

Prologue

Mike & Nate Meet

“Thanks cuz.”

Nathaniel Lee Marshall was minding his own business, strolling down his street, bouncing his basketball that his grandmother had given him for Christmas when he happened upon a group of young neighborhood boys traveling in the opposite direction as he was. He recognized most of their faces, most from school, some from the neighborhood. He'd never spoken to any and was quite positive that they had not even realized he existed up until this precise moment when the one with the appearance of being the leader of their little thugged-out pack snatched Nate's basketball mid-dribble.

Nate stopped short as the gang of seven eleven and twelve-year-olds continued forward laughing in joy of their mischief. Basketball was Nate's life, his whole world revolved around the game. He was terribly shy and quiet and thus had no true friends. His father, a strict disciplinarian, had no interest in being buddies with a child. His mother had given birth to six children. Nate was her first and only male child. Needless to say with all the mouths that had to be fed there would be no

extra money in the budget to buy Nathaniel Lee Marshall a new basketball.

Nate turned on his heels and reached toward the ground before pushing his way through the crowd of delinquents, his mind focused on getting his ball back and not the potential ass whopping he could be setting himself up for. He wasn't too worried about it however because what his peers were not aware of was his level of determination and that in his hand he held a large rock, was cocked and ready to throw. Yes, maybe he would get his ass kicked out here today but he was taking somebody down with him. Before anyone had a chance to react Nate had already swung the ring leader around and pushed him onto on his back on the earth below. He was poised above him with the rock aimed at his skull.

“Give me my ball back!” Nate spat out.

From behind he could hear the young boys yelling out threats and profane statements of disbelief as they honed in on him. The young man beneath Nate simply laughed and called his dogs off. He handed Nate his ball.

“Well you can't just leave me here,” he said.

Nate reached out to help the young boy to his feet. He didn't see the blow coming. He felt the kicks in his side but was temporarily blinded and couldn't tell where they were coming from. From his position sprawled out on the concrete he could hear yelling and cheering. He felt around, again his ball was missing. He began to panic. He managed to dodge another kick and stagger to his feet.

“Where's my ball?” he yelled at his tormentor.

“Where my ball? Where my ball? What choo a l'il white boy uh sumthin?” another of the kids passed the ball off to the boy, “You won't cho ball, come get it den!”

“Aaaargh!” Nate yelled out as he charged at the boy. The two exchanged blows as they rolled around in the dirt. Nate quickly began to get the best of the young boy. As soon as his crew recognized the potential defeat they dove in on top of Nate. He fought strong and hard and landed several good blows before he was imminently overcome.

“Git y’all l’il bad asses away from the front of my house wit’ dis nonsense! Git up offa dat dere l’il boy, wuss wrong wit’ ch’all?” Ms. Muriel Johnson shouted as she beat the boys off of Nate with a broom, “Gone nah, fo’ I call y’all’s mammy’s, ya hear?”

Like roaches when the lights came on the boys scattered in different directions. They all knew old Ms. Johnson and thus knew that she was not one to be played with. Nate was balled up in pain in the dirt that should have been a lawn. Ms. Johnson pulled him to his feet and gave him a once over. He was filthy and his long lanky body was battered. His shirt was torn and one of his sneakers had come off. His nose was bleeding and there was a gash over his left eye. He was a very fair-skinned boy despite growing up in the blazing Florida sun and thus his arms had black and blue bruises. Ms. Johnson held his cheeks firmly between her thumb and fore finger and turned his head in both directions.

“Aw boy you gone be alright. Nah gone on home to ya mammy so she can clean ya up. Go on nah,” and with that Ms. Johnson disappeared into her little yellow house and locked the screen door behind her.

Nate dropped his head and limped over to his missing sneaker. His head pounded as he struggled to bend down to tie it. He looked up and around to see the streets was empty, his ball gone. He sighed and resisted the urge to cry. His father had taught him that only girls and sissies cried and he had enough girls and didn’t need one with a dick. He vowed if he turned out to be a sissy he’d surely kill him with his own bare hands. So Nate swallowed his emotional pain and limped toward home. When he arrived he was surprised to find his very own bully sitting on his front stoop as if nothing had happened. Even worse, between his legs he bounced Nate’s basketball. Nate walked inside his gate and glared at him. His face became heated as the blood rushed forth.

“Catch,” he said, passing the ball to Nate who instinctively caught it, “Yo’ name Nate ain’t it?”

“Yes,” Nate answered clutching his ball in fear that this may be a set up.

“My name Mike but the bitches call me Romeo.”

“I know who you are,” Nate tucked his ball safely under his arm and walked past Mike to his front door. Mike rose from his position on the concrete and headed for the gate. He called out to Nate without stopping or turning around.

“Ay you wanna roll wit’ me an’ my homies to da ‘Plex t’nite?”

“Sure.”

“Meet us at the corna o’ 193rd at six o’clock. Frenchy momma gone drop us off.”

“Okay.”

“Lata.”

