

NOBODY WAKES UP PRETTY

Chapter One

Let's get this out of the way: I'm a white woman who likes black men. I like the stories black men tell and the way they talk and the way they look at me, this way they have of being sure and tentative all at once, and yes, oh yes, I'm not gonna hide it, the hard sweet way they ball. Still, I don't like having that reputation, white folks—not to mention the sistahs—all thinking I'm just after black cock. So let's be straight: at the time I'm talking about, the only black cock I was on intimate terms with was attached to Samps, and I wasn't *after* Samps, we just ... well, OK, we fucked, we fucked a lot, but I want you to know the guy was homeless, penniless, quite likely clinically insane. Believe me, I didn't have my hands on anything *you* would want.

Most of the time I wasn't sure *I* wanted him. Yeah, I hear you: if dumb hair-tossing white bitches like me weren't so easy, men like Samps would have to straighten up, get a job, live right and be there for you. Well, my hair's too frizzy to toss. And a man like Samps won't be there for you, *ever*, I can tell you that, but sooner or later, he always showed up.

Except to funerals.

It was 1992. The first Bush reigned in Washington. The Twin Towers stood downtown and as far as we knew would stand forever, but for me, that was the summer when the city I'd lived in all my life changed past recognition. And the funerals were about to begin.

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I was making lasagna when Khorey came to the door, all six foot two, long and lean. My hands were deep in ricotta so I didn't get a hug. Just ate him up with my eyes which was all I ever allowed myself since he was only sixteen besides which I'd known him since he was a little kid. Just because I like black men does not make me a nasty child-molesting freak though I knew there were some on the block who thought otherwise, like why else would him and me be friends?

He'd come to tell me Junie was dead.

What I felt was a mix of guilt and sadness and relief. I hesitated. "How—?"

"How—?" he shouted. I'd never seen Khorey so angry. "You asking me if someone shot him?"

It was not an unnatural thing to wonder.

"The man had two strokes, a heart attack, and cancer, and you're asking me *how!*"

My hand flew to my mouth flinging cheese all over my face and in my hair. Junie had been so sick and I hadn't even known.

"He *loved* you, Holly!" Khorey said. "Did you go to the hospital even once?"

"I didn't know," I said.

"He kept asking for you. *Where's Holly? Why ain't Holly here?*"

"Why didn't someone tell me?" I asked.

"He phoned you. From that hospital bed, he phoned you and phoned you."

For months, I'd been hanging up on Junie's calls. I thought it was the same old same old. Thing was, Junie had started to get me nervous. When Samps came over, every time, the phone would ring and I'd hear Junie's voice: "I know he's with you."

"Don't do this, Junie." I couldn't tell if I was warning him or begging.

His voice would go hoarse. "I want you bad, girl, but the doctor tells me it'd kill me."

Now he was dead anyway.

"You gonna call Samps?" Khorey asked and I reminded him for the hundredth time that homeless people don't have phones.

Khorey picked ricotta out of my hair. I put on the last layer of noodles and sauce—I'd have something to bring the family—and covered the pan with foil. All Gloria would have to do was bake. I wanted to do the dishes but Khorey was in a hurry.

"Leave it for the roaches. Let's go."

"But I got to change."

Oh, God, what do you wear to a funeral? I needed something good enough to show respect. Samps was always criticizing my clothes. "You dress like a boy, those goddamn jeans and workshirts."

"I have a pair of brown corduroys."

"My point exactly."

Here's a guy who washes up at a fire hydrant and had the nerve to slam my fashion sense. But he looked out for me. I tried on the blue designer dress he'd fished out of a dumpster. It looked good as long as you didn't know where it came from.

By the time I came out of the bathroom, Khorey had done the dishes.

"Thanks, baby."

"Any time, dollface."

Coming from Khorey, "dollface" made me purely happy. Besides, it meant he wasn't still mad at me over Junie. And he didn't seem in such a hurry.

"You got any of the clear stuff?" he asked.

Junie used to drive down to Virginia where he had his still and he'd come back with a trunk full. Whatever he couldn't sell quick, he'd share with the neighbors because Glo had finally put her foot down about his drinking and wouldn't let him keep any in the house. I still had a jar in the cupboard. Enough for two small glasses, not enough to pass out on which was the usual result of Junie's liquor.

We toasted his memory.

"No more where this came from," Khorey said.

It felt like something big had ended. I looked at the empty jar. Well, Samps at least would be pleased. He drank nothing but white wine which he referred to as “piss of the Duchess,” and always disapproved of Junie’s moonshine.

“I really feel like getting fucked up tonight,” Khorey said.

We held each other for a moment. He said, “I’m gonna miss him.”

Outside, the street was thronged with people. The news had been on the drum and Gypsy cabs and limos idled by the curb.

Junie knew everyone. Whenever someone moved onto the block, Junie checked him out. He knew who to introduce, who would be friends, who could use each other.

The street kids, Clayton, Derek, and Buddy stood in a row and Blue from 151 went down the line lending each of them a tie and then putting it on them when they didn’t know how.

The six of us tumbled into a bouncing cab and took off for uptown, me sitting on Khorey’s lap. I felt his tears rolling down my neck.

The driver had to leave us a block away, the street in front of Benta’s being so clogged with cars and limousines.

“On the house,” said the driver. “I loved that man.”

We pushed our way through the throng on the sidewalk.

“Got a dead celebrity!” called a man on the corner. “Who y’all burying?”

