

## Chapter 6

*“On the down low, secretly, you know?”*

“I got that gig in Cali’ I was telling you about.”

“Really, Train? That’s great!” Tiffany grabbed her boyfriend, kissed his face all over.

“Come on, girl. All that ain’t necessary.” The young wanna-be rapper wiped his face. She might have smeared orange mango lipstick on him, but it was hard to detect on his dark skin.

“What’s wrong with you? Why aren’t you happy? You get to leave boring Oakridge, fly to California to live out your dream and here you are acting all blasé, “What’s up with that?” Tiffany inquired.

“You just ain’t knowin’, Girl. I’m traveling thousands of miles away on one man’s promise. I might get there and find out the whole deal is bogus. Then what am I supposed to do?”

“That’s not going happen. But, if it did, you know you can count on me. Just say the word and I’ll get you back on the first thing smokin’.” Tiffany looked down. Her dark lashes lay against her carmel skin. “To be honest, Train, I want to go with you.”

“What? Girl, you must be on crack. There ain’t no way I’d put your future on the line to follow me. Naw, that ain’t ‘bout to go down.”

“Come on, Train, you haven’t even heard me out.” She pouted. “It could be fun, like an adventure. We’re both young, no baggage, nothing to tie us down.”

He pushed her wild curly hair off her face. “Girl, I take you away, your parents would hate me before they got to meet me.”

“It’s not their decision, remember, I’m twenty-one.”

“All that does is remind me how young you really are. You need to get your own crib or be on your way to college, not in the streets trying to keep up with me while I try to make a living” he said.

“Honestly, Train, sometimes you sound like an old man. Shoot, I’m tired of this town. I need excitement, I’m ready to explore, see what’s out there.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to trot after you graduate. You already wasted close to three years. I’d trade places with you in a heartbeat. Your moms and pops are all up in your corner, you live in that bomb house, you got that fly ride, and now you’re about to get all that money. I didn’t have no trust fund waiting for me when I turned twenty-one. You’re set, and you’re saying you wanna run with me? I don’t get it.”

“All that glitters, ain’t gold.”

“That’s the point I’m trying to make to you,” Train said. “And I know you ain’t trying to say your peeps ain’t got it going on.”

“They’re doing all right.” She fiddled with her manicured nails.

“Yeah, I know they are. And what about your sister and brother-in-law, living up in that phat mansion, they got mad cash. Yeah, that’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout, and you want to run away from all that.”

“I’m not running away. I want to see other places,” Tiffany informed.

Train stood from his second-hand couch. “You better get up outta here. Your party is going to be starting in another hour.”

“I don’t care about any stupid birthday party; I’d rather stay here with you, Train.”

“We should both be going to the party, but you ain’t down with that.”

“Don’t start that again. I told you, you’re the only thing in my life that’s really all mine. I don’t want to share you with the family.”

“Yeah, how’s that supposed to make me feel. I think you’re just ashamed of me,” he said and placed her car keys in her hand.

“So, you ‘re putting me out?”

He walked to the door of his small apartment on the opposite side of town. “Dino’s gonna be staying at the crib while I’m in Cali’. He may have his girl over in case you call, and she answers the phone.” He held the door open.

“When will you be back?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

She gazed in his eyes. “I still say you should take some head shots with you. Hollywood is always searching for the tall, dark and handsome type.” She stood on tipped toes in Air Nikes and rubbed his smooth dome. She kissed him, pressed into his full lips and grabbed his neck.

“Slow down, Tiff, I’m not leaving today.” He moved her arms down. They rested on her fitted Capri pants. Her midriff showed off a flat tummy with a butterfly tattoo near her navel.

“Why you dressin’ like this, its wintertime, Tiff.”

“I’ve got my jacket,” she said.

“Well put it on,” he insisted. He helped her into it and then said, “You know what?”

“What’s up, Baby?”

“I been thinkin’, maybe we shouldn’t hook up when I get back.”

Tiffany’s face crumbled. “What do you mean, Train? You’re my heart.”

