a huge mistake coming here. I didn't know that you were raped. I should have never come here. I don't belong here."

Mama removed the binding spell and hugged Teresa so tight I thought they were going to fall over. We all began to cry except Tiffany. Tiffany had no expression on her face. Mama asked her if she would stay and talk some more or maybe come back tomorrow. She said no. She felt she didn't belong and there was nothing else to talk about. She wanted answers. Answers she didn't expect but she got 'em. The question is would that be enough for her? I could tell Mama wanted more time to talk with her. I think she wanted to hear Teresa forgive her and wanted to be a part of her family. I didn't think Teresa was ready to forgive Mama or us for that matter. It wasn't Mama's fault. I hope she realizes that. It sure as hell wasn't our fault but I understand her feeling left behind and left out. I didn't want Mama to be disappointed. Teresa said she didn't know what she wanted to do but needed some time to process everything. Mama walked Teresa to her car. Of course I was right behind them just in case Teresa tried somethin'. Mama gave Teresa her number if she ever wanted to talk. No words were said. Teresa look back at me and gave me the most pitiful look saying, "Sorry." I didn't respond. She finally left.

Mama broke down and cried. She apologized to all of us for not telling us about her past. Leah told her that wasn't necessary. It wasn't her fault and she made the best choice for Teresa at that time. Teresa has her issues she needs to deal with before she can expect Mama let alone us to accept or trust her. Tiffany reminded all of us that Teresa has gifts just like us. She might get a hair up her ass and try something. She needed to be watched. Mama was quiet. She suggested we give her some space. As we all started going back into the house the guys were comin' home.

Daddy was still so excited about his party. I couldn't remember the last time Daddy stayed up past midnight. I walked Eric to his car and he went home. Carlos and Leah went back to their hotel. Uncle David and the rest of the fellas were right behind them. Tiffany hung around to make sure Mom was okay. Daddy gave Mama a nice warm hug and kiss. He told us that he was so appreciative of what we all did. He even teared up talking about Uncle David's toast. In that moment Mama broke down and started to cry. Daddy asked why she was upset. She told him that Teresa her firstborn came here to confront her. She told him the whole confrontation caught her off guard. We all went back in the house and sat in the living room. Tiffany and I were both concerned about Teresa's motives. Would she be back? Would she forgive Mama and try to have a relationship? Did she just want to speak her piece and move on? Did she want some type of revenge? He told Mama whatever she decided to do, he would support her. Daddy even mentioned that if Teresa wanted to be a part of our entire family she would be welcomed. I still didn't trust her. To come all this way from wherever she came and confront us then leave, somethin' told me she was up to no good. Mama told Daddy to get ready for bed and she'd be in soon. I suggested we do a protection spell for all of us just in case. Mama hesitated. She didn't think it was necessary. That's what I love about Mama; she always gives the benefit of the doubt. We went to her garden shed as Daddy called it. He built it for her around the same time he

finished the gazebo. We got an angelica root also known as “Archangel” to keep evil away, provide strength to women, and bring good luck to families. We mixed the root with some lavender and other herbs. Mama placed them in a small pot and burned them. I told Mama whatever support she needed from us, she had. We all hugged and finally went to bed.