1 Nate

My parents, four out of five of my sisters, their spouses, and Sierra were all gathered at the table with excited wonderment. I'd called them all here to my childhood home and had mother prepare a hearty meal so that I could make the announcement. The wonderful meal my mother had prepared awaited their salivating mouths. They were anxious and hungry, hungry and anxious as the aroma from Mother's infamous baked beans circulated the air and filled up their nostrils.

Mya was at my side watching me...watching her man as he stood before his loved ones looking good as always. Yes, I was clean. Navy blue tailored pants and light blue and white pinstriped button down Perry Ellis shirt and tie. On my feet I wore square toe Ken Cole's. My hair was cut low and faded to perfection, my lining and sideburns sharp. My mustache ideally trimmed. I'd had a manicure done early that afternoon so you know my nails were right. And oh yes, when I raised my wineglass to commence my announcement that was a Rolex you saw hanging onto my wrist. I keep it clean and always have. Even when I was a young man running the streets of South Dade County with a young thug named Mike (oh, but the bitches call him Romeo.)

Mike, now that's my homey. The two of us have been down since we first scuffled back in uh, hmm, what was it like '87? Damn time flies. But yes, we whipped each other's ass and have been tight ever since. Got-damn we were terrible together. Running the streets, starting fights, in and out of JC. My mother, who has never actually hated anyone, came real close when it came to Mike. See you have to understand something. Before that fight over my basketball, my mother's son was a good son. I did my chores; I went to class and even made good grades. I kept my mouth shut and did everything that was expected of me or shall I say everything my mother expected. But that loyalty kept me from being popular with my peers.

Raising me with five sisters it often became difficult for my mother to differentiate her behavior. What does that mean? Well simply put she didn't know how not to treat me like she treated the girls. I learned to cook, I learned to clean, I was taught to play the piano and much to my father's dismay I was even taught to sew. I was often treated like one of the girls and I was comfortable with that as it felt natural...normal. That is until I was about seven. My dad was hardly ever home and when he was he was too tired to teach me how to be a man. One day he came home from work early and I was in the tub taking my bath only instead of bathing I was playing with toys as children do. My father entered the bathroom with an overloaded bladder. He didn't pay much attention to what I was doing until he finished what he was doing. "*You playin' wit' them GI Joe's I bought you son?*" he asked me as he zipped up his workpants. "*Uh uhb Daddy. Barbie.*"

Wrong answer. I remember him having this...this horrified look on his face. It was as if someone had told him that his best friend was dead. He yanked his big black leather belt off so quick if it could have it would have caught whiplash. He grabbed me out of the water by my wrist and beat my soaking wet seven-year-old ass. I screamed and I hollered and then he beat me for crying. That's the first time I remember him saying to me that men don't cry, only girls and sissies but with the way my mother was raising me it wouldn't be the last. He drilled his theory into me throughout life, that and the promise that if I turned out to be a sissy he'd kill me with his own bare hands.

But anyway back to my story. Naturally all the commotion attracted the attention of a crowd. My mother rushed to my aide and attempted as best as she could to pull my daddy off of me. *“James Nathaniel Marshall you let him go!”* she cried. He obliged but paused long enough to blame her for the situation and turned with an open palm and struck her down to kiss the linoleum tile floor. He dropped my battered bleeding body beside her and pushed his way past my sisters. His footsteps faded to nothing as he made his way to the front door and out into the streets. That would be the first and last time my father would ever hit my mother, I’d see to it. If it weren’t for her he would have killed me for certain.

My mother nursed me back to health. She kept the incident within the confines of our immediate family. She advised school that I had the flu and would be out for a few days. My pops, angry and embarrassed at what he’d done to my mother I suppose, stayed away for a week. When I’d fully recovered from my “whoopin” I steered clear of anything that could have possibly been deemed “girly”. I ceased to engage in games with my sisters and rather kept quiet, kept to myself. My mother, who had always been terribly feminine, unaware of how to teach a boy to be a man left me be. School days I would come home, sit on my bedroom floor and pick at my toes between homework and dinner until one day I paid attention to an old worn basketball in the corner of my room. I took it under my arm and carried it out to the back of the house and there shot my first basket.

From that day on all of my time was divided between school, homework and shooting hoops. My mother had given up on culturing me not wanting to risk enraging my father and my father began to look at me differently than he had in the past. Though he and I still did not communicate verbally I would feel the difference in our relationship when he’d allow me to sit with him while he sipped a cold Bud and watched sporting events. But the ultimate breakthrough came when I began to hang out with Mike. Mike was the ultimate man-child and my pops loved him. He loved him so much that I didn’t want to be like Mike, I wanted to be Mike. Everything that Mike did, I did. If Mike cut school, I cut. If Mike picked a fight, I finished it. If Mike stole a car, I stole two. Yes, my grades slipped and my juvenile rap sheet was

beginning to read like a book but it was a small price to pay to get your father to like you.

