



Seasons Change and So Do We

By: Nichelle A. Ruffin

*Nia (NEE-YAH) **Purpose:** Encourages us to look within ourselves and to set personal goals that are beneficial to the community.*

This book is written about a wonderful woman named Nia. Nia is a thirty something divorced African American mother of one daughter, Noel. She has proven that she can be a good wife and mother while creating a very lucrative career and extravagant lifestyle. Most of her life has been spent doing just that. Unfortunately, in the midst of it all, she sees that she has lost sight of what success truly means. She is now single with an adult daughter. She has a wonderful family. She has wonderful friends. The company she helped build is ranked in the top three of Fortune Five Hundred companies. She has stocks and bonds. On top of it all, she wins the lottery. What's the problem? They all consume her. Everything consumes her, even her intimate relationships. In fact, she admits she is suffocating.

Nia struggles to live and rediscover her true calling but not before she faces a battle with severe episodes of depression, drug abuse and an encounter with Satan himself.

Epilogue: *It's amazing that this time of year we are still having very warm weather. The season is definitely changing because leaves are falling from the trees. I can't help but appreciate the beauty the leaves bring each year. Even when I had a huge front and back yard, which were surrounded by humungous trees, I enjoyed watching the leaves fall. Of course bagging them up was a nightmare but I really appreciated the beauty of it all. My mother and I would have wonderful discussions about the seasons and how trees are affected. There were times we would actually stop the car to marvel at their beauty as we enjoy the whisper of the wind brush against our faces. It would be more like we were having conversations with all of God's beauty instead of each other. The conversations always ended with us taking photos of the trees, thanking God for His goodness and letting the Universe know how much we appreciate all the love continuously shown to us through each of the four seasons.*

As the seasons change, I think of love. Nature is love's expression of love's purity manifested. I have learned to become one with it all. When I was younger, I would often become strikingly ill. After many days of staying in-doors, due to my illness, my mom would tell me that it was time to go outside to bathe in the sun. The sun was a part of the many remedies used to nurture me back to health. It always worked! Even today, whenever I am feeling down and out or a little under the weather, I will sit outside a while, under the magnificent sun. What better way to feel the healing powers of love. It is high time to feel the sun again. It is time to bathe in the ray of glorious light. Remember through all the bathing, seasons change...and so do we!

Chapter 1

Today is going to be a great day. I just know it. I intend it! I awoke this morning to a whole new world, full of new ideas. My mind is made up. Really and truly, my mind has been made up for a very long time. I am going to turn in my resignation and walk into my destiny. I prayed about it and I remind myself constantly that it is time to do what I love to do. I want to write. I want to sing. I want to do whatever I feel like doing. Is that too much to ask? No, I really don't think so. If I don't go with my heart, I will lose my mind. Don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with corporate America. Corporate America has given me the necessary tools to become who I am today. My family and friends would say that I am wealthy and some may even insist I am rich. If we are talking monetarily, then I'd say they are absolutely correct. In that case, I can't complain...I won't complain. However, I could do better. Isn't that what life is about? The season has changed and so have I. I have spent many days reminiscing about the summers I spent walking barefoot in the rich red soil of Alabama. I didn't have a care in the world. Money was something that didn't dictate my family's happiness during those days. Maybe I did have a care, but after a while it didn't matter. My cares consisted of being a girl in the midst of all the boys in my family. I didn't want to accept the notion that girls are meant to be seen and not heard. I wanted to boss everyone. I was always in charge. I wanted to play football, baseball and especially doge ball. I wanted to "pop willies" on my bicycle. Now, in my mind, that is what being rich is all about. Being rich is about doing whatever makes you feel whole.

As kids, we would go out-doors and play all day long, even in the early parts of winter. There was nothing like the feeling of being free to run as far as we wanted. Right in the back of

my great grandmother's house was a huge field. All the kids in the neighborhood would play all day long back there. My mom said that when she and her sisters were coming up, they would have baseball games in that very field. I miss the feeling of those days. There has to be a better way to make a living while enjoying it as well. Lord, bring back that feeling I once knew.

Today is the day. I don't care what anybody says either. I am convinced that my life depends on this very choice. If I remain at my company another day, I am going to have to be committed to somebody's insane asylum. It is that crucial. I can hear my brother now, "You want to give up a six figure income to do what?" Then he'll call my baby brother, while he's talking to me, just to back up what he was saying. My baby brother will usually agree with the both of us. He's always been that way. He has told me, behind closed doors, to follow my heart no matter what. That is how he and his wife live their lives. We call them our Bohemian/Rosita Tribe. Where ever my brother and his wife are, the children, all seven of them, are not too far behind. Whatever they do, they enjoy every moment of it. Can you imagine waking up with not a care in the world even after looking at seven additional mouths to feed?

What happened to me? Why have I given away my freedom? I used to follow my heart. Somewhere along the way, I lost it. I began following my head and what other people felt was right for me. Well, now my daughter is all grown up and it is time for me to become a Gypsy, Bohemian, Rastafarian, or whatever the hell I choose to be. And, if I want to change it up the following week, then so be it. I am going to travel, take all kinds of classes, visit friends and family, compose a record, run in a marathon, be a part of Oprah Winfrey's audience or panel of guests, go deep within myself on a spiritual retreat and become a part of *The Contender's* audience for life. Honey, I love myself some *Contender*. I don't know if I even saved enough

money for all of those things. How about, I don't even care if I did or not. That's enough to set it all in motion. I am going! Watch my smoke.

My mom understands. Thank you Mom for understanding the way I feel. You know how most mother's are. Even if they don't understand, they sure will try and the part that just doesn't seem to make its' way to their brain, well, they'll give that part right on over to the Lord while counting it all joy because God has always remained faithful.

As far as I can remember, my mom has always been in my corner. She's been the same for my brothers. She tells me that if she could live her life over again, she would follow every dream that had ever come into her mind. Before having her first child, even after having her first child, she spent hours designing dresses and decorating her home. She didn't know then that her dreams were truly an option until now that she is well into her fifties and my father has passed on. Young, poor black people, in my momma's day, were told to get married, have children, work hard and save for a house, possibly a car and most of all, put food on the table to feed the children. Those things were "ideal" at that time. Today things are different. Many parents tell their children to follow their dreams. Those who were not encouraged to follow their dreams grew up to be parents who in turn say pretty much the same things as their parents. I don't blame them or anybody else, for that is all they know to do. It's all they have been taught to believe. There was nothing or nobody telling them to "think outside the box". Plus many of them lived in areas where their entire race was told over and over again that they were nothing. My mother is just now beginning to understand and accept the philosophy of thinking outside of the box. She has seen where the concept has proven beneficial in her children, in our community and in the world. I constantly tell my daughter day in and day out to do what makes her happy as long as it is legally and morally correct. She chooses to get straight "A's" in school. I don't pressure her to

maintain that standard. Yes, I am very pleased. However, if she were to make “C’s”, I would love her the same while reminding her that it is her life and perhaps one day she’d wish she had tried a little harder. Of course, I don’t allow her to make all the decisions for herself. I am the parent but I do give her opportunities to spread her wings by making essential decisions from time to time. She needs to make some decisions and realize that her thoughts count. I’ve taught her that her thoughts create her world. Sometimes it is a little challenging because she’s my baby. I am still my momma’s baby too. So, with support of my mother and daughter, I am walking away from the “money making madness” I chose for myself many seasons ago.

Believe it or not, I am more than eager to hand my boss, the president of *Davison, Lawson and Bryant*, my resignation letter. I had gone through mixed emotions months ago. Prayer and meditation have given me what I need to remain calm and to see this transition through.

“This is a good move for the company and me”, I told Mr. Blake.

He went on and on about how much money I made for the company and that I am the reason for all of the vast improvements.

“Yes, I realize all of that but I wouldn’t and could not have done what I’ve done without the help of the team”, I stated.

I explained how different ones from different departments had done most of the leg work. All I did was package it all together and pitch their hard earned work to our clients. Of course they all

loved my “pitch” and were praising me for years. I am happy to have been one of the trail blazers. I am actually truly honored to be known as the first African American female to have spearheaded one of the first major corporations in America.

“All that is good but I want to go home,” I thought.

I might even decide to admit myself to a hospital or Buddhist retreat for a couple of weeks. Sounds crazy doesn’t it? How many people have thought that very same thought?

Hmmmmmm...I know I am not the only one. I just want to sleep until I decide to wake up.

Finally, Mr. Blake told me that he understood and that his children grew up without many hands on support from him. He said that he wished he had the faith that I have.

“No offense to the company, but when you’re sick and tired of being sick and tired...this is what happens,” I replied.