“I know. It’s not you, Baby.” He placed his strong hands on her shoulders.

“Then, what?”

“It’s all about being a man. Your funds are about to come through. How’s it gonna look, me being kept by my woman?”

“Our relationship is not about what other people think; it’s about how we feel about each other.”

“True that, true that. Thing is, I just can’t get with it, at least not until my first joint drops,” he said.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this. You didn’t trip when I got my college money. This is messed up; you’re breaking up with me on my birthday? We need to talk.” Tiffany was about to walk toward the couch, but Train stopped her.

“We’ll talk later; I promise.” He pecked her tender lips. Suddenly, Tiffany was on the other side of the door.

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“Where’s Tiffany?” Sandy complained. “She was supposed to be here an hour ago.”

“I don’t know, Mom. I told her what time to be here,” claimed Sharon.

“You’d think she would be on time to her own birthday party,” her mother complained over the loud music. She poured punch as Sharon handed it to her sister’s friends.

“Maybe she decided to surprise *us* instead. You know how she is.”

Sandy knew all too well how her child was. It was common for Tiffany to be late to family gatherings or to miss appointments altogether, except for when it came to something *she* wanted to do. Sandy tried to label it as absentmindedness, Dan, called it something else, selfishness. The once levelheaded “A” student with the sweet disposition had literally changed overnight. She had been a driven seventeen-year-old that gave up much of her senior events to participate in extracurricular activities that

either earned college credits or looked impressive on her resume. With her mother's guidance, Tiffany became convinced, in her sophomore year, that a quality education and the pursuit to accomplish goals were more important than a high school car wash to raise money for a senior picnic.

Although the effort paid off (earning high SAT scores and a scholarship to Spellman College) it turned out to be her last academic endeavor. The college-bound student decided two days before she was set to check into her dorm room that she wasn't going to college after all. "*I need more time to discover what I really want to do with my life,*" she had said.

Tiffany's decision was a slap in her mother's face. Not just for her loss of control, but, for the reason Sandy conceived Marie, for the sake of a college education. In a desperate attempt to change Tiffany's mind, Sandy reminded her daughter of the indecent proposal she had accepted years ago and its outcome, but it was to no avail.

When Tiffany was in high school, her parents promised that if she earned a four-year scholarship, the money that they saved for her education would be hers to keep. The idea was to start her out in life with a home, a nice vehicle, and money set aside. She would also receive a nice trust fund from Marie to be awarded on her twenty-first birthday, but Tiffany decided college could wait, and it did.

With no solution in sight, Dan decided to renege on giving Tiffany the saved college money since she would not be attending, but when Sandy informed Tiffany, the pre-law student had said, "*The agreement was that I had to earn the scholarship, which I did; I never said I would actually go.*" In a courtroom, Sandy thought her daughter's argument would have been valid. Against Dan's wishes, her parents forked over \$88,560, the cost of room and board, tuition and books, for *two* years at Spelman, (Dan's compromise) +and she continued to live at home.

As the music bombarded her thoughts, Sandy had a closer look at Sharon. She wore a short skirt and lip-gloss. She was seventeen now, the age when Tiffany made *her* change. “Where’d you get that outfit?” Sandy quizzed.

“It’s Tiffany’s.”

“You know you don’t have any business in her clothes. You’ll be grown soon enough.” Go upstairs and see if Marie has something you can put on.”

“Ah, mom,” Sharon whined. “I want to wear this, besides; Marie’s clothes are too big.”

“Not by a long shot, your hips are about as big as mine,” Marie defended.

“You want me to call Tiffany again?” Sharon volunteered.

“No, I want you to find something else to wear,” Sandy insisted.

Sharon stormed off; hit the swing door with force.

“Now, you see, in my day, that would have been her butt,” Audrey commented. “We were never able to get away with disrespectful stuff like that. The Bible says, spare the rod spoil the child,” she added. “If she was my daughter...”

“Well, she’s not, Audrey, so, just keep your opinions, please,” Sandy defended.

“Hmmp,” Audrey mumbled.