Yes everything Mike did, I did and when for Mike snatching purses and jacking sneaks began to become overshadowed by pussy I remained hot on his trail. Now believe it or not this was the biggest feat for me. I'm going to share with you something about me that no one; I mean no one else is aware of. I'm homosexual. Yes gay, queer, a faggot, whatever you want to call it. Shocked? Well, you remember that saying? The biggest trick the devil ever pulled was what? Pretending he didn't exist. So yes I am gay. I am not proud of it; I am not ashamed of it. I just am. And don't go blaming my mother for it either. Pay attention. When we began all of this I told you what? It felt natural. You may think something is normal but it doesn't mean you're comfortable with it. It's when you think that it's natural that could be cause for concern. If my pops had not been so hard on me, so homophobic I'd still be who I am today except I'd probably be making this announcement tonight with a boyfriend instead of my girlfriend.

Ok, okay, I gotcha, I gotcha. Your next question is if I'm gay why I even have a girlfriend. Well, I'm going to address that now. Like I said in order to keep Pops satisfied I needed to in a sense "be" Mike. Well, girls and pussy became an intricate part of who Mike was. I was an actor in a starring role which was my life. I couldn't back down. So I bit the bullet and fell into character. Soon, it went from being a chore to being a mission. With all the women I slept with, allowed to perform oral sex on me, and a few other sexual deeds I'm not very proud to confess to, I hoped that one of those coochies would have the secret cure for my curse. Of course none of them did. When I was alone I felt guilt. I hated what I was doing to these women and as I aged the tougher it became, the more emotional distress I experienced but alas I had to keep up with Mike aka Romeo.

When my 25th birthday rolled around Mike was still lovin' 'em and leavin' 'em. I could keep it up no longer as my conscious would not allow it. At the same time a fear of disappointing my father kept me trapped in the lifestyle that I'd emulated for so many, many years. It was around that time that I met Mya Engles, a gorgeous Black woman from Great Britain. At the time she was a waitress at a little café I patronized

on South Beach. I became fascinated with not only her lovely accent but her demeanor as well. She was so refined and gave the presence of being highly intelligent and extremely cultured. The striking similarities to my mother stimulated my mind and I'd hoped to have an opportunity to converse with her. Opportunity finally knocked. A meeting had run late and Mya was nowhere to be found when I arrived at the café. I thought to ask for her but not wanting her to get a misconstrued impression of me I kept quiet. I decided to skip lunch and head back to the office to go over some paintings when I spotted her (I'm the H.N.I.C. now but at the time I was a junior art buyer). I'm not clear as to how but fortunately I did. She was sitting across the street on a blanket reading James Baldwin's *1 Day When I Was Lost*. Being cast as a player and smooth talker most of my life I felt no intimidation as I walked in her direction.

"Excuse me, Miss." Her beautiful eyes met mine though seemingly unfazed by my charming good looks. Her brown curly hair was wild and pulled into a haphazard ponytail. She peered at me over the stylish eyeglasses that sat on the brim of her nose. She was wearing the apron that was a part of her uniform and so I correctly reasoned that she was on a break. It was clear that she was annoyed with me for disturbing her reading but recognizing my face and being the person she is she offered me a slice of pineapple from the bowl she was snacking from. As it turned out she was just the woman I thought her to be. I didn't go into this situation with the intent of having a more intimate relationship with her. She intrigued me and I wanted to know her as a person. Over the years we became close but when she confessed that she was falling in love with me my first instinct was to stop her in her tracks quickly. But then I realized that she was what I needed, who I'd been looking for. No I wasn't "in" love with her and realized that I may never be but I did love her as a person. I was sure she would be as close to true love as I could ever expect in my lifetime and it would keep the role going. So I professed to love her when in reality I did not though I foolishly hope someday it will be true and that's what brings us to this announcement today.

"Ladies, gentlemen, I suppose you're all wondering about the reason that we are all gathered here today. Well, besides the pleasure of partaking in this wonderful meal which Mother has prepared for us, I

have a special announcement to make,” I took Mya’s hand in mine and pulled her to her feet beside me. At a petite 4’11” tall beside my 6’4” we make quite the odd couple. She was just as lovely as ever on this occasion with her honey brown complexion and bright green eyes. She’d had her naturally curly hair dyed a light golden brown and straightened so it hung to her elbows. Normally her choice in style was in direct contrast with mine but for this evening she wore a simple yet elegant backless red dress just to please me. I leaned forward and kissed the back of her hand before I turned to face her. I looked at Mya; her hand still in mine but directed my words to the group.

“Mother, Father, family. I’ve asked you all here to announce that I’ve asked young Ms. Mya Rene Engles to be my loving wife.”

“And I said yes,” she finished in her beautiful British accent.

I eased the engagement ring with the 1-carat princess diamond set in platinum onto her small finger and pulled her into a warm embrace. The group applauded, my mother cried, my sisters all gathered around Mya trying to check out their brother’s generosity. Sierra congratulated me and kissed my forehead. My father beamed, the ultimate victory could now be achieved; an Oscar could now be won. Caught up in the moment and opportunity I continued to stand after most of the commotion had calmed.

“And that’s not all,” I continued, “We’re also working on having a baby.”