I am not really unhappy, I am just plain ole’ burned out from the hustle and bustle of the game. In fact, what started out being something I used to breathe like air has become a pillow which seems to suffocate me on a continuous basis. The suffocation didn’t come all at once though. It was like a ten year stench of labor pains. Hell, the last two years, I fought like “Iron Mike” just to stay alive. My body hurts. I went from seeing a therapist one day a month to seeing her one day a week. All my life I believed in conquering physical pain with sleep and drinking water.

Now, I can barely close my medicine cabinet. There is Percocet, Vicodin, Prozac, Effexor, Robaxin, Mylantin, Pepto, you name it, I take it or have taken it. Yoga has become a new religion to me. No, I haven't denounced Christianity. I've just added a new friend.

So, after an endless battle of highs and low low low lows, I realized that I have to eat right again. I have to sleep again. I have to get out of here fast. I have to breathe again. Oh, did I mention that I have to stop drinking so damn much?

On that depressing (sick) note, I shook Mr. Blake's quivering hand and begged him to not make a big deal of my leaving the company. I don't know if he was shaking because I was really the mastermind behind our empire and now he would really have to do work or if he thought I would demand ownership and possibly take over the company. That's definitely not my style. I wasn't looking to leave the company "high and dry" but I did expect what was rightfully mine, which is probably half the cost of this thirty-six story building and its' supplies, but who's keeping notes. When I decided to resign, I thought about how I felt when I decided to leave my husband. That's a whole 'nother sad drama filled story that should have ended long before it started. I didn't want anything that wasn't rightfully mine from that man. Although, most of what we had together was given to me by the court, I never wanted to end our marriage like that. We shared a lot of good years together. It gave me peace to end it with both of us smiling. I operate like that all of my relationships. Why should I become greedy now?

Believe it or not, when I started *Davison, Lawson and Bryant*, at the tender age of nineteen, we only had six floors. We all worked night and day and day and night to get this empire off the ground. Most of those who started out with me went on to become CEOs of their own firms. While others, like myself, continued to burn the midnight oil for what we have today. I will miss many of the people desperately and will even call them from time to time. Most of

them are still working because they either enjoy it or they don't know anything else. It is definitely not because they have to though. Yeah, I will miss this place deeply but not enough to cry a river.

Mr. Blake's secretary Natalie, of fifteen years, is notorious for planning beautiful parties of every kind. She started her own party planning business, *Nat's Nest*, about two years ago. It's been booming ever since. Natalie refuses to leave the company though. She thinks Mr. Blake would die without her. I agree. I don't care if he goes into a coma over me leaving though. I have to get out! Of course, as I thought, no matter how many times I said I didn't want a fuss made over my leaving. There was a party scheduled for me before I could walk out of Mr. Blake's office. What could I do? Not accept what they desired to do for me? Momma didn't raise no fool!

Any way, like I said, Mr. Blake's secretary set it out, like she had many times before. All work had to cease by noon that day. Mr. Blake told everyone to go home and get changed for the party but everyone had to return by five o'clock, if they wanted be paid for that day, as if those well to do folks cared about a pay check. I wasn't allowed to show up until about five thirty. The guest of honor should make an entrance, they said. That was an understatement to me. My girlfriends and I had gotten started early that day before even knowing if there would actually be a party. We were celebrating life.

After clocking out for the last time, I planned to meet up with my girlfriends at *Casey's Joint*, just around the corner from where I worked. My driver wanted to take me there but I gave him a hundred dollar tip and told him to buy his wife something nice instead of driving me around. As I got closer to the *Casey's*, I noticed Terry's mauve Mercedes parked in the lot. Just as I thought, they were already juiced up! We will have to sit here about an hour for them to gain

their composure. It's a good thing our favorite spa is located right upstairs. If we had to go any further, somebody wouldn't make it. Constance, one of the many stylists, came over to the table to spread the latest gossip as usual.

"Ladies, ladies, ladies, where ya'll been?" This was a rhetorical question, cause she continued without missing a beat. "I've been meaning to call you Crystal. Mr. Whestmore is throwing a big bash next week for his son who passed the bar exam the other day. His daughter is on her third husband and the baby girl is supposedly still in rehab. Ain't that a mess?"

That was also a rhetorical question.

"Nina, I heard that you told those white folks to kiss your big black butt! Girl, it is about time you move on to something grander because you deserve it. Those folks ought to kiss your butt three thousand times for all you've given them. So, what does Noel think about your big move?"

Finally I was able to get in a word, even if it was only for a second. "Noel, is as excited as I am. In fact all of my family and friends are, well, except for my big brother."

"Girl, where is that fine chocolate thang?"

That goes to show how much she cares about me. She moved right on to another topic, her favorite topic, my oldest brother.

"Oh, he's doing what he does," I said, hoping she wouldn't start telling us about how she loved his dirty drawers.

"Well ladies, I won't bore you any longer. Doll and Mamie are upstairs waiting to get started on beautifying the divas," Constance said, as she sashayed over to the register.

We were celebrating me going into the world and doing my thang Hollywood style. The celebration was to go on for the entire weekend.

“We are not twenty year olds anymore,” I laughingly said. My girls chimed in, “But we look it though!” I had to admit that if I didn’t have the cellulite, which I’d been meaning to make an appointment for, and maybe a gray hair or two, I could compete with Beyonce’, Ashanti, and my girl Alicia Keys.

“Ooh, doesn’t Janet look good?” Terri screamed.

I had to give Janet her props. Miss Girl is well into her forties and still can drop it like it’s hot.

Diva Style did just what they do. They whipped our hair into master pieces in less than two hours. It is a shame my girlfriends didn’t want to accompany me to my going away party. I convinced them though and they were elated after getting there. The girls thought it would be stuffy, since most of my staff is Caucasian. I told them that those are the people who know how to throw a party.

“These are the type of white folks I like,” Kim chimed.

“Hmmm I like Sean Carnery, over there,” said Crystal. Crystal was known for working old men. I mean, “Older men”. That is just how she rolls. It has paid off for her too. She lives in a five bedroom mansion, which was willed to her by her late husband, along with a Bentley, an Escalade and a life time membership at the cities most famous spas and restaurants. Did I mention that he was seventy-five years old when he passed on? Crystal is thirty- three. When she went after him, we made fun of her for days. Who’s laughing now? She is, cause Miss Crystal is living large. She doesn’t have to work ever again if she doesn’t want to. Some people get all the breaks. Well, thank God she is a very dear friend of mine and has my back if I should

ever need her. She's truly a wonderful person once you get to know her. Most women are intimidated by her because she carries herself like Earth Kit, very statuesque. I ain't mad at my girl for that! Being a part of her life has been exciting. It's like a viewing of *The Life Styles of the Rich and Famous*. If you didn't know any better, you would probably mistake her for Jasmine Guy. She could really play Jasmine in a movie or something. I am dead serious.

I haven't forgotten the party but since we are on the subject, let me give you a rundown of the crew. My girlfriends are something else. Ok, Terri is the oldest and probably the prettiest, in a more refined earthy way. Please don't tell her that I said that she's the oldest or the prettiest because she will probably not agree. Oh yeah, she is also the most physically competitive. There is nothing that this woman hasn't done. I asked her if she has a death wish or something. She sky dives, bungee jumps, surfs, plays hockey and travels to Africa periodically to update her pictures of the wild life. I guess traveling to Africa's jungles is what she has to do to make a living. How many normal sistahs or brothas would have chosen something like that as a profession? The job has given her pleasure though and that is what it is all about. She rises in the morning anxious about her day and goes to bed at night dreaming about all the exciting things she did that day and will do tomorrow. Her passion for adventure runs deep. Not to mention, the pictures she's taken of Africa have won her many respected awards. You go girl! Is all I can say. Did I mention that she's been dating the same guy for about six years now? That's not that unusual huh? Did I mention that he is a brotha? He's away on some safari somewhere. God truly has someone for everybody. Don't ever think that He doesn't.

Kim. What can I say about Kim? Kim is married to the Honorable Daniel Madison. He's the mayor of our city. I mentioned him before telling you anything about her because "he is her" and "she is he". Last year, he was accused of sexual harassment by one of his interns. It

was all thrown out of court after Daniel's lawyer proved the young lady to be a philanderer. She had filed similar charges against two of her very well off instructors about ten years ago. You would think that Daniel is Bobby Brown and Kim is Whitney, the way my girl showed her ass in the courtroom. That is some type of love I just don't understand. I can't put a label on it and won't even try. I just love them just like they are. My girl stood by her husband through it all. She is one that strongly believes a woman should stand by her man through the fire. I applaud her. I am finally at that point but my thing right now is getting me together first.

Kim and Daniel produced three children: Daniel Jr., Darius and Dale. Darius and Dale are identical twins but are so very different in character. They are a hand full. Yet, the twins are the sweetest pair of four year olds I have ever seen. Daniel Jr. will be graduating from high school this year. Kim has been planning that boy's future since he was in the womb.