“Now, mom, you know she’s only trying to help,” Marie spoke. “A little discipline never hurt anybody.”

“You’re right, I didn’t mean anything by it, Audrey, I guess I’m just worried about Tiffany,” Sandy admitted.

Suddenly the door flew open. “Why is everyone cooped up in the kitchen?” Kareem asked, unlike his usual relaxed demeanor. “You know, we could use some damage control out there,” he added. His dreads gently swayed as he knelt in search of a trash bag.

“We’re waiting for Tiffany,” Audrey volunteered.

Marie retrieved the bags from their appropriate place and handed one to her husband. She made eye contact to detect his mood.

His eyes shifted. "Have you guys called around?"

"Mom has," Marie answered. She studied his tall masculinity. He had the body of a goddess, she thought.

"I don't know who else to call, all of her friends are here," said Sandy.

"I'm sure she'll be here soon," Kareem assured and left the kitchen. Although he wanted to comfort his mother-in-law, he didn't agree with the way she and Dan chose to raise their daughters, so when trouble loomed, he kept quiet.

Marie followed him into the party, the acoustics pierced her eardrums; sound blared from room to room in the mansion. She caught his sleeve, "You all right, baby?"

He nodded, and then motioned for the D.J. to turn the music down. As he looked around, he could hardly believe his eyes. The dress code had completely changed since he was twenty-one. Tiffany's friends didn't look anything like the girls he used to mack to. They looked more like women with heavenly bodies. He wondered if they all shared the same fitness instructor or nowadays, the same surgeon. They wore provocative clothing with full bosoms, short shorts and tight pants. A closer look revealed tattoos and belly rings: it was a new generation.

When the idea of having the party had come up, Kareem's first thought was against, but he allowed his young sister-in-law to persuade him, spouting that it was the most significant birthday, the one that transformed her into adulthood. Kareem had warned that she and her friends had better act like adults by respecting his home, but the outcome was more than he expected and to top it off, Tiffany wasn't even there.

As Marie wandered through, she spotted Sharon boogying with the crowd in the same outfit her mother had told her to change. She went straight to her, yanked her off

step, scolded, and sent her upstairs. It had been an embarrassing moment for the high school student, but more so for her father, only a few feet away without the heart to say a word.

Kareem was also disturbed to find young men groping their partners and worse, the young women allowing it. Some of them so close, he had to literally break them up, and that was on a fast song. For them, it was all about getting the digits and hooking up with a honey or some cute guy. Then there were drinks on the furniture, chips on the floor and Kareem's carefully placed tracks (small Christian booklets) thrown to the side, even discarded under foot, it had seemed that no one had gotten the message; he headed to the DJ's makeshift platform to end the ungodly soiree.

"Tell everyone to go home, the party is over!" Kareem shouted.

The D.J. grabbed his ear, pretending not to hear a word of it. "Huh! What!" A silver bubble pierced his tongue; it looked painful, he continued to spin.

Just then, Kareem's attention was diverted, "Mr. Johnson, have you seen Tiffany around?" She too, was part of the heavenly body club.

"No, Shay, I haven't," he said, preoccupied.

"What!" She asked.

"No!" Kareem's voice competed with the beat.

"Is she here?"

"No! Do you know of anybody she might be hanging out with, a BOYFRIEND?" he shouted.

She hesitated, nodded. "She's been keepin' him on the down low," she said.

"He's down low, you say?"

"No, she's been dating him on the down low, secretly, you know? Even *I* don't know the 411 on dude," Shay hollered.

"Did you say his name is Dude?"

"No, I said..."

“Hold on, don’t leave until we talk,” Kareem instructed. He searched about, looking for cords that led to the annoying box that spewed an instantaneous headache; finally, he yanked, and the music stopped; silence was golden.

“Ahhh! What happened?” he heard people say.

To the dismay of all, Kareem made an announcement that ended the bash. The youngsters took their time about leaving; still chatting and swapping phone numbers while Kareem tried to usher them out. As he looked around for adult life, he caught Dan eating cake, who quickly wiped the crumbs with a pink napkin.