I lied. Just like that I lied but being a good sport Mya didn’t let me slip; she jumped into character as my supporting actress and went right along with it. We hadn’t yet discussed having children but to be perfectly honest I knew I did not want any – ever. I wasn’t sure if Mya did or not but I got the feeling it didn’t much matter to her one way or another. The question was whether or not I’d set myself up to work on it now? Either way I didn’t care as I’d just received my Oscar.

“Congratulations son, I’m proud of you,” my old man said, shaking my hand.

“Thanks Pops,” it was done, locked and sealed. I’d never have to worry about my father wondering whether or not I am a man.

Dinner was consumed through mouthfuls of excitement driven chatter, which was mostly courtesy of the women. They were curious about everything from what style of dress Mya wished to wear to what we'd name our unborn, unconceived, unagreed upon child. After dinner I took a seat on the sofa. My father sat beside me and handed me one of his prized Cubans. He pat my back and smiled with pride.

"Good job son," he said before he stood and went to join the other men. My Father was satisfied, I'd done well.

"Is this seat taken?" that was Sierra, my best friend in the world surpassing even Mike. I'll get back to her momentarily.

"Never," I answered.

"Wow, so you and Mya are finally going to do it right."

"Yep."

"Congratulations baby. You know I'm happy for you, Mya is a beautiful woman. But uh, how are you gone break this news to your friend?"

"I'm going to tell him. I didn't want to invite him here. You know how ignorant Mike can get."

"Mmhm."

"Really though, it shouldn't come as such a surprise to him. We've been seeing one another for almost three years now."

"I know, I know but you know how your boy is. It's enough for him to deal with you being involved in a long-term relationship, now you're going to tell him you're getting married? Tying the knot? Jumping the broom? God I'd give nearly anything to see the look on his face when you break to him his biggest fear and worst nightmare. Oh no I'm sorry, second worse. His worst is him getting married!" the two of us laughed together, it felt good. It always felt good.

"Well he's just going to have to get used to it. How long does he expect we can play the field? On up into our 70's? Yea right, when I get old and decrepit I want to know that I have someone that can bury me. Not wonder how long I'll sit and rot before someone sniffs me out."

“Eeww Nate that’s nasty!” Sierra laughed, “Well baby just remember that I love you and no matter what I got your back.”

That’s why Sierra’s my best friend. She’s true and honest, real. I could tell her any and everything and I did just that with the exception of the truth about my sexuality. It is not as though I did not trust her with that information or thought I’d loose her behind it, it’s just that if I told anybody it could compromise the portrayal of my character and I could not afford for that to happen. And Sierra being the devout Christian that she is would try to convince me to come to church and ask Jesus to purge it from me. She’d want me to speak of it and how could I deny it if I was dealing with it?

Sierra and I met when we were juniors in high school. We were sixteen years old and for the third consecutive year we occupied space in the same classroom, Señor De La Cruz’s Spanish class. I suppose one would assume that after spending two years in the same class we would have met long ago. Those people don’t know Sierra Douglas. As I stated Sierra is a devout Christian, daughter of a Pastor and perfect Pastor’s wife. She only spoke when spoken to and focused deeply on actually learning the foreign language unlike myself. I was content to simply learn just enough to maintain the C average which kept me staring on Varsity basketball. At the time I was all about playing ball and fucking to put it bluntly and I knew that would not happen with a girl like Sierra and so there was no reason for me to approach her. It’s likely that I would have allowed four years of high school to pass by without so much as saying “excúseme” to her. But on that very first day she sat beside me and mumbled “*Oiga que vamos otra vez*” which I later found out was ‘hear we go again’ in Spanish. It was a sweet effort and so I entertained a conversation with her before class. What I was unaware of throughout that brief exchange was that it was just the start of a lifetime friendship. Over the years that passed she was there supporting me in every positive and during the repercussion of every negative endeavor. I know for certain there is nothing in this lifetime that Sierra wouldn’t do for me as there isn’t a thing in this world that I wouldn’t do for her.

“Honey, it’s getting quite late. I think we should be getting home now,” Mya interrupted our conversation. She was correct; it was getting quite late into the evening and we both needed to get up early the next morning, “Sierra darling, thank you so much for joining us.”

“Of course sweetheart. Congratulations again,” the two embraced and then it was off for Mya and me. I said my goodbyes to the family and graciously accepted their repeated congrats as we headed outside to my brand new Mercedes Benz CLK320. Both Mya and I were silent on our drive back to our six-bedroom home in Weston, Florida. Chopin played in the background setting a relaxing mood for the two of us. I parked inside the three-car garage beside Mya’s silver Porsche 911 Carrera 4. I think you’re beginning to grasp the idea that together Mya and I were set financially. Neither of us wanted for anything. I was senior art buyer for a large local firm and Mya was a CPA with her own accounting firm not to mention the fact that she was born with a silver dish set in her mouth. So the idea of starting a family at her age 26 and my age 28 was not too farfetched, not too farfetched at all.