She said, "D.J. will go to Notre Dame and by God, he will get a full expense paid scholarship."

In deed D.J. received the scholarship. Could it have been the influence of his parents? I don't know, but inquiring minds would like to know. D.J. is a great ball player in spite of how I think he may have gotten the scholarship, so I'll stop throwing salt but anyone knows that it does help when your last name is "Madison". I must tell you that there was a young lady in his life for quite some time. Miss Kim ended that though. D.J. begged me to speak with his mother about her attitude towards his lady friend. Unfortunately I was unable to get Kim to bend one bit. However, I am glad Kim stuck to her guns. A mother knows a gold digger when she sees one. The night of the break up, that little heifer started going out with D.J.'s first cousin. How scandalous can one be? Yes, D.J.'s cousin is a sought after football player.

“Mother knows best”, is what Kim stated after D.J. had gotten over the ordeal. Yeah, Kim is a little too attached and goes a little over board once in a while but I must say, that girl loves her family and definitely does know what is best for them. There is nothing she wouldn’t do to keep them on top. To boot, she is also a wonderful friend. I can’t ask for anything better than the bond we share.

Did I forget anyone? Hmmm...Kim, Crystal and Terri. Yeah, I gave you the “low down” on all my girls. I will get back to the party in a minute. Alright already! First I must tell you some things about me. It wouldn’t be right to allow you to see one side of my world. Yes, I am about to embark on a whole new way of life. However, that’s not all there is to me. You noticed early on, my family and friends are a special part of my life. This will never ever change. The only thing that will change is the order of priority. God is first, as always. I am learning to allow Nia Annette Robinson to be second. Nobody and I do mean nobody will come before me ever again. Don’t get me wrong. I am not turning into some selfish bitch or anything like that. I am truly a person of much love and compassion. I can’t be anything else, but the love and compassion is a circle which starts with me and ends with me. There is no other way. The men in my life....well, there are two, outside of my two brothers.

My momma says, “It’s a crime and a shame to be laying up with two men!”

I agreed but what’s a girl to do? Yeah, I need Jesus don’t I? We all do and when I get my love life straight, I will still need Jesus. Believe it or not, they both have the same name too, Michael. This works for me. I can never say the wrong name when I am with either one of them. Wait a minute, I have to tell you that they do know about each other and have for quite a while now.

Michael Thomas lives in L.A. Hell, I don't know what he's doing do I? He could be married with children for all I know. I can say that he stood by me through some very trying times. Back in 1999 I had fallen down in my kitchen. Silly me, I forgot that I had just waxed the floor. Anyway, Michael was in the den at the time but managed to hear my head hit the cabinet. He came running and immediately phoned 911. I still can't remember any of this. I do recall waking up about two hours later with Michael standing over me. I laughed because he looked as if he had seen a ghost but the humor wasn't returned. Once I took my eyes off of him, I looked around with amazement. I asked Michael all of the details as to me getting there. To make a long story short, I was released with about two prescriptions for pain killers and a bed rest note from the doctor. This was the beginning of my addiction to pain killers. No one ever knew what happened that night or how bad I had phoned for months over pain killers. Michael Thomas did and hasn't told a soul. He knew how my friends looked up to me and my mom couldn't handle any more than what was on her plate at the time. I don't know whether to thank him or not. I suppose in a warped minded kind of way, I love him for this. He did tell that he would blow the whistle on me if Noel or my finances suffered because of my habit. I had gotten just that bad. I never had to find a supplier because my doctor, the best supplier in the world, is one of my very dear friends. Of course, he recommended that I stop as well. After much consideration, I realized that it was way too much trouble than it was worth. Believe me, I have moments now of wanting that hazy pain free feeling but I replace the thought with something more positive. Now that I am clean, I still believe I wasn't even close to ruining my life in any way.

Michael and I met during a business seminar back in 1995 but didn't start dating until probably around early 1999. I've never asked him about his life outside of me and him. This

does sound strange huh? Well, after a marriage spent in purgatory and a divorce spent in hell, I don't give a damn what any man does any more as long as he faithfully wears condoms and he's heterosexual. I've had a very close friend find out after years of sleeping with a man she thought was hers, he turned to out to be sharing his love with a "him" too. She tried killing herself, him and his lover before surrendering to the police. This is another story at a much later date.

My other beau, Michael Wells, on the other hand, lives about twenty minutes from me. Ask me if I care what he's doing either? The answer is no. Of course, Michael Thomas doesn't know that Michael Wells lives that close. But he does know that he exists and is a part of my life. If I have my say, he will never know where Michael Wells lives. We met at the bowling alley. I am not a bowler by any means. I was just out having some fun with my girlfriends. They noticed Michael when we walked in and he walked up to us as if he wasn't a stranger at all. Upon approaching us, we all could see that his eyes remained on me the entire time. We made small talk and the rest is history. What I love about him is his love for his daughter. She and my daughter are the same age but to him she's still his baby although he treats her like the young adult she is. He doesn't disrespect either one of us. We are both treated like queens. In my mind, he could be a little more outgoing because he has so much potential. He graduated with honors from a very prestigious engineering program yet he adores refurbishing cars. His work is remarkable. I almost lost him when I had someone from my office call him with a great opportunity as lead engineer for our company. He let me have it. He said he's a man and for me to never forget it. O.k., I guess he told me. I never did anything like that again to either of my men.

One day this triangle will end but today is definitely not it. I love them both. I really do. If I could marry the both of them, I would do it immediately. Together, they are perfect.

Unfortunately our laws don't give us that freedom. So, I'll hold on until I find the strength to let one of them go. Who knows, I might just add them to the list of "things to get rid of" as well. It is time for a whole new life and a whole new me. Ladies and gentlemen, I am not trying to play nobody. I really do care about them more than I can say. Haven't you ever gotten caught up? Haven't you ever been at cross roads? It will get better, I promise.

Back in the day I would have never dreamed of juggling men or even having complete confidence in myself and in my decisions to have this type of relationship. That was before I learned that my chocolate skin and high I.Q. are assets. That was also before I realized that my thoughts create my reality. I realize now that I can pursue my dreams and live happily ever after. Fortunately I have come to terms with my kinky hair too. Hair straightened down my back is not how God intended me to be, especially if the hair being straightened is not mine to begin with. I realized that I could cut my hair down and look more like a diamond than I ever did with all the horse's mane I've bought. Don't get me wrong, ain't a thang wrong with weave as long as the person wearing it knows who she is. Most of all, that was also before I stopped wrapping my jackets around my waist to cover the booty given to me from the Queen Nefertiti of the "Mother Land". God, I am so ashamed to admit this! The Commodores told me over and over again that I am a "Brick House". However, I chose not to listen over and over again. Why???? Have you met Barbie? Have you seen teen magazine during 1984 -1989, the years I was most impressionable? Wait, what about the impression we have been given about our blackness since the beginning of slavery. Now, I know all of these things that were not beautiful are what gets me in out of the cold when others have to wait in line at the clubs. I have to laugh sometimes at how crazy I was and what I chose to believe about me. Lord please forgive your child! My mother use to tell me, as she drowned my face in Vaseline, "you are the cutest little black berry

in the briar patch”. Of course she made me feel worse. You know she did. First of all, all I could hear was the word “black” and that wasn’t good at all. All I could see was my little face not only being black but shiny and black. What an ugly combination.

The party, oh yeah, I haven’t forgotten. Child, I get so caught up in the subject of blackness and other stuff it ain’t even funny.

Miss Thang, (the secretary), even had someone designated to park cars. There was also someone checking coats. Food was ridiculously everywhere we turned. The tables were beautifully covered with beautiful *Noritake* China which was skillfully filled with exotic ordurves. Am I the Queen of the Nile or what? I must have forgotten who I am. As I made my entrance, people started applauding. My girls and I strolled down the red carpet bewildered and giddy.

“Isn’t this amazing”, was all I could say.

“You deserve it girl,” Terri said through a fake cheerleader smile while clenching her teeth.

Tears flooded my eyes as I made my way to the front of the room. Immediately, my special guests and I were escorted to our seats at the head table. My boss stood up and stated that since the guest of honor is present, the presentation should begin.

“What presentation?” I asked.

The lights dimmed and the movie screen scrolled down. There were snap shots of the staff ten years ago up to now. Boy, had we changed. Thank God, black doesn’t crack! I look the same in all the pictures except for the last two. My eyes seemed to be extremely sad and tired. Obviously in the pictures, I was smiling but crying on the inside. If my mother were here, she would have said the same. She knows her baby girl like nobody else.