“Help me clear this place out, man,” Kareem asked.

“I was just about to go search for Tiffany,” Dan replied.

“Let’s get them out, and then we’ll both go.”

“Sure deal.” Dan paused, and then said, “Each generation seems to get more and more irresponsible. No way would I have stood up *my* father.”

“I hear you, man.”

“Look at that!” Dan nudged Kareem at his side and pointed to a heavenly body strutting her stuff out the door.

“Yeah, I know, they’re all over the place,” he said, as the women came from out of the kitchen to begin the clean-up process.

“Now, what happened to Sharon?” Sandy asked.

“She’s upstairs,” Marie said.

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“When you gonna let me get with you, girl?”

“When hell freezes.”

“Aw-wow, that’s messed up,” Blaze said while inhaling a Blunt (marijuana rolled in cigar paper and just as big). He got his nickname because *Blaze* was the first thing he said when he greeted someone.

“I thought you were supposed to be talking to Kim. What happened there?”

“She was trippin’ just like you are now, Tiff.”

“You know I don’t be getting down like that.”

He passed her the joint.

“Anyway, you men act like that’s all you want from a sistah.” Tiffany took a long drag off the blunt, she held it in, and then released her anxieties in a cloud of smoke.

“Oh, like you don’t be getting’ busy.”

“I don’t, I’m a Christian.”

Blaze laughed aloud. “How can I tell?” He laughed louder.

“What? Cause I’m smoking? I don’t do this all the time; I’m just upset right now.” She chugalugged the last of her Heineken.

“Oh, I get it. You’re a Christian when things are smooth in your life, and when they’re not, you drink and get high; and here I was thinking you had to be committed or somethin’, my bad.”

“I *am* committed, I just happen to be back sliding right now, so get up out my face about it,” Tiffany warned. She noticed a couple of guys across the room checking her out, “Who are they?” she inquired.

“You wanna meet ‘em?”

“No!”

“Then don’t ask.”

There was silence as Tiffany stared out the window of the apartment hangout. Her mind was on Train, why he decided to break it off. “Got anything to eat?”

“Fridge,” Blaze jerked his head as he rolled another blunt. “Where’s Train?” he called to the kitchen.

“What do I look like, his keeper?” She answered on her way back in with a banana.

“Dang, girl, I just asked. Must be trouble in paradise.” He licked the brown paper to seal in its ingredients. “I was wondering what you were doing in the hood.”

“You know what, Blaze?”

“What’s that?”

“You talk too much.”

“So, you waitin’ for him to come by here? Well, I can tell you now, he ain’t stopping in. I talked to him earlier; he said he had some packin’ to do. He told me you were having a set tonight; don’t you need to be getting ready or somethin’?”

She was quiet.

Blaze’s cell rang; he excused himself to take the call.

The living room was dark with pillow cushions thrown all around. Torn newspaper attached to the windows helped shut out the light. A slab of Formica sat atop a wooden crate and in the corner, a boom box spat out rhythmic justice very loud and very clear.

Tiffany took into consideration the little chat she and Train had regarding enrolling in school. She’d been thinking about it a lot lately, knowing that to join the family business, *Johnson Perry-Johnson, Attorneys at Law*; she’d have to pass the BAR.

After a few more puffs, Tiffany decided it was time to get to her birthday party. She stuck her head threw an open door to let Blaze know she was leaving, but didn’t see him. Curiosity took her into the kitchen, still no Blaze. She wasn’t about to search the whole apartment, thought she’d just go.

“Hey,” said one of the guys from the living room. He’d surprised her in the hallway and was all up in her face.

“Hi.” A nervous heartbeat began to thump.

“Here.” A cold Heineken was forced into her hand, while a fresh blunt was passed to her.

“No, guys, I’m cool, thanks,” she said politely.

“Now, I already opened this beer and you know how high-priced Heineken’s are.”

Tiffany tried to relax a bit, couldn’t let fear take over. She thought better to play along for the moment; she swallowed the beer.

They watched as she let it chase the remainder of her banana.