It had been a long day and I was very tired. Mya led me up the stairs to our bedroom where she helped me out of my evening attire. She’s not ever been a chatty woman but I noticed that she was unusually quiet this evening. I figured it may have had something to do with my little addendum to our announcement. I recognized that at some point she would voice her opinion and so I left her to her thoughts. I stepped into the shower and cleansed the daily dust from my body and washed my short hair. When I was done I wrapped a towel around my waist and stood before the sink to brush my teeth. Mya was making some notes in her journal when I rejoined her in our bedroom. I grabbed a bottle of Aloe Vera lotion and sat on the edge of the bed. Mya closed her book and slipped it inside the top dresser drawer that was filled with all of her womanly accoutrements. She walked to me wearing nothing but the bra and thong that she’d worn beneath her gown and took the lotion from my hand. She oozed the creamy substance onto her hands and rubbed it down my legs and to my feet.

“You must really be tired,” she joked as she rubbed my inner thighs.

“What? Oh yes,” I responded once I caught on to her jest regarding my penis which was as limp as a cat with a broke leg. She climbed onto the king size bed and sat on her knees behind me. She began to massage the lotion into my shoulders.

“So,” she began, “what exactly is this about us working on having a baby? Is that what we’ve been doing here? If so I really wish you would

have told me Nathaniel as it would have saved us plenty money on birth control pills.”

“Sorry sweetheart, I know I should have discussed it with you first. It’s just me getting caught up in the moment and not thinking. If you’re not ready I’ll understand. We can wait as long as you need to,” secretly I hoped she would decide that we should wait.

“Well what do you want Nathaniel? If you’re second guessing your decision we don’t have to go along with it.”

“No, no, I’m not second guessing anything,” I lied; I’m second-guessing everything.

“Well in that case my darling, I say let’s go for it.”

“Are you sure?” are you sure, you’re sure?

“Darling I’m as certain as I am going to get. Nathaniel Marshall I love you more than life itself and I would be honored to carry your child.”

I turned to look Mya in the eyes. Happiness was there, certainty, love, “Well let’s go for it my love.”

Mya squealed and wrapped her arms around my neck. She kissed my lips over and over as she repeated her vow of love to me. She eased away from me and in a sexy manor unsnapped and removed her red lace bra allowing her B-cup breasts to spill forward. She teased her nipples with her fingers and slowly ran her tongue across her lips.

“Nathaniel,” she spoke in a low husky voice.

“Yes darling?”

“I’ve already taken my pill for the day so I can’t get pregnant tonight but how about a practice round?”

“Sure, why not?” her hand slid down her body and inside the center of her red lace thong panties. I watched as she stroked momentarily before sliding her hand back up her body and slipping those naughty fingers inside her mouth, “Okay darling, let’s practice,” I took her 98-pound body in my arms and slammed her onto the bed. I climbed on top of her and instinctively my “young man” downstairs did what he was trained to do.

2Sierra

Sierra waved good-bye to her best friend Nathaniel's family as she jogged out the front door and to her old 1993 Chevy Caprice that was parked in front. She reached down and gathered her ankle-length purple cotton dress and climbed into the driver's seat. She put the car in gear and drove in the direction of Fort Lauderdale to her parent's home. It was past time for her to pick up her three children before her parents nine pm bedtime. No one understood better than Sierra how dull the lives of church officials could be. Sierra, also known as Si-Si, grew up as the older of two girls and naturally spent most of her childhood in the church. She was raised to be a very obedient young lady, an ideal preacher's daughter far from the wild, outgoing, sex-driven stereotype. She studied hard with aspirations of being an attorney when she became a woman. She was an attractive young girl coming up, men recognized that but she did not allow that to influence her lifestyle. She had plans for her future and she was very determined to bring those plans into reality when she reached her prime.

Sierra's father had other plans for his girls. He allowed his eldest to attend college more for the purpose of meeting a spiritual, intelligent husband with a promising future than to establish a financially secure

future of her own. For him, his daughter becoming anything more than a housewife with a degree was out of the question. Taking after her mother the “perfect pastor’s wife”, Sierra caved into her daddy’s wishes as a child should honor thy mother and father. During her senior year she met Darryl Douglas, a law major. As Sierra could not accomplish her mission of becoming an attorney herself out of respect for her father, she decided that involving herself with one was the next best thing. After two years of dating without any sexual involvement, Darryl proposed. He’d established a solid repor with Pastor Mitchell and was well on his way to becoming a prosecuting attorney and so even though she wasn’t in love, she accepted his proposal. This decision pleased her father greatly therefore Sierra did not second-guess it. She supposed that she would fall in love with Darryl eventually.

They were married the Spring of Sierra’s twenty-third birthday and had since given birth to three beautiful children, the eldest child Michele was four years old. She resembled Darryl with her brown skin and round brown eyes. Though she was very intelligent, quick-witted and talkative, it was her behavior that most bothered Sierra’s father who felt she talked too much for a young girl. He would constantly chastise Sierra about her daughter’s mouth. As much as Sierra scolded her child about her ways there was no way to readjust the young girl’s personality.