The staff prepared an extra copy for me to take home. It really touched my heart. Each department presented me with gifts of appreciation: there were vacation packages, jewelry, fruit baskets, plaques, African Art, my very own set of *Noritake* china, the list goes on. I will probably have to hire someone tonight to move all of these things home for me. Didn't they know, this sistah is trying to de-clutter her life? My girlfriends had claimed most of the gifts during the presentation. I told them that they could have whatever they wanted except my china, vacation packages and African art. Between me and my mother, we will enjoy those items.

Once the lights were turned back up, the music began to fill the room. I made my way over to the champagne. I wouldn't be driving tonight, I thought. Somebody else will be "driving Ms. Daisy". This is my night. I had no clue how I would go about living the rest of my life. I almost allowed the feeling of self pity to infiltrate me but I remembered what Bishop T.D. Jakes once said, "Shake your self!" So, immediately I "shook myself". I repeated over and over again, "This is a wonderful and new beginning for me."

And God said, "Let there be light!"

The evening was more than memorable. I left the party with running mascara and blood shot eyes. There wasn't a dry eye in the entire room. People, who really didn't know me, were shedding tears. It was a very touching experience. In fact, tomorrow morning I am going to run down to the market just to get the morning news paper. I know that the party will be covered in the local news, if not on the front page. You see, not only is my company one of the top in revenue and sales, I am well known throughout the community because of the type of work I've done outside of the office with the inner city youth, church events, breast cancer awareness and my most favorite of the topics... African American Literature. I have participated in every event that the Hurston and Wright Foundation conducted.

The Zora Neal Hurston /Richard Wright Foundation established itself in September 1990 by Marita Golden, a novelist. The foundation presents awards to writers of African descent. To me, anything having to do with the foundation was and is extraordinary.

So, needless to say, based on my resume', I've touched most of the people in my city in one way or another. Surely, they will appreciate me even more once I start living my dream. This time I will live my life like it is "Golden" just like my girl, Jill Scott. Didn't I say that before? In case you didn't get it the first time, I repeated it for G.P.

Chapter 2

I told you that we would party all weekend. The girls decided to stay over to my house instead of going home, only to come back the next day. We chose to order breakfast while we planned for the rest of the day.

“All I want right now is a cup of coffee,” I groaned.

“Me too”, Terri replied.

I immediately rushed over to my coffee maker hoping that I didn’t forget to buy more coffee. Thank God. There was half a container. We had more than enough between the two of us. Crystal and Kim requested tea instead, which was alright by me.

“It’s good to the last drop”, I chimed. My spirits were lifted just thinking about the wonderful taste of Folgers.

Breakfast arrived about thirty minutes later. We were dressed and wired for the events of the day. I figured we would go to the Brown’s Island first. There would be entertainers from all over, there today. The concert is designed to raise money for the “Hurricane Katrina” victims down in Alabama and Mississippi. Many felt that the victims in New Orleans were in need as well but New Orleans had received the bulk of the support.

As always, Richmond is congested with Traffic. I am glad that we chose to leave a little earlier. Even though I had a personal parking spot near Brown’s Island, I didn’t want to take any chances at having to fight someone over “my spot”. I thought. One would be amazed at what people will do when they are desperate.

There was no one in my spot, or in the President’s parking area. The President of our company had two parking areas. I knew that he wouldn’t be visiting this event; therefore I didn’t

have to worry about someone parking on either side of me. I had a couple of orange cones in my trunk. I decided to take them out and place them in the center of each vacancy, one to my left and the other to my right. I really didn't want to take the chance of anyone parking next to my "ride". Paint jobs are not cheap you know.

We managed to make our way through the crowd. I had no idea that so many African American people resided in Richmond, VA. Being that Virginia is remembered for its'notorious slave trade and massacres, you would think we wouldn't want to be here. Oh contraire! We, as black people, love ourselves some Richmond, VA. If you are wealthy and black, you got it going on. I wanted my daughter to attend college in Richmond but she chose to go back down further south. Her choice became Spelman College. I have to admit, she chose a great school with great history. Howard University was her second choice. That was cool by me but my mom didn't want my daughter in the heart of D.C. I asked her how being in Atlanta would be any better. My mom is still in the mindset of the south being a little safer than any other area in the world. She believes that drugs and sex are not as prevalent. Momma please! Yeah, maybe that is the way it used to be when my mother was a young girl but today, everywhere is pretty much the same. I am just happy that my child is in somebody's school. Hell, it's free! How could anyone pass up a free education? Especially if the education is free at any college in America. Not only did my daughter receive several scholarships, her father's veteran benefits covered all of his children's education.

We had just finished eating breakfast a couple of hours ago but that didn't stop my mouth from salivating. I could smell curry chicken, curry goat and plantains a mile away. "The line is not even long," I shouted. I went on over and told my girls to find us a shaded area to set up our chairs and card table. I always come prepared. There were vendors all over, making money off

of the likes of Bob Marley, Bijou Banton and the rest of the reggae posse. Many of the vendors insisted on jacking the prices as high as they could get a way with. They knew that some fool would buy the merchandise mainly because they were too ignorant to shop around on line themselves. I wanted to yell out so badly, “Don’t waste your money or your time!” Instead, I chilled. My new motto as of today would be to allow people to do whatever the hell they wanted to do. Miss Nia is definitely going to do her thang. Bought sense is the best sense any way.

Ooh, the food is to die for! Everyone started eating from my plate.

“Why didn’t you all get your black asses in line?”

My nerves were almost wrecked by their bickering over who would have the last plantain. I divided it four ways and dared any one to say anything about it. Crystal had already lain out on her little blanket like she was some white woman on a beach. Guys eyed her up and down as they passed by. Crystal knew exactly what to do to draw attention. My only concern was having to fight off the women of all those eyeballing men. I wasn’t prepared to battle today. I just got my hair and nails done. Not to mention, these expensive shoes are not meant for any type stomping. Some of the sisters surrounding us are way far larger than the four of us put together. We are not ready for that type of labor.

One guy had the audacity to come over to where we were. He respectfully introduced himself and pointed to his boys who stood by hoping to be beckoned over. If they were waiting on an invitation from me, they would be waiting for a very long time. I hope their legs are strong! Mr. Mack Daddy, Eric was his name, complimented all of us but we all knew that Crystal was the one he came for. I wanted to spare the brotha and tell him that he was wasting his time. I chose not to, because what? I decided to allow people to do what they want to do.

“Five, four, three, two...one, and he is out for the count!” Terri made matters worse by whispering the count down. O’boy didn’t know our little secret. You see, whenever someone Crystal’s age or younger approached her, we would all count down. It never took longer than five seconds for most of them to decide that she wasn’t listening. Then there were the ones who thought that all they had to do was “mack” a little harder. I’ve seen fools leaving Crystal’s side sweating. Eric must have realized that there were beautiful women all over the island because he stepped off after five seconds flat and landed in the face of another beautiful woman.

“Crystal, why do you act so ugly?” Kim asked. “Kim, sweetheart, why should I waste time with petty conversation, when I am clearly not interested in what they have to say?” “I’m just saying, you are young and beautiful. Why do you spend your life chasing after men old enough to be your great grand father?”

“I can’t help who I am attracted to.” “It’s more like what you’re attracted to,” Terri stated. I found this conversation to be very entertaining. Like I said, I am not going to say a word about how anyone, not even Crystal, live her life. She seems to be doing just fine with her “old men loving self”. Just when the conversation was getting heated, Elephant Man ran onto the stage.

“How in God’s name does he have so much energy?” I thought. I love to see him dance. “Rasta Man” knows how to rotate those hips! Yes, if I was as aggressive as Crystal, I would have joined him on the stage. Some woman in the crowd wasn’t ashamed to get her big butt up there. Elephant Man almost fell off of the stage trying to help “Big Momma” up. His body guards had to come and assist. Nevertheless, she has something to tell her children, grand children and great grand children now.

The show started winding down at about nine o'clock. We were getting our things together when one of the security guards briskly walked over towards us. What does he want? I thought.

He introduced himself and told us that one of the entertainers had asked him to invite us to the after party. "Girl, I am gamed," Terri yelled. "Do you mind me asking, which one of the entertainers it was?" I quickly asked.

Terri intervened, "What does it matter? We were invited. Do we care which one it was?" I could have slapped her silly. She knows how I am.

"I am no groupie!" I shouted. I calmed down and began breathing like I was taught by my yoga instructor. The security guard handed us a card and directions to the party if we decided to go. I was so out voted. Against my better judgment, we were headed for the after party.

Chapter 2

The party must have been going on long before we arrived. It seemed that people were already intoxicated on something other than alcohol. We eased our way past the doorman without any trouble. Unlike the guys behind us, we weren't searched or charged for entering. I suppose the doorman was told to allow only women in without hassle. It appeared to be a rather live party going on. Maybe it will be alright, I thought. Before I could complete my thought good, I noticed a group of people snorting coke or whatever it was. That should have been my clue to leave right then but I didn't want anyone to say I was a "party pooper". Aren't I little too old to care what the masses think? Ok, I will overlook that one little or big mishap. My phone started vibrating. I looked at the caller I.D. and saw that it was Michael; the one in Richmond. He and Kim's husband had gone to the race track. I don't ever remember Michael mentioning that he even liked racing cars. Apparently he does. I learn something new every day.