“I haven’t seen you here before, name’s Kevin,” the taller one said. He held out his hand for a shake.

She gave a slight smile but didn’t allow him to take her hand. Her eyes looked over their shoulders in hopes for Blazes’ quick return.

“This is Lil’ D,” Kevin said. “So, ah, you Blaze’s girl?” He moved in closer.

She leaned back, away. “No, I’m Train’s girl.” She heard herself talk with a slur. Instinct kicked in, it was time to jet. Tiffany excused herself, having to squeeze between them. “I’m due somewhere, I’ve got to go,” she said in slow motion and then a sudden head-rush dizzied her. Her knees were weak, and she had trouble holding herself up and then she was led into an open room.

“You okay?” Kevin asked.

She heard him talking, but couldn’t understand the words. Her head spun, like the earth was off its axis. She cushioned it on a dingy pillow; her temples pulsed. Their voices became echoes. Something was wrong, as much as she wanted to leave, she couldn’t make her body move.

Kevin’s face was in hers. “Pretty,” his voice echoed as he stroked her face with bad breath.

Flat on her back, she tried to speak, “Help me.” Her eyes must have been closed, she thought, because everything was black. Her arms and legs were rigid, unshakable, her mouth on lock down. “Am I dead?” she wondered.

Moments later, the voices were talking in her ear. She forced her eyes to open; they let in a crack of light, enough to know she wasn’t dead or alone.

“I guarantee this won’t hurt you a bit. They don’t call me Lil’ D’ for nothing.” Her midriff was pulled up, he stroked her mounds; buried his face there. Her arms were overhead, no control. The weight of Lil’ D’s body landed on hers. He struggled with her Capri’s, didn’t notice the small hook that kept the zipper from easing down. His patience had worn thin.

“Come on, Kev’, man get this for me,” he begged.

With one strong tug, Tiffany’s pants were ripped. “Oh, yeah, this is gonna be good,” Lil’ D said as he set his eyes on lacy panties that held back the depths of her womanhood.

“Hurry up, man, we ain’t got all day,” Kevin said nervously.

“Dang, she fine.” Directing his weapon, Lil’ D set out to rob Tiffany of the joy within, but prematurely spilled excitement all over her butterfly.

Kevin laughed, teased, even. Before Lil’ D could defend, they heard Blaze’s footsteps approaching and did what was expected, bailed.

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“Where is she, man?” Train was in a state of panic.

“In the room.” Blaze led the way.

“Why you let her get wasted at your joint?”

“Man, she was fine when I went to use the phone.”

“You should have called me when she got here,” Train yelled.

“Don’t go blaming me, she ain’t my woman, I didn’t tell her to come here.”

Train walked into the dark room. It reeked of stale smoke. A faded dresser with a cracked mirror sat along-side a mattress and box spring in the middle of the floor. On it, Tiffany lay, unconscious.

“Help me get her up. Go get some water,” Train ordered. “Tiffany, Tiffany, wake up, wake up.” He shook her, patted her face.

A frown appeared on her face. Her shutters opened slowly. She tried to focus. “Train?”

“Yeah, baby, it’s me, Train. I need to get you out of here, can you walk?”

Tiffany was still disoriented, not sure of any of her capabilities. Her head swayed, her body was limp. It was apparent she was in no condition to move on her own. Blaze

returned with the cold water, Train sprinkled it in her face. He pulled back the blanket Blaze used to cover a disgraceful act.

“Ah, naw! Train’s eyes bulged at her ripped Capri’s, lacey panties and *stained* butterfly. Who been up in my girl?”

“Hey, I don’t know nothing ‘bout that!”

“The heck you don’t.” Train grabbed Blaze by the collar and forced him against the wall.

“I don’t know, man, really. It could have been any one of them hard heads, man,” Blaze explained.

“It coulda been you.” Train released him.

“It wasn’t me. I wouldn’t do that to you, man. You my ace.” Blaze fixed his clothes.

“Why didn’t you tell me on the phone she was...was...like this.”

“I know how you feel about her, man, this here is foul.”