Sierra and Darryl’s son Lee, named in honor of Sierra’s friendship with Nate, was three years of age and a spitting image of Darryl. He was a quiet and obedient child. Being his father’s only son one would think that they would be close but they were not. As a matter of fact Lee behaved as though he did not like his own father. The baby was two-year-old Jennifer, Sierra’s pride and joy. She bore the most similarities to Sierra in terms of personality as well as physical features. But no matter whose physical attributes the children inherited it was clear all three children held a greater affection toward their mother than her husband. As a matter of fact Darryl had no bond with their children at all.

Sierra and Darryl had less than an ideal marriage. They had much less than even a decent one. The two had barely spoken and had no physical contact since the birth of Jennifer. Most of their problems stemmed from Sierra’s tainted childhood. Her uncle, her father’s brother and the church Deacon Myron Mitchell was very popular not only within the family but the church as well. He was a handsome

gentleman but he'd never married and never had children of his own. Sierra and her younger sister Lillian spent a great deal of time around their uncle Deacon Myron Mitchell but of the two it seemed that Sierra was his favorite. He regularly provided her with money and treats and in return for his supposed generosity he made her give him her innocence. He touched her in places and ways that only a husband should; he made her do things to him that only a whore would. These rituals carried on for seven years of Sierra's childhood, only ceasing when a fed-up Sierra began to "loose control" of her teeth at the most inopportune moments. Realizing that his power over her was diminishing, he soon ceased touching her in that way.

Sierra hid the sad experience from her family. With her uncles popularity she was certain that no one would believe her if she told them anyway, so what would be the point? The only time she'd ever spoken of it was to Nate. He encouraged her to speak up to her family about it. She promised that she would do so but she could not bring herself to disgrace them and the church in such a way. She assumed by the time she was a married adult she would have a much better handle on things. She could not have been more wrong. When the time came to consummate her marriage it was emotionally as well as physically painful for Sierra. Going into the relationship Darryl was fully aware that Sierra was a virgin; unfortunately she'd never filled him in on her family secret. He assumed that as time passed the sex would improve but Sierra never felt comfortable with it. She would lie beneath her husband stiff and tense and secretly afraid. She would never try to make it better; she would never display a desire to experiment.

Although the two decided to wait until Darryl finished his education and obtained a secure position with a solid law firm before they had children, Sierra decided early into the marriage that she needed to stop taking her birth control pills. From her point of view if she became pregnant she would not have to make love to Darryl for at least nine months. Her plan succeeded but upset Darryl. As a cover for her deceit Sierra lied and stated that her pills were not strong enough. She promised to have her gynecologist prescribe her a more powerful dosage after she gave birth.

Michele LeeAnne Douglas was born and Darryl accepted the child. Sierra recovered and Darryl attempted to resume a normal marriage, a

normal marriage that included sexual affinity. Sierra quickly became paranoid and again felt the only way out was to again become pregnant. Darryl was incensed. The last thing he needed was another mouth to feed. There was no way that he'd believe that the pills were still not strong enough and so after the birth of Lee Darryl Douglas, her husband began to monitor her usage of her birth control pills. He required Sierra to take the pill in his presence every morning and to Sierra's dismay he wanted sex from her most every night. Sierra became frantic, dreading the idea of going to bed at night. She did not want to participate but he was her husband, how could she tell him no? After the years that past she could not muster courage to confide in him about her history and Darryl never bothered to try and find out just why his wife was so intimidated by intimacy. He instead was determined to force her involvement in their sex life. In a frantic effort to escape it, Sierra replaced her birth control pills with pills of the same size and confidently popped one every morning in front of her husband.

It was when she became pregnant with Jennifer Leenette that her marriage was essentially over. Being against the idea of needing to use condoms with his wife, Darryl ceased having sex with her altogether. Sierra was relieved yet concerned that if he'd ceased trying with her that he was achieving it elsewhere. Since he never introduced the prospect of divorce she allowed the thought to slip to the back of her mind and continued on accepting things as they'd become. Naturally Sierra did not want her marriage to be that way; she just did not know how to make it different. She did not know how to be what Darryl wanted and needed for her to be. But with all the love that was expressed between Nate and Mya tonight, Sierra began to become hopeful that she could somehow turn her marriage around. It was 9:10 pm when Sierra knocked on her parent's door.

"Si-Si, honey you know what time me and your father go to bed," her mother stated as soon as she opened the front door.

"I know Momma, I'm sorry."

"You can't be leavin' these babies like this Sierra."

"Mom, I'm sorry."

“Specially that Michele. You had betta nip that little personality in the bud before she turn out like your sista,” Mrs. Mitchell turned on her heels to gather up her grandchildren. Sierra swallowed her comments. What made her mother think that she could nip Michele’s behavior if she could not nip Lillian’s?

“Mommy!” Michele called out as she ran into Sierra’s arms. The two embraced, “Mommy, Mommy, Granpa yelled at me.”

“He did not yell at you little girl, quit being so sensitive,” Sierra’s mother defended her husband.