"Hi baby," I cooed. "Hey yourself, what's all of that noise I hear?" Michael asked. "Oh, baby we're at a party downtown. Don't even say it. I know that I said we were going to Norfolk but we changed our minds at the last minute, as you can see."

"Nia, that's great. I guess I can swing by your place once we are finished here and wait for you to come home from the party."

"That may not be a good idea, Michael. The ladies are staying over again tonight. We plan to attend church together in the morning." The phone went silent. Because of all the background noise, I couldn't tell what Michael had said in response to what I said.

"Baby, please speak up?" I said.

“Nia, I don’t get to see you during the week. When can I have some time? You know what, never mind. I will go by my brother’s crib and maybe play a few hands of spades.”

Before I could say o.k. Michael hung up.

“Is everything alright?” Terri inquired. I looked at her like I was in control even though my heart was racing a mile a minute. I had to stop thinking about Michael. It’s all about me! It’s all about me! If I think it long enough, I will start believing it. It’s all about me!

Kim didn’t seem to be very concerned about Daniel. The kids were with his parents in Panama. Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you that Daniel is Panamanian. They met during their college spring break. Kim had gone to Panama to become a little familiar with the research she had done in her Anthropology class. Miss Thang came back to the states with not only a banging dissertation but also a handsome husband. They married each other after only three weeks together. That was fifteen years ago. Who says a couple should get to know each other for years before tying the knot. If you ask me, those two will be one of those couples you see in Jet Magazine, professing their undying love after fifty years of marital bliss. Maybe that’s why she was out there, on the dance floor, dropping it hotter than Janet. She was definitely secure in her marriage and so was Daniel. He would never question her about what she did, who she did it with or where she was. One time he tried to question her; she packed his bags and told him to get the hell out of her house. I asked her if she thought she may have been going overboard. She said that she does his laundry, nurtures his kids (including the one he has outside of the marriage), writes his speeches, cooks his food and pays the bills and the house keeper on time. At least he can trust her, unlike some women these days. Kim went on to say that Daniel’s name is on his kid’s birth certificate, not hers.

That was enough for me. I guess when she does get out of the house, she deserves to let her hair down and “shake a tail feather”. Do your thing girl because I don’t want you interfering with me doing mine.

Terri and I took a seat at the bar, while Crystal joined “Janet” on the dance floor. The bartender came over with two glasses of white wine. We reached into our purses attempting to pay but the bartender pointed to two guys sitting at the far end of the bar.

“I think they are football players. Don’t quote me because I just started getting into the game but I am pretty sure that they are.” Terri seemed fascinated about my new interest in the sport, as well as the men. She made her way over to the two gentlemen, just to thank them she said. “Yeah right, go on down there with your fast self.” I said. They were impressed and so was I. Well, they seemed to be down right giddy over “Black Barbie” strolling over while her sexy sidekick awaited her return. One of them had a grin that could put kool-aide out of business tonight. I felt like an ass sitting all alone and staring at my cell phone as if I was retrieving a phone number. The other guy pointed at me. “Oh Lord, please don’t let him come down here.” He is fine! As a matter of fact, he’s gorgeous. Any other night, I probably would’ve enjoyed his company. All I wanted to do tonight was to enjoy myself. I didn’t want anybody keeping me company all night long just because he bought me a little ole’ glass of wine. I don’t care if he is Deon Sanders, Emmett Smith or any other football player for that matter.

“Lord, here he comes...shit, oh I mean shoot....forgive me Lord.”

“Hi beautiful, and what is your name?”

Now this #@*!*, I mean, wonderful child of God, knows my name. Hell he probably knows my birthday and favorite color as much as he was jibbering and jabbering to with Terri over there.

“My name is Nia,” I said politely, even though I wanted to tell him what I had mumbled to myself. I had to laugh because I reminded myself of my Granny. She would be saying, under her breath, “That dog on so and so, knows my darn name!” My grandmother is a trip. Don’t let her get a little tipsy. O’boy would be really getting an ear full.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Nothing, I apologize, I was just thinking about my grandmother that’s all.” Why did I say that? He took my hand in his, as if to say that he understood. If he really did understand, he would know that I didn’t want him to hold my hand, I didn’t want him sitting by me and I didn’t want him buying me drinks. Once you allow a man to buy you one drink, not to mention two, he thinks you’re his for the rest of the night.

Without being too obvious, I pulled my hand back and asked if he would excuse me, I had to go to the ladies room. He stood up, like a good boy and pulled my chair out from under me. “Whatever happened to chivalry?” Baby Face sang the hell out of that song. I thought chivalry was dead too Baby Face but some men still are chivalrous. Yes in deedy.

“I’ll be right here when you get back sweetheart. If I am not here, I am over on the other side catching the rest of the boxing match,” he screamed above the blaring music. I smiled and followed the signs to the restroom. I really didn’t have to go. I just needed a breather. All the stalls were full when I walked in. I turned to fix my make up in the ill lit mirrors. What a way to keep the ladies happy, huh? As, I began to admire my new haircut, I had to admit again that it looks good on me. My hair dresser, Pinkie, told me how lovely and sophisticated I looked. I thought Pinkie was just trying to flatter me. He was exceptionally proud of himself for doing such a great job. Pinkie is an ar-tist! He is also another story all by himself.

Pinkie's real name is Alonzo Mullins. His mother was fourteen years old when she gave birth to him. At the age of six, he was raped by his mother's pimp and at the age of ten he turned his first trick for his mother's drug addicted boyfriend. His story is a horrible one indeed. Believe it or not, there are children out there with stories that will make Pinkie's story sound boring. When Alonzo became a teenager he was no longer Alonzo, he became Pinkie. Everyone in the neighborhood knew him as Pinkie. Turning tricks became a way of life for him until Granny, his great grandmother, came to get the girls and just happened to see him strutting down the street as if he were on Broad Way.

"Lonzo, is that you?" was what he told me she said.

"Lonzo, boy get yo' thangs and get in this hea cah."

He told me that he strutted into the house past his blazed out mamma and packed everything he could fit into the army duffle bag his Uncle Joe left for him. As he walked to the door, he leaned over his mamma and kissed her trembling head good bye. That was the last time he saw or heard from her, he was thirteen.

Pinkie came to Richmond in the early seventies with his great grandmother and her sister, May Bell. I think Pinkie may have been about sixteen or seventeen at that time. Not only did Granny raise Pinkie but she also raised his three younger sisters. Pinkie's mother, Gloria, didn't even know that her children were gone until many days later. She was so high on heroine at the time of their departure, anybody could've walked away with her house and she wouldn't have known the difference.

Gloria refused time and time again to kick her habit or leave the drug infested area of Georgia. She also refused treatment. Finally Pinkie's grandmother wrote a letter to Granny about what had been told to her. She was very concerned about Gloria and her children. Being

that she couldn't get there to help Gloria, because of her having a life sentence in the state penitentiary. Pinkie's grandmother had been convicted for murdering Mr. Dan, a white man, who allegedly fathered three of her children, one being Gloria. She pleaded with Granny to at least take the girls from Gloria. Granny ended up with the girls plus one more, Pinkie. Pinkie has been a success in the hair industry every since.

"Hey girl," a familiar voice said while interrupting my thoughts on Pinkie's life. I turned around and couldn't believe my eyes. It was Sophie. We had gone to college together. She and I were inseparable until I found out that she lived an alternate lifestyle. Don't think that I am homophobic or anything like that. It's just that I was young and again very impressionable. I thought being gay was something you could catch, like a disease or something. Hey, I came from the south. There was nothing called "out of the closet" when I was growing up. We had our suspicions about certain ones but that is as far as it went. The men that were really flaming...well, we laughed about it and didn't think anything else.

"Hello Sophie, girl you look good!"

"Thank you, Nia. I've been wondering where you disappeared to. I haven't seen you in so long. I miss you girl. You know that I've been away for quite sometime. After retiring from the Air Force, I decided to come back to Virginia. I accepted a job at the Virginia State University."

"That's good girl. What are you doing?" I asked. "I am the assistant dean of Black Studies," she said.

She is really doing well, I thought.

"Yeah, the military paid for each one of my degrees. So, I said, what the hell. I should get all I can get and while aiming high as I can aim."

She wanted to know what I was up to these days and if we could get together for lunch sometimes.

“I have an idea,” she said. “Why don’t you come over for dinner next weekend?”

“I don’t know Sophie. I haven’t been spending a lot of time with my man friend and it is wearing on him.”