Train wiped her down with a hot towel and put a pair of Blaze’s sweats on her. He put the towel and her Capri’s in a plastic grocery bag before they carried her down to Train’s car.

“Say, Man, don’t forget where you got those sweats,” Blaze reminded as he slammed the car door shut.

During the ride, Tiffany’s eyes peeled open, she blinked several times to focus; noticed she had a splitting headache, her mouth was dry and upon looking down-she was wearing someone else’s pants.

She looked to Train, his eyes squinted, wrinkled forehead, and glaring eyes. Sweat beaded his temple and the rise and fall of his chest indicated panic from a man who was always in control. She turned her face, barely recognized the streets they passed.

Train noticed she was coherent now, drilled her with questions about being at Blaze’s apartment. “Why were you

there? Who else was there? Why were you drunk?" And finally, "Who did you screw?"

Not knowing the answers to any of his questions, she drowsily asked, "Can we discuss it later?" Especially that question about screwing someone, she remembered being on her back, someone in her face, but everything else was foggy. "Oh God! Please let me still be a virgin," was her silent prayer. She had no idea of what really happened, but it seemed Train did. This was not something she could talk her way out of.

"Discuss it later! Yeah, until you can come up with a good story. Not this time, Tiff. Matter of fact, you ain't got to tell me nothing, I'm not your man anymore."

His words hurt, twisted like a screw in a cork. "Train please, can we please talk about this later," Tiffany pleaded; her voice was scratchy, and she felt nauseous.

Train gripped the steering wheel in a silent huff. He could think of many ways to label her: stuck up Prima Dona, selfish, bookworm, rich-girl, but he never thought she would get drunk and have meaningless sex. If he had wanted to, he could have had her, even used her for her money, but the truth was, he respected her, loved her.

Words escaped him. He had done his part, rescuing her from Blaze's then dropping her off at the back door of her sister's mansion. It was easier than he thought it would be; her party guests were spilling out of the house and landing all over the front yard, too busy for anyone to notice what he was up to. His first thought was to wait at the door until someone answered, give himself a proper introduction, but that wasn't the first impression he wanted to give, besides, he knew Tiffany wouldn't have wanted that, instead, he rang the bell and quickly disappeared into the night so that he would have no explaining to do.

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Kareem heard running water coming from the bathroom. He knocked hard. "Marie, are you up here?"

"I'm in here," Sharon spoke up. She opened the bathroom door.

Kareem walked in. "Ah, man." An unpleasant odor hung in the air. He was shocked to find Tiffany wrapped in a bath towel and barreled over the toilet spitting out the last few drops of her vomit. "What's wrong with her, is she sick or drunk?"

"Smells like beer," Sharon admitted.

He fanned the air under his nose and emptied a can of Vanilla Mist into the air. "When did she get here?"

"About forty minutes ago."

"Why didn't you tell somebody?"

"Uh, excuse me; I was a little busy." Sharon was sarcastic.

"I'm going to get your mother," Kareem announced.

"No, please, get Marie," Sharon begged and then turned her attention to her sister. When the coast was clear, Sharon whispered to her, "What happened, Tiff?"

With her slight turn, slobber slid across her cheek. Her eyes were bloodshot, her Carmel skin ashy and her *Scary Spice* hairdo was scary. "I don't know," she managed to say.

"Did you drive home?" Sharon dabbed the corner of her sister's mouth.

She shook in the negative, "My friend brought me."

"Who? Where's the Lincoln?"

"Come on, Sis, nix all the questions, I feel like I'm dying here."

Sharon obeyed. She found a pair of Marie's pajamas in a cherry wood armoire and helped her sister. "I'm glad you're home, Mom and Dad were starting to freak."

Tiffany nodded. "I'm cold," she moaned.

Sharon pulled an extra blanket out of the hope chest; Tiffany immediately fell into sleep.

“What happened!” said Marie as she barreled through the door. Kareem behind her; he also wanted to know.

“She’s really out of it, guys; I think we should talk to her tomorrow.”

“Is she alright?” asked Marie, calmer seeing Tiffany at rest.