“Uh huhn, Granny he did!”

“Michele!” Sierra snapped, “You don’t talk to your Grandmother like that.”

“But-”

“Michele,” she said again firmly. She felt bad inside as her daughter sat on the edge of the bed in the guestroom holding back the tears in her eyes.

“What I tell you? She too sassy for her own good. I got the sista’s prayin’ over her mouth, you should try it too.”

Sierra listened to her mother lecture her about how to raise and pray for her daughter. Some things her mother said disturbed her but she was respectful enough to respond only with an occasional “yes ma’am” or “no ma’am”. As her mother spoke she finished preparing her babies and took a sleeping Jennifer into her arms and led them to the front door with her mother close behind. Once they were standing outside of the house she calmed. She kissed Jennifer on her cheek and hugged and kissed Lee who was not too thrilled about leaving his grandmother. Michele stood by her mother’s leg more than ready to go.

“Come give your Granny some sugar,” Sierra’s mother told Michele, her arms extended. Michele looked up at her mother for her approval before she stepped forward. Mrs. Mitchell shook her head and tsk-ed as she stood upright, “I love you baby, you drive safe,” she said as she hugged Sierra.

Once Sierra tucked her children into bed she went to her room and took a brief hot shower. When she finished she returned to her

bedroom, her husband had still not come home. She didn't expect him for a while. Although his work day ended at 6:30 he rarely came home before ten at night. Tuesday's and Thursday's were the only days she could count on him being home by a reasonable time. She removed her bathrobe and pulled a long cotton nightgown over her head. She sat on the edge of the bed and thoroughly lotioned her body before slipping beneath the comforter. Two small lamps lit up the bedroom. Sierra picked up the book she had been reading, *In His Image*. A half an hour into her reading Darryl entered the bedroom. She curiously peered up at him. She wanted to speak but respecting their established ritual of silence she returned her gaze to the words on the page she was reading and kept quiet.

Darryl crossed the room without looking in Sierra's direction. He ran himself a shower and washed the day's dirt and fumes and fragrances from his body. He felt tense each time he came home. He did not want to be there; he hated this life and regretted making Sierra his wife. He blamed her for his inability to finish school and become the attorney that he dreamed of becoming. Instead he was forced into taking his knowledge of law and using it to become a legal secretary. In his opinion it was a woman and a sissy's job and he was no damn sissy. But with three extra mouths to feed it became increasingly difficult to study and pay for school.

He should have met Victoria first. Victoria Hart was the woman he'd been having an affair with for the past three and a half years of his marriage. He had to admit that Sierra was attractive at 5'5" with her bright skin tone and big brown eyes. Her long thick, natural non-chemically treated brown hair hung past her shoulders. But she was plain and the babies left her out of shape with a pouch for a belly and stretch marks etched her thighs. Victoria was sexy. She had long muscular legs and nice perfect breasts. Unlike his wife her waistline remained visible even though she herself had a son and a daughter. And though her hair and nails may have been store bought she kept them well maintained. He would leave Sierra in a heartbeat to be with Victoria if it weren't for those money guzzling rug rats she'd tricked him into having. He made just enough to comfortably support his family and his mistress. Thus he adopted the aphorism, "It's cheaper to keep her."

The only reason Darryl married Sierra was to be the first she'd ever had sex with and because of her parent's apparent wealth and her father's connections. The pastor embraced Darryl and wanted to make him happy by providing invitations to important social events and tickets to sports games and more. He'd never planned to have children with Sierra though he'd allow her to believe that. He never expected to remain married to her long term. But this was the life he'd foolishly chosen and he had to accept it.

Darryl stepped out of the shower and dried his feet on the bath rug. He dabbed his body with the large towel and stepped into a pair of blue and white striped boxers. He brushed his teeth and returned to his and Sierra's bedroom. Sierra continued reading when he climbed into his side of the bed and turned the lamp off. He pulled the sheet over his head and tossed a couple of times.

"Can you read that someplace else?" he asked, a hint of attitude in his voice. Quietly Sierra set her book on the table and turned her light off. She turned her back to her husband and stared into the darkness, thinking.

It was a Tuesday afternoon and Sierra had just returned home from grocery shopping. She stood in the kitchen removing items from the shopping bags. Her girlfriend Pam Thomas was assisting her as Sierra's three children and Pam's twin girls Alexis and Porsche played together in the backyard. Sierra and Pam had been friends for a couple years. The two met at a coffee shop only to find out that they were neighbors. What attracted Sierra to her was the fact that she spoke her mind on most every subject, this day was no different.

"So what do you think this dinner is going to do?" Pam asked Sierra as she handed her a box of powdered milk.

"I don't know what it'll do but I have to try," Sierra answered taking the box from her girlfriend's hand.

"Why do you have to try? Because Nate and Mya are getting married? That's some bullshit Sierra, what you need to do is leave his sorry ass."

“Watch your mouth.”