“Bring him along. The more the merrier.”

I smiled and took down all of her information and gave her mine. We agreed to meet next weekend. There was no way to get out of it without her thinking that I’ve never gotten over her life style. I’m over it. She is a wonderful person and friend.

I walked out of the restroom still thinking about my conversation with Sophie. We had some great times together. I am not going to allow her lifestyle to stop us from remaining friends again. I refuse to pass judgment on anyone. I don’t appreciate being judged either. Live and let live! Sophie was a wizard in college. That girl would party all night and get to all her classes the next day. There was no skipping classes for her.

Sophie grew up on the mean streets of Brooklyn, literally, and vowed that if she was ever given a way out, she would take it. Her upbringing or lack of it gave something to her that no one else in our group possessed...a very broad outlook of the world. She would tell me stories of how she would be awakened in the middle of the night by policeman, homeless people and/or concerned citizens telling her and her mother to “cop a squat” somewhere else. They spent many nights in public parks or under bridges after being forced out of their house. Sophie’s father was a Vietnam veteran. Mr. Johnson would stop taking his medicine from time to time, which caused him to hallucinate something awful. Back then, there was almost no support for veterans.

Anyway, Sophie's mother would not allow Mr. Johnson to be hospitalized. Mrs. Johnson didn't think Mr. Johnson would receive proper care. She knew that he would calm down after a couple of days. Sure enough, Mr. Johnson would quiet down after a couple of days. Mrs. Johnson and Sophie would return as if nothing ever happened. Once he calmed down he stayed that way for usually six to eight months. Sophie loved her father as much as her mother did. Before he died, she promised him that she would always be the best that she could be, which, involved using every bit of her father's veteran benefits for they were rightfully hers. She did just that.

Sophie also entered a writing contest our freshman year of college and won. For the life of me, I can't remember what the topic was but I do remember the prize she was given. Her entire tuition, plus some, was covered for the first four years. Because of her academic record, she was granted an extension of the award, which covered graduate school as well. According to Sophie, going to school while in the military was very easy and beneficial when it came time for promotions.

After her successful career, Sophie invested in many of the brown stones in her old neighborhood. She was able to turn them into apartments for senior citizens. Her mother and grandmother were set for the rest of their lives. Sophie owns several vans, which she uses to transport the elderly to their appointments or to different places they decide to go. If I remember correctly, they have weekly schedules of their activities. She is the type of business person that I want to keep on my team. Our friendship may be something I need to cherish and thank God for. Right now I have to get back to the Octopus I left sitting alone.

I made it back to my seat. There was a single rose with a card placed in my chair. My name was written in big bold letters. I opened it, expecting to read some ridiculous line. The words weren't ridiculous at all. "Stay beautiful...Beautiful," is what was written. His name and number were written at the very bottom. I smiled, smelled my rose and ordered another white wine.

"Hey girl, where you been," shouted Crystal. By that time, all of my girls were seated at the bar getting tore up. Ignoring Crystal's question, I said, "You know we are going to church in the morning. You all look toasted."

"Girl, I don't know if I am going to make it there. Maybe you should go without me," Terri slurred.

"We are all going together and that's that," I answered. "As a matter of fact, we need to get out of here now," I yelled. Without an argument, everyone got their bags and headed for the door. The doorman was standing by the door. He blocked our exit.

"Please tell me that you are not leaving this early," he asked.

"Yes," we said in unison. He handed Crystal a flyer and told her to be there and to bring her crew. We smiled and he politely opened the door while telling us to have a good night.

All I wanted to do was to get into my cozy warm bed. My girl friends went for the refrigerator while I made my way up stairs. "

Just make sure you clean up behind your selves,” I said. Upon walking into my room, I recognized a familiar scent. I followed the scent until I reached its’ owner. Michael was nestled under the covers.

“Hi baby,” I said. “I thought you were upset with me.” He told me that he couldn’t be because he came in the relationship knowing that I loved living my life to the fullest. He knew what he had gotten himself into when he met me, he added.

“Michael, you know how I feel about you. I just have this desire inside of me that grows stronger every day. I want to know what it feels like to live life on my own terms. You knew me when I was married to my ex. I had no freedom whatsoever. We’ve talked about this before, I know. You know that you are very important to me.”

“What about Michael,” he interrupted. “Yes, my feelings for Michael are strong also. That has nothing to do with how I feel about you. It’s crazy, I know but it is what we all chose to deal with. Please don’t make me choose between you two o.k. I need time to deal with me right now. I’ve always been honest with the both of you. I’ve always told you to do what you have to do. If you have to walk away then so be it. I will miss you because I love you. I love what we share but I understand.”

Michael remained silent as if he was really considering leaving. I couldn’t blame him or the other Michael for walking away. I would walk if the tables were turned. We’ve done this for too long.

“Nia baby, I adore you. I want us to be together forever and ever. I’ve done all I can to keep you happy. I try to stay focused on the love we share but I can’t stomach you and him making love. You are my woman. You are supposed to be with me only. All I want to do is make love to you, physically, spiritually and emotionally. That’s what I want to do. When I hold

your hand, we are making love. When I make you laugh, we are making love. When we talk endlessly on the phone, we are making love. I don't know what you see but all I see is you."

Those were the sweetest, most endearing words I've ever heard. God, why can't I embrace this? I waited my whole life to hear these words from a man as fine as Michael. Now, I can't feel them like I would like to. My mother is going to tell me how crazy I am, I know.

"Michael, you know what? I am not going to do this to you or Michael any more. I am going to stop this none sense right now."

"Nia, please..." He interrupted.

"No Michael, I love you both too much to keep doing this."

"Nia, let me hold you tonight. I will not fight you on this. Just let me hold you one last time."

I agreed. Michael kissed my head, my eye lids, my ears and oh God, my neck. He knew my spot. Boy, did he know! I begged him to let me shower first but he refused. He said he wanted to taste me just like I was. I laughed and told him that he was so nasty. Michael looked me in my eyes and said that he was nasty only for me. You see what I am saying? How in God's name did I get a man like this? I don't deserve him right now. All these years I've wanted this but now I want to give it to myself. I wanted to love me. I wanted to know what it felt like to love me! Not sexually speaking. I wanted freedom from everything and everyone.

Until then, I decided to enjoy Michael's love.

"Are you going to come up for air Michael or do I have to pull you up?"

"Baby just enjoy o.k. Let me make you feel good." It was indeed the best feeling in the world. Michael knew how to work it too. "Heaven must be like this. Yes, D'Angelo, Heaven must be like this!"

Chapter 3

I woke up before Michael and turned on the television to get the weather report. Today would be another unusually hot day for this time of the year. It was all good to me. I loved warm weather. The nights were getting to be a little “nippy” but I also loved nights like that. It’s nice snuggling under warm covers alone or even with the one you love.

I was about to kiss Michael but decided against it. Even though we had been together for quite some time, I was still very cautious about morning breath. I ran into the bathroom to brush my teeth and decided to take care of everything while I was in there. My morning ritual of exercise, bubble bath and meditation had to be put on hold. I didn’t want to neglect all the company that had crashed at my place. Kim must be up, I smell the aroma. She is definitely a mother and a wife. The scent of bacon cooking made its way into my bathroom.

Michael knocked on the bathroom door, “Baby, how long are you going to be in there?”

“I will be out in a minute,” I said.

That’s why I don’t share my space with anyone other than my daughter. She’s learned to respect my “me” time. When I was married, my husband and I did everything we had to do in the bathroom together when I allowed him to. If I was in the shower, he would either join me or shave. I could never really bring myself to have a bowel movement while he was in there like he easily did. Men are mutts! One day he sat on the floor hoping to wait me out. We held a two hour conversation while I sat on the toilet. He realized I wouldn’t be able to go with him sitting there. So, he gave up and then just like clock work, my body relieved itself. We were man and wife but some things are still meant to be personal. I have to admit that I did enjoy the closeness we shared. We were so young and in love, until he decided to break the bond.