“She’ll live.”

“Did she say how she got here?” Kareem questioned.

“Just that a friend brought her, I don’t even know where her truck is,” she informed. Sharon sat at the foot of the poster bed. She rubbed Tiffany’s feet through the layer of blankets. It was obvious that through all the sibling rivalries when it came down to it, the ties that bind are unbreakable.

“So, was she drunk or what?” asked Marie.

“I smelled beer, but it seemed more like she was, *drugged.*”

“Drugged?” Marie was concerned.

“How could you tell?”

“I don’t know, Kareem, it was weird. I’ve seen her tipsy before, she’d talk a lot, slur a few words, sing even, but this was different, like she was not in control, in a daze, drugged.” Sharon leapt from the bed and retrieved a bag from the bathroom. “Look at this.”

Kareem pulled Tiffany’s ripped Capri’s from the bag. On further inspection, he discovered the soiled towel and sniffed it. He shook his head in disgust. “Where did you find this, this...bag?”

“It was on the back porch, with her.”

“What were you doing on the back porch? I distinctly told you to wait upstairs,” Marie said.

“I know, I was...going to sneak out,” she admitted, “Just as I was leaving, I heard the bell, and that’s when I found her.”

“Did you see anyone else, a car, perhaps?” Kareem asked.

“No.”

“What was she wearing?” He questioned.

“A cute top and some oversized sweat pants. They aren’t hers.” Sharon produced them.

“I think we need to notify the police. It’s obvious a crime has been committed against her.”

“Marie, we’re going to have to speak to Tiffany and your parents first. Sharon, go down and get them.”

Marie plopped down on the floral loveseat just under the huge picture window. Kareem joined her and placed his arm around his wife with a light squeeze. The moon glowed; the light struck a coffee table where a bouquet of the latest blooms perfumed their bedroom; it offered nearly as much light as the sun did throughout the day.

“What are we going to do, Kareem?”

“First, we’re going to pray, after we tell your folks, I think we should get Tiff to the hospital and file a police report.”

After the Kramer’s were informed, they all joined hands around the bed. With a crinkled forehead, Kareem prayed that Tiffany had not been sexually violated. He impressed upon the Lord how grateful the family was to have her home safely and asked if He would deliver Tiffany from her waywardness.

Kareem asked for guidance on how to proceed with the situation and to protect Sharon from the same fate. He asked for strength and understanding for the Kramers and pleaded for forgiveness for them all and even for the perpetrators, to keep His angels in their midst. His fervor prompted Marie to peek at his face; she wanted to see his devotion to God. His sincerity pleased her.

*“Lord, please release her from the temptations of the world and send the Holy Spirit to remind her of You. Dear God, we know that Your time is not our time, but still we ask that this child be returned to the loving guidance and security of her family. Help her realize that on her knees,*

*with Your name on her lips, is the only direction that leads to peace. Help her see that alcohol and drugs are a ploy of the Devil for her destruction. Lord, return Tiffany to us with a new confidence in herself and in You, Jesus. In Your holy name we pray, Amen.”*

And they all said, “Amen.”

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Grace received an urgent call from Jon’s nurse, whom she had gotten to know from the frequent visits. “I’m sorry, Grace, he just isn’t doing well, his white blood cell count is dangerously low,” Nurse Amy whispered. She was a young woman, new on the job although that was no excuse for breaking hospital policy by giving updates on a patient—especially to one not a family member. She hushed her words as they entered Jon’s room, his Aunt Betty was at his bedside; she held a handkerchief to her face.

Grace gently touched Betty’s shoulders; let her know she was there for her. Betty moved from the chair, allowed Grace to sit there. “The doctor said he’s developed pneumonia and some other complications,” Betty sniveled.

He’d lost even more weight since the last time she was there. He looked horrible; his face seemed hollowed out without much else under the sheets. He wasn’t even breathing completely on his own, a respirator assisted. She placed her hand on him, thought of his grandmother, supposed Betty would continue taking care of her.

“Jon? Can you hear me? Blink if you can hear me.” She spoke louder than usual as if he were deaf.