“I done told you about trying to censor me Sierra. Those kids ain’t hardly thinkin’ about us right now, anyway,” Pam folded the paper bags and stacked them on the counter, “He cheatin’. I know it, you damn sure know it. Leave him.”

“You know I can’t.”

“Why not? When I found out the girls daddy was fuckin’ that trick Betty, I kicked his sorry ass to the curb with the quickness.”

“We done been through this before Pam. I can’t divorce Darryl. I took a vow before God. I can’t just break that. It said for better or for worse.”

“That nigga breakin’ it by committing adultery. I don’t believe your vows allowed for that.”

“We don’t know he’s cheating, you’re assuming that.”

“Don’t be naive Si-Si, we know. A nigga get off work at 6:30 but don’t get home until 11 at night had done picked up some extra-curricular pussy,” Pam took an apple from the fruit bowl on the table and bit into it, “Now girl, what you need to do is take that fine friend of yours Nate away from that European bitch. You know you like him.”

Sierra rolled her eyes and smiled as she continued to put food in the refrigerator, “I never said I like him.”

“You never said you didn’t.”

“Well, I don’t, not like that anyway. He’s just my friend.”

“Gurl please! Who you think you talkin’ to? Shit you named all your kids after the nigga! Give me a break, friend my ass.”

Pam hopped from her stool and headed out the back door to check on the children. Sierra shook her head. Nate was her friend, her very best friend and he was happy with Mya. She would never try to come between them. Besides, she didn’t think she was Nate’s type anyway. Even if she did have a slight crush on him it wouldn’t be worth pursuing. She was a married mother of three. So it may not have been a happy marriage but it was a marriage none-the-less. Not to mention that

involvement with a good friend was not always healthy and she would not wish to possibly compromise her and Nate's friendship.

Sierra cooked a fine meal for her and her husband's enjoyment. She set the dining room with their best dishes. Two candles in the center to set the romantic mood she was hoping for. It was nearing 6:30 and Darryl would soon come. Sierra left the children in Pam's care who was reluctant to take Sierra's three home with her. Reluctant not because she did not enjoy Sierra's children but rather because she disagreed with her friend trying to revitalize a useless marriage. Sierra took a hot shower and shaved the excess hair from her legs and armpits. She oiled her frame and put on a black bra and her only pair of black satin panties. Her hair she pulled back into a bun. Gold earrings dangled from her ears. A long navy blue sleeveless sheath dress was laid across her bed.

She dressed and slid her eyeglasses back onto her face then took a seat in her living room waiting for her husband to come home. At ten to eight o'clock she heard Darryl's car pull up. She quickly jumped up from her seat on the sofa and returned to the kitchen to prepare. Darryl's key turned in the door and seconds after the sound of his footsteps faded as he walked to the bedroom. The sound of movement traveled on the air from the rear of the house followed by footsteps in Sierra's direction. Despite the tempting aroma he continued past the kitchen and into the living room where he turned on the television.

In the kitchen Sierra's nerves were frazzled. She practiced breathing techniques and touched her hair to be sure it was still in tact. "Hear goes nothing" she mumbled to herself as she walked out of the kitchen and to the living room. She stopped at its edge nervous and afraid to continue forward. Darryl sat slouched on the sofa surfing channels. He wore his store bought work slacks and black dress socks. A standard white button down shirt was open revealing a slightly dingy wife-beater. His tie had been removed. Sierra took a deep breath and continued on until she stood beside him.

"I cooked, would you like to eat?" she asked timidly.

"I'm not hungry," he responded without looking at her.

"The kids are with Pam. We have the house to ourselves for awhile."

Darryl remained unfazed, his gaze affixed on the television. He began to feel annoyed. Curiosity engaged his senses and he wondered what incited her to suddenly strike up a conversation with him. Relief set in when she appeared to give up as she began to turn away but she instead stopped and turned back to him.

“I cooked your favorites. Pork chops and homemade mashed potatoes and gravy and green beans. I even made a peach cobbler,” she tried again.

“I said I’m not hungry,” he said staring Sierra directly in her eyes before returning his attention to the television.

Sierra gave up and swallowed her pain. She didn’t cry though she wanted to, she instead chewed her bottom lip. She’d long lost her ability to cry. Sierra left him be in the living room but paused directly outside of it. She leaned her back against the wall and stared at the ceiling as she came to terms with what had just happened, how she’d been so terribly rejected by a man who vowed to dedicate himself to her happiness. From where she stood Sierra could hear Darryl pick up the telephone receiver. A brief moment passed before his voice tapped against her eardrum.

“Yea what up dawg?” he spoke into the receiver, “nothin’ just flippin’ through bullshit on TV.... oh yea?... when?... I’m down, shit nigga my ass starvin’ like Marvin...hell yea, let me just get out these plantation clothes and I’m on my way.... aight.”

Darryl replaced the receiver and turned the television off. Not wanting him to be aware that she was spying on him, Sierra rushed into the kitchen and out of visibility. As Darryl changed out of his make money clothing and into his spend money attire to wear out to dinner with his friends, Sierra put away the dinner she’d put on her evening gown to eat with her husband in.