My ex-husband, Andrew and I started out on top of the world. We were teenagers believing that we would remain inseparable until reality eventually set in. After graduating high school, we both went on to college. He was a Morehouse man from birth and I completed him by attending Spelman. Of course, as fate would have it, I got pregnant my first semester. Being the man he was, he asked me to marry him the day we confirmed that I was indeed pregnant. We continued to go to school while working nights. I managed to work until the very last month. Noel was such an easy baby before and after she came into this world. We loved her immensely. Because we had saved so much money, we were able to afford a care provider whom we found not too far from our small apartment. This allowed us much needed time to study, work and play. Joy was a wonderful elderly lady. In fact, we remain very close. I think because my ex and I had so much time to ourselves, playing became a little more of a priority, at least for him. I noticed he had started hanging out more with his football buddies, which was really not a problem at first. I loved the time to myself. Then, he would come home drunk like some wild man gone foolish. His first attempt at abusing me was unsuccessful. During one of his drunken rages, he stumbled through the door insisting that he saw me out with some man. I tried calming him down like somebody who had some sense. Of course, people like that are not sensible and can't be reasoned with. He bent down as if to lay his head on my neck. Next thing I knew, this man bit down into my shoulder like a ferocious dog. To get him to release me, I had to think quickly. I reached for his goods and pulled with all my might. Then, I twisted and twisted as if I meant to screw his jewels off. I never heard a person yelp like he did. Within three seconds of my hold, he collapsed like a rag doll. That's where he remained until the following day. This is the type of behavior I dealt with for almost a year. One thing is for sure, sometimes people do not change. Sometimes they get worse. I found out that my husband would stop at Denise's

apartment down stairs from us. There were times he would sleep there for days without me knowing. I'd call all over the place looking for him and he was right under my feet all along. How did I find out? I followed him. He and his boys left our apartment partially lit as they often had. I gave them about a fifteen minute head start because I didn't want them seeing me. I took Noel over Joy's house and took a cab to the club where they frequented. Of course they were there making it rain! I found something else out while sitting there also. Denise was one of the dancers. In fact, she seemed to be getting well paid by my husband. No wonder he never has any money, I thought. My head and heart fell in my stomach but I had to keep it together. I had to get more information before confronting Andrew. Even in the dim corner where I had positioned myself, men found their way over to me. I admitted to one guy that I was on a stake out and before the night was over someone was going to die. He moved on quickly. The second gentleman reminded me of the deacon at my mom's church, oh God he is the deacon at my mom's church, I said to myself. Although he seemed to be a little nervous, he asked if we could have a drink together. I told him no but next time. He smiled and moved on also. About two hours later, I regretted that I didn't take that drink with the good deacon cause my man and his friends continued to parley for what seemed like hours. I motioned for the waitress and told her to bring me two shots of vodka. She did. I drank it down in one gulp. By one o'clock, the boys were heading for the door. That was my cue to move. I could see Andrew walking instead of getting in the car with his friends. He did a u-turn and I dove behind a dumpster. I could still hear his voice though. He was telling someone to unlock their car door. I peeped around as quickly as I could to see who he/she was. It was Denise. O.k. maybe he asked her for a ride home. I knew that I would soon find out though. As he got into her car, I managed to get on my feet. Luckily, there was a taxi coming around the corner. I told the taxi driver to follow that

burgundy escort. He complied. My heart was relieved to see them going in the direction of our apartment building. I immediately felt like an idiot for not trusting Andrew. Before I had completely sold myself on being an idiot, I watched Andrew watch as Denise entered her domain and almost immediately he went in right behind her. Lord, my blood pressure boiled. You would have thought I turned to a pillar of salt. Again, I had to think quickly. I decided, after seconds of contemplation, to break into her apartment. I had to see the writing on the wall. The hard part was waiting for the right time. Boy, waiting until I thought they were asleep was like waiting for hell to freeze over. Around four a.m., I started prying her kitchen window open. It was hard sliding through it but determination is the key. As I made my way over the sink, I almost knocked the stack of dirty dishes to the floor. Wow, how filthy can one be? I thought. As I headed out I could see the two of them lying on the living room floor naked. I turned back around to the kitchen. I saw a skillet sitting on the stove, so I reached for it. I slowly crept to where they were lying, bent down and started swinging like a woman gone wild. I made sure I could get to my feet before they could. As they each tried to stand, I knocked them back down. She was a little fighter though. My ex-husband alcohol consumption made it extremely hard for him to compete with me. Also, there was way too much blood spill coming from his wounds. I didn't want to kill him or her. Finally, I kicked her in the stomach and made my way to the front door. I can't tell you what happened to them afterwards. I went to my apartment, packed up as much as I could and moved in with one of my girlfriends. I think the next time I saw Andrew was in court. I had him served divorce papers one week after the incident. Denise never retaliated or told a soul as far as I know. What a memory. Going through that with Andrew and another bad relationship a couple years later has taught me to never love that way again.

I wrapped myself in one of my long bath towels and allowed “sleeping beauty” to come in and take a leak. “Baby, you don’t have to leave. All I want to do is pee.” “Oh, that’s o.k. I have to get ready for church any way,” I lied. Michael decided to not come with me this Sunday. He figured, since my girls are attending then he is allowed to be excused. Sometimes that man acts just like a child.

“Baby, I am going to get some coffee and go. I’ll see you when you feel like I am worthy of your presence.” I laughed at my over grown baby and then gave him a big juicy kiss. Michael told me to not start something I couldn’t finish. At that moment, I looked into his eyes and told him that I did love him whether my actions said it or not. I promised once I got my head together, I would see him again and not a moment sooner.

“That could take forever,” he said.

“Yes, I know, Michael. Have you ever just wanted to run but didn’t know where you wanted to run to?”

“Baby, whatever it is that you are searching for, I hope you find it. I will support your every move in every way that I can. I can’t promise you I will be here when or if you decide to come back though. Just know that I will never stop loving you. I have to do what I have to do for me also.”

I understood. I didn’t want to understand or let him go, but I did. It was the right thing to do. Michael grabbed the rest of his things, kissed me again and walked out of my life.

Chapter 4

“Let the church say Amen, Amen again, and Amen one more time. One time for the Father, one time for the Son and one more time for the Holy Ghost,” said Rev. Joseph.

We all pulled straws on which church we would attend. Of course, I wanted to go to *Divine Unity* but my straw was not long enough. Crystal had the longest straw and as you can see, ***The Holy Tabernacle Trinity Zion Temple of Fellowship & Faith Baptist Church*** wins. She told me that she just couldn’t get into the whole Christian Science thing like I have.

“Why, because they don’t hoop and holler or roll down the aisle,” I said.

“You were not raised in Divine Unity. I think this thing is just a fad anyway. Haven’t you read about all the celebrities attending religious science and scientology churches,” she questioned.

“First of all, my place of worship is not a religious science church. Not that there is anything wrong with religious science. *Divine Unity* focuses on the new thought principle. I’ve found what I believe to be the truth for me. I can’t continue to worship in a place just because it is familiar. I would be living a lie,” I stated.

There was silence after that because the usher at the door had given us the, “you better shut your mouth look”. We knew then, from experience, that we better not say another word.

I had to give Rev. Joseph his props. The brotha knows how to put on a good show. Like the old folks say, “Rev. Joseph show can preach!”

I wanted to reply every time, “Please tell me what you’ve learned from the message?”

Of course I knew to stay in my place and just nod my head in agreement. Where I am from, you don't go toe to toe with your elders. Even if I had chosen to, I knew it wouldn't be a pretty sight.

Momma use to say, "Nia, you talk too damn much! You need to think before you say anything. And most of the time, it is not what you say chile that gets you in trouble. Most of the time, it is how you say what you say, that gets your butt whooped. Ain't none of ya'll churin' big and bad enough to whoop me, so I advise you to keep your mouth closed."

Oh, she would go on and on and on. "Yes, ma'am," was all I could and would say. If I chose to not say anything, she would accuse me of ignoring her. It was a no win situation.

Rev. Joseph brought me back to the present with the sweet sound of *Amazing Grace*. Now, one thing is for sure. The man can sang! He doesn't sing. Honey, he sings! I always loved to hear him sing *Amazing Grace*. It always brought tears to my eyes whenever he would sing that song.

Kim elbowed me saying, "Aren't you the one that didn't want to come here?"

I rolled my eyes and continued to appreciate the melodic baritone voice of Rev. Joseph.

While the pastor was preparing to dismiss, I began searching through my purse for a few dollars for the building fund, the choir anniversary, the pastor's anniversary and for the under privileged children attending B.T.U.

"I refuse to allow Satan to control my thoughts. Not today," I said to myself. At least I intended to only speak to myself.

"Shush," the usher that looked like she could be Mike Tyson's sister, interjected. "Lord, Satan got a hold of me any way. I called that woman a Mike Tyson's look alike. I couldn't stop that thought Lord. Help me Holy Ghost," I pleaded.

During my spiritual battle, I managed to pull out enough to cover every offering, along with pulling out the lottery ticket I purchased earlier this week. I forgot about it basically because I hardly ever buy lottery tickets. This week the pot had reached 250 million dollars and no one had claimed the prize. I figured I had just as good of a chance as anyone else. Yesterday was the day to check the numbers.

“I’d just check the website or the newspaper tonight”, I thought. I put the lottery ticket in my change purse this time, so that I wouldn’t forget about it.

Lord, Mother Brown will not let a Sunday pass without having to say something. “Father please give me patience,” I begged.

“Here she goes,” Crystal joked.