“Junie Frink,” said Khorey. “The Mayor of our block.”

“Mayor!” the man snorted. “Junie Frink was just a crook.”

“Just like a real mayor,” said Clayton.

The chapel was already full, but Spidey was at the door and ushered us in. He was dressed so sharp I did a doubletake.

“Spidey, you’re dressed like an Italian gangster.”

“Shhhh,” he said. “Junie left me his job.”

“Oops.” I hoped no one had heard me over the organ. “But Spidey, you’re not going to—?”

“Just for a little while,” he said, and added, “Hey, nice dress.”

People made way for us. A man placed an arm on my shoulder. “Now you go on up front with the family. You Junie’s daughter, aintcha?”

“No,” I said.

“You his daughter with that white woman from Pittsburgh.”

“No.” It was weird how often people had taken us for father and daughter.

“Junie’s daughter is here.” People took up the cry. “Let her through. Daughter of that white girl from Cleveland.”

“No,” I repeated.

“Oh, Gloria know all about you,” the man said. “She won’t mind.”

But she had every right to mind. She and his real daughters, too. I hadn’t even known he was sick. I hadn’t visited, I hadn’t helped and now I couldn’t face them.

I started avoiding Junie after the time he stopped Samps on the street: “All the womens on this block belongs to me,” he said. “I’m gonna have to get my gun.” I knew it was a joke, or at least I thought I knew, but it wasn’t the kind of joke I found funny.

Junie wasn’t violent. I was sure, at least I thought I was sure. Except right after Vinny Cavallo got gunned down. Some joker on the block who knew a few words of Italian referred to him as Caca Cavallo which, if you don’t know the language, translates as “horseshit.” By the time Junie got through with him, the guy’s wife actually believed he’d been kicked by a mule.

Me, I’m not Italian. I’m Jewish. I went to socialist summer camp. I’m right out of a Woody Allen movie, except an integrated one, if you can feature that.

And no, I really couldn’t see Junie as violent. He tended to get involved after the fact. *They*, the people he worked for, stored hijacked shipments in his spare bedroom. The last time I’d seen Glo and the girls, we’d all been up there playing with the fur coats that dropped off a truck, modeling them, and rolling around on piles of animal skins. Glo wanted to keep one, but I didn’t mind just playing. I didn’t tell anyone I was philosophically and ethically opposed to fur.

“Let her through! It’s Junie’s daughter from Atlanta!”

“She sure do look white,” someone said.

And then I was standing next to Gloria. She took my hand and squeezed it. God, what a beautiful woman. The two girls, Janette and Patty were crying, but Glo stood there absolutely straight staring at the casket and the four men behind it. A black minister; Horace the Yoruba priest (who I recognized because he was also bartender at Briars); two white guys (a rabbi and a Catholic priest). It looked like a setup for one of those jokes, I thought. The service was true to Junie—ecumenical and multicultural.

I walked up to the casket and there he was in his electric blue suit, surrounded by flowers. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

A woman I didn’t recognize pushed me aside and threw herself on top of his body. People screamed, but Gloria calmly went over and drew the woman away, comforting her.

Prayers and speeches and songs and memories of the man.

When Khorey got up to speak, I didn’t know what to expect. Junie was always harsh with Khorey. I thought there’d been trouble between them. Once I’d heard Junie tell Khorey to stay away from his daughters. “Why?” Khorey had challenged him back. “Too dark for them?” I hated it that Junie was good to me, and not so good to Khorey.

“I could always go to Junie,” Khorey said. “I could always talk to him. He was the only one I could talk to about things I did that I was ashamed of. He knew right from wrong,” Khorey said, “and he wanted me to do right, but he’d seen and heard and done it all and there wasn’t nothing you could say that would shock him. He didn’t judge you.”

I thought he judged Khorey all the time which proved I didn’t know a fucking thing.

"I loved him like a father," Khorey said. "He loved me like a son."

Glo pulled the flowers from the arrangements one by one and passed them through the ranks of mourners till a couple of hundred people each held a gladiolus or a lily. I thought the flower would wilt in my hand. The first time I felt uncomfortable with Junie, I'd simply dumped him. Couldn't people see it all over me, that big red B for Bitch?

When it was over, I caught up with Khorey. His eyes were dry with suspicion. But it wasn't about me.

"What's that softball lawyer doing here?" he asked.

"What softball lawyer?"

"One of your Harveys," he said.

At the time, see, I didn't like white men very much, but being white myself, didn't feel entitled to call them honkies. So I called them Harveys, especially the shitty fools I worked for. I was a secretary at a law firm, and the firm had a softball team, and being very competitive, they sometimes asked me to invite my friends to play when they needed a ringer.

"Where?" I said.

"Over there. The one who hit the pop up fly in the third inning."

But I didn't see anyone and no way was I going to remember a play from a law firm softball game.

"Junie never played," said Khorey. "How come that Harvey knows him? What's that white lawyer doing in Harlem at Junie's wake?"

"Oh, come on," I said. "Everybody knew Junie."

"So how come he didn't get up and speak?"

"White folks aren't any good at extemporaneous speaking," I said.

"*You* spoke," said Khorey.

"Yeah, and I bet I sounded pretty stupid. I don't mind looking stupid. But that's something a white man can't stand. Especially looking stupid in front of a room packed full of black folks."

"You think you know it all," said Khorey.

"Sure do," I said.

"I'm telling you there's something very wrong about that white man."

And he was right.