Jon blinked.

“Are you in pain?”

Jon blinked.

“He’s in pain, Betty,” Grace reported.

“He just received some morphine before you came in.”

“Your medicine will be kicking in any minute, Jon.” She picked up his hand, gave a little squeeze. It bothered her to

see him that way; there was no doubt in her mind that death was knocking at his door. As she held his bony hand, she could see the medicine taking affect, he began to relax; his breathing was deeper. "I know we talked about this before, Jon, but I was never clear about your beliefs. I know you said you believe in God, but what about Jesus, do you believe in Him too?"

Jon blinked-slower.

"I'd like to say a prayer that will insure you'll be with the Lord after you leave, blink if you'd like that, Jon."

Jon blinked rapidly.

*"Dear Lord, in heaven, we come to you asking for Your mercy on our souls. We realize that you paid the ultimate price when You died for our sins. We realize there is no way we could ever repay You, other than to acknowledge You as our Savior and do Your will. We admit that we are sinners and we ask You to live within us, guiding our thoughts, our actions, our lives. In this prayer Jon is preparing to meet you, Lord. He is grateful that even though he didn't live for You, Your mercy says he will live everlasting in Your presence, honoring You. We thank You for the chance to redeem ourselves. We pray for the comfort of the Holy Spirit; it is in Jesus' name that we pray, Amen."*

Jon blinked. He tried to squeeze her hand, but had fallen into unconsciousness. His closed eyes were the excuse Grace needed to allow her tears to fall.

From across the room Betty spoke, "I said it too, does it count?"

Grace moved from the chair, went to her by the window, "Of course it does, yes, yes, it does." They hugged, cried. Jon remained out of it for the duration of her visit. It did her good to know that he would die a Christian. Nurse Amy announced that visiting hours would be over soon. Grace worried that it would be the last time she would see him alive. She kissed his hand and touched Jon's forehead, hugged Betty.

“I’m going home too, I finally have the courage to tell Jon’s grandmother the truth about what has happened to him,” said Betty.

Before leaving the hospital parking lot, Grace called Sean, “Hi, it’s me, Grace.”

“Hi, is everything all right? How’s your friend, Jon? Do you need anything?”

“Which question would you like me to answer first?”

“Sorry, I guess I’m a little excited, it’s not every day that I meet a lovely woman,” he said. “Why don’t you start with your friend?”

“He’s not doing so well. In fact, he’s taken a turn for the worst, critical condition,” Grace told as she tried to control the tremble in her voice.

Sean heard her distress, “I’m sorry, really. Would you like some company? We don’t have to do dinner or anything, maybe you’d like to talk or pray?”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.” She cleared her throat. “I guess I just wanted to talk with someone who might care.”

“I’m sure you have people in your life who are close to you.”

“Yes, I do. I just didn’t want to burden them; Jon was not popular with my friends.”

“What about your family?” He asked.

“It’s just my mother, we’re not very close,” she confessed.

“Have you made it home yet?”

“No, why?”

“I was going to suggest you turn to a passage in the Bible that has always comforted me at times like these.”

Grace was quiet. She thanked the Lord in her mind once again.

“Can I read it for you?” He asked.

“Yes, please.”

“It says, *‘Let him have all your worries and cares, for He is always thinking about you and watching everything that concerns you, 1 Peter 5:7.’*”

“Thank you. That *is* comforting.”

“I wish I had said it first, but Jesus gave it to Paul.”

He’d gotten her to smile. “I’d better get on out of here; I have a daughter to pick up from a friend’s home. Do you like children, Sean?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. I never married, so I don’t have any, but I have always wanted to raise a family.”

“That’s nice. So, I’ll call you some other time, all right?”

“What about Bible study?”

“It’s actually too late.”

“Can I call you?”

“That would be nice,” she said and then recited her phone number. Marie said it was best to play hard to get to pique a man’s interest, she said it makes the beginning stages of the relationship more interesting, but Grace didn’t feel that was necessary with Sean, he was different, a gift from God.