I just would like to thank the Lawd for my healt and skrengt. I would like to thank Him fuh you pastor. You’s a blessin’ to this church. You’s a blessin’ to the churin’, cause you sees to it that they attend B.T.U. Thank you and ya’ll continue to pray for me as I pray for ya’ll cause I’s getting ole now. I can’t see with these ole’ eyes like I use too. But, with the Lawd on my side, I can do all thangs...thank ya...ooh thank ya Lawd. Ya’ll don’t know like I know. If you did, you would shout too! Hallelujah! Praise His Name! If you did know anything about the Lawd, you wouldn’t sit dhere like you don’t know who woke you up this moanin’. Pastor I’m a sit down now, but thank ya. If you needs me, just call me any time. It don’t matter what time a day or night it is,...uh... cept foe Thuhsdays though. You know I takes Sistah Moe to her hair ‘pointment every Thursday the Lawd wakes me up! Yes Lawd! And, then you know I goes by Ms. Clara’s to see how the churin’ treatin’ huh. They sits Ms. Clara out dhere on that poach, bless Gawd, yes they do, and don’t see bout huh until they feels like it, which is bout two to three

times, from “can see to can’t see”. But, Pastor, as long as there is a Gawd in Heabin’, I am gone keep seein’ bout Ms. Clara. Churin’ listen, don’t do yoe momma like that you heah me? Yes Lawd, Amen and thank Gawd for you and Mrs. Joseph. Now listen and listen good Pastor, don’t ya’ll give up on habin’ churin’. Sarah was a old woman too. But ya’ll is still young folks. We gone continue to lift you up in prayer. If Gawd done it for others, He show will do the same foe you. That’s all I got Pastor. Thank ya, for lettin’ me spress myself. I can’t keep the fie shut up in my bones! Amen Chuch...Amen Saints. I said, Amen Saints!

The congregation quickly responded, “Amen”.

Mother Brown was escorted to her seat by her great grandson. He wasn’t embarrassed one bit. She had been doing that same thing ever since I was a child. So, we always expected it. If she didn’t speak, then we’ll have something to worry about.

“Thank you Mother for your beautiful words and with that said, Sister Hattie Mae Jackson Jones-Smith will give us a selection then I will dismiss church,” replied Rev Joseph as he winked at Mother Brown.

He started winking at Mother Brown shortly after her husband died, almost seven years ago. The harmless flirting is just to keep her alive and confident about herself. Folks say that Mother Brown was a fox in her day. She still dresses like one of those “fly” women back in the 30s or 40s. Thank God for her. The woman is almost a hundred years old.

On another note, everybody from near and far knows that Sister Hattie Mae Jackson Jones-Smith’s song is *Precious Lord*. Nobody ever attempts to sing any verse or other version of it either. Ever! She barely allows the congregation to sing along with her. To ensure that the song is hers and hers only, she’ll render a whole new version each time she was asked to sing.

I've always thought that Mahalia died and came back as Sister Jackson Jones-Smith because she sounds just like her.

Mahalia did it again!!!!!!!!!! Sister Hattie Mae received a standing ovation. Everyone then remained standing for dismissal, while trying not to look like they wanted to stretch, yawn or run out of the church.

In unison, we all sang, "Praise Father, Son and Ho- l-y Ghost...A-men."

Chapter 5

My girls did the right thing by catching the church van home. I am way too tired to drive them. Daniel just had to come by the church after all. His baby had been away from him for two nights. That was a little too much for him. He didn't know that Kim had expressed wanting to go with the choir to *Calvary Baptist*. As I was pulling out of the parking lot, I noticed Daniel getting into the van with his wife and the choir. They pulled off immediately after I did but came to screeching halt. I thought maybe there was a problem with the van. Little did they know, they had driven off without the "Diva" himself, Miss Melvin James.

Lord, please tell me why Melvin came running out of the church shouting, "Hootie Hoo!" "Hootie Hoo!"

How ghetto can one be? He didn't stop shouting either.

"I said, Hoo-tie the hell, Hoo!"

Right after the third "club house owl call", Miss Melvin had the audacity to stomp his feet while adding a rotating snap. Brother Thomas put the gear into reverse, backed up the van and beckoned Melvin to get in. Melvin had an attitude by then.

He asked, "How in the hell... yeah it is still Sunday, but how in the hell could you forget about me?" Members were trying so hard to hold their laughter. I was in my car tickled to death.

"Lord thank you for that laugh, whew, 'cause I sure did need it," I said, while finally driving off into the sunset.

The grocery store began calling my name. Usually, I would go by "Big Mommas" to pick up the best meal there, barbecue chicken and fried rice. She really put her foot in it too! I

thought very hard about going to her restaurant but decided to just get a few things from *Winn Dixie*.

“Why is it always so cold in this store,” I wondered. As a matter of fact, I’d ask myself that question every time I shopped here. Knowing all the time that there could be ice sickles forming at the front entrance and I would still go in to shop. I love this store. *Winn Dixie* and *Wal-Mart*, are the best stores in the world. Everything I want or need are found at one or the other. Very seldom am I disappointed.

I decided not to get a shopping cart. Everything would fit nicely in the little basket, which was conveniently placed at the door. I grabbed the basket and filled it with a bag of salad, a loaf of garlic bread, a pint of soy milk for my coffee....coffee, I need coffee. I picked up a jar of coffee, a pre-cooked pan of Lasagna and a bottle of White Zinfandel. Oh yeah, I also grabbed the latest *Ebony* and *Jet* magazine. That Nelly is so beautiful! My baby girl never fails to remind me of how old I am, like I am not aware of my age. She says Nelly doesn’t want an old woman. That’s what she thinks! Hell, I am only thirty eight.

“Nelly you and I would make the cutest couple,” I said to his photo on the cover of *Ebony*. He could leave Miss Ashanti and “come on over to my place”. You better sing it Teddy P! Well, I guess I am a little old school huh?

I had set my mind on spending the rest of my day recuperating from this weekend. I’ll probably need more than a day. Oh, I forgot, I don’t have to clock into any body’s job!

“There’s my cell phone, under the seat.” I knew I didn’t take it out of the car when I talked on it last.

“Three missed calls.” Two of the calls were from Michael (L.A.) and the most important call of the three was from my baby girl, Noel. I almost melted while listening to her little sweet

voice. It's hard to believe my baby is a grown woman now. She practically lives very well on her own without my help. Most of the time she pretends to need me anyway. She doesn't think I know she's pretending though. I know it's only to make me feel better about her being on her own.

"Mom, I am calling to tell you to continue to follow your heart. You've sacrificed enough for everyone else, including me. It's time to do all that you've been doing anyway but this time you will be doing it on your terms. I love you, I love you, I love you Mom," she chanted.

I was used to her pouring it on real thick but something wasn't quite right. I always know when she's hiding or trying to hide something from me.

"Mom, I have to tell you something. You probably won't like it but I have to tell you anyway." She didn't say anything after that. Lord, please don't let her tell me she's pregnant. I won't kill her but I will come mighty close. Her father and I sacrificed our own happiness to give her the very best. "Lord!" I waited and waited for the last part of the call. Nothing.

I couldn't get home fast enough. I could have called her from the car but chose not to. I didn't want to be the cause of nobody's car wreck. When I walked in the door, I set the groceries on the table. I couldn't put the items up before calling Noel back.

I dialed her number. The answering machine picked up. "That little girl of mine, where is she?" I could've jumped through the phone and choked her neck. I would find her and then choke her. "Calm down Nia. It may not be what you think it is." I tried her cell. She picked up on the first ring.

"Hi, mom."

"Hello sweetie. What's going on?"

“Mom, did you get my message?”

“Part of it, please get to what you so desperately need to tell me before you give your mother a heart attack.”

A month ago, I went over to my friend's crib. There were a lot of people there. You know how much I hate crowds, right? Well, I told Soni that I would come by later. She understands me, so she said that would be cool. I turned to go out the door when someone grabbed my hand. Mom, it was this guy I had seen around on campus. I never knew his name or anything else about him. I just thought he was older and more conservative than the average college student. Anyway, he asked if he could walk me outside. Instead of leaving like I had planned, I sat with him in my car for a while. We talked until three the next morning. I gave him my phone number and he gave me his. We promised to call each other right away. He called me almost immediately. We had breakfast the next day together. We have been inseparable ever since. Umm mom, we're married.

“What the hell,” I screamed.

“Mom, please don't yell.”

“Little girl, this is not yelling, this is being calm. Oh, my God, I never imagined this. Honestly, I thought that you were going to tell me that you are pregnant. Wait a minute, are you?”

“No mother, I am religiously using contraceptives. Neither one of us wants children. We just want to be together.”

“Want to be together,” I screamed again. “Noel, you don't even know this man. How can you say that you just want to be together? You are only 18 years old. Why? Why?”