

PART ONE

Janice Johnson

I WISH . . .

I COULD

HAVE BEEN THERE . . .

TO SAVE HIM

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Chapter 1

There is nothing like being in love with a naked man.

Now, I'm not saying that I didn't love my husband when he was fully clothed. But right now, right here, all I could do was perch myself up on my elbow and enjoy as my husband strutted around our bedroom as if he were looking for something. He wasn't looking for a doggone thing; Tyrone was just giving me a show.

And what a show it was, 'cause there was nothing like a naked, carved, then chiseled to perfection, chocolate man.

I sighed and my heart swelled with even more love than I ever thought possible. I didn't know it could be like this. Didn't know it could be like this after sixteen years of marriage. Didn't know it could be like this after the betrayal of infidelity.

"What are you staring at?" Tyrone's voice broke through my thoughts. He flexed his pecs and inside, I moaned. "What? What are you looking at?" he asked again.

Really? He was standing there, full frontal, and he was asking me what I was looking at? Did he want me to describe the human statue of excellence that he was to me?

I answered my husband. "Nothing. I'm not looking at anything."

He busted out laughing, then leaned over and kissed my forehead.

I tugged at his arm, trying to pull him down on top of me so that I could do more nasty things to him. If our life were a book, it would've been titled *Love and Sex*. It had started with

the marriage counselor that my best friend, Syreeta, had referred us to after “the cheating incident.”

“Stay in the bed,” the counselor had advised. “You have to connect again with one another sexually. Once you get the trust back in bed, because that’s where it was broken, you’ll be able to get the trust back in every other aspect of your life.”

[That had just sounded like some man talking at the time.](#) And trust me, it had been hard on both of us. But after a couple of months, we needed therapy to get us *out* of bed. It was like we couldn’t stop. And the counselor had been right. We connected again, in bed first, and everything else followed.

But even though my husband was always down for second and third sexual helpings, this time he pulled back and I frowned.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll be right back.” Turning away, he grabbed his bathrobe from the chaise. “I’m going to check on Marquis. Make sure his homework is done and he’s getting ready to turn in.”

I bounced back in the bed and sighed. “Tyrone . . .”

“Don’t start, Janice.”

“It’s barely nine o’clock and you’re sending him to bed? He’s seventeen! Come on, now. When are you going to let up on him?”

The expression of pure pleasure that had been on my husband’s face just a minute before faded fast. “Let up on him?” Tyrone grumbled. “We’re raising a black boy in a white world. I will never let up. I will never go easy. We’ve got just one chance to get this right.”

“I get that,” I said, having heard this lecture so many times. But if he was going to give me his speech, then he was going to once again listen to mine.

“It's been a month since he was suspended. And he's done everything that we've asked him to do. All he does is go to school and then come home. He's back on track.”

“See, that's my point right there,” Tyrone said, jabbing his finger in the air. “He's *back* on track. He should have never been derailed in the first place and I want to make sure that he never gets derailed again.”

“But what else do you want from him? We've got to let him know that there is redemption after repentance. We've got to teach him that he can do something wrong, but then he can make up for it by doing something right.”

“He's a black boy. In this country, he won't get a makeup opportunity. In this country, he won't be given a second chance, and our son has to learn that lesson now.”

“That may be how it is in this country,” I said. “But we've got to let him know that it's not like that in this house. At home, he has to know that we trust him again.”

Tyrone shook his head.

“It was one joint, Tyrone,” I said for what had to be the millionth time since our son had received that three-day school suspension a month ago. “Don't make it out to be any bigger than that.” When Tyrone opened his mouth to lecture me more, I added, “Don't forget you smoked when you were in high school.”

“Yeah, but now that I know better, I've done better. And I wasn't at Winchester Academy when I smoked. I wasn't at some high falutin' school where the people there were expecting and waiting for me to fail.”

I sighed as Tyrone went on and on about how our son's mistake was much worse since he was at Winchester—one of the top college-prep academies in the country. It had been my idea to send Marquis there since I recognized his brilliance from when he was in my womb. Seriously though, our son was smart and I wanted my only child to have the best opportunities, to give him a future that I could've never imagined for myself when I was growing up motherless, fatherless, oftentimes feeling homeless as I was shuffled from one foster home to the next.

“You know I'm right, Janice.” Tyrone broke through my thoughts. “Those white folks don't want him there, and he goes around acting a fool.”

“He was acting like a seventeen-year-old . . .” I held up my hand before Tyrone could pounce on my words. “And yes, he was wrong,” I continued. “But he's learned his lesson and all I want you to see is that Marquis is a good kid. A really good kid who's going to do great things in life.”

“I know he has that potential. But if he's going to be great, he has to understand that he can't get caught up. He has to do everything right.”

“Everything right? Really?” It took all that was inside of me not to shake my head and roll my eyes at this man. Sometimes Tyrone spoke as if he were the only parent with dreams for our son, but I wanted the same, perhaps even more, for Marquis. While Tyrone focused on his academics, accepting nothing less than straight A's, I focused on the fullness of the life that I prayed Marquis would have. I wanted him to be well educated, but happy, with a wife and plenty of children who called me Grandma. I wanted to see him grow up doing the things he loved, playing the saxophone and piano, writing poetry, and participating in amateur golf tournaments.

But none of that extracurricular stuff mattered to Tyrone. He was a strict disciplinarian who walked a straight military line. I understood structure and parental control; it was just that sometimes, Tyrone was so strict, even I felt stifled.

“I *am* letting up a little bit,” Tyrone said as if he heard my thoughts. “I let him go out tonight, didn’t I?”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed. “You let him go to the library!”

Tyrone grinned with me. “I let him go to the library . . . with Heather,” he said, referring to our son’s girlfriend.

While those words made Tyrone smile, the thought made me want to shout, and I wasn’t talking about shouting hallelujah! This discussion was going fine—why did Tyrone even have to bring up Marquis’s girlfriend? His *white* girlfriend. She was the only thing that made me regret busting my butt, working those extra shifts at the post office so that we could send Marquis to Winchester.

“I guess you don’t have nothin’ to say now, huh?” Tyrone chuckled.

My husband was torturing me and he knew it. He knew how I felt about Marquis bringing that girl home when there were all these beautiful black girls that he knew from growing up in church, and even a few at Winchester. Every day, I brought up a new name to him, but Marquis could not be moved. I have no idea where I went wrong, but sometime after Marquis became a teenager, he suddenly and only had eyes for girls who looked like Snow White.

It sickened me, though his son’s preference for girls with blond hair and blue eyes didn’t seem to bother Tyrone. I didn’t get that. My husband was always talking about white people this

and white people that and how he lived *in* this country, but he was not *of* this country. Well, why didn't he have an issue with his son dating a white girl?

“Okay, I won't tell him that he has to turn in,” Tyrone said, saving me from myself. Because thoughts of Heather were getting me riled up. Now that Tyrone had mentioned Heather, I was beginning to think maybe we should keep Marquis on lockdown (and away from that white girl) until he left for college in the fall.

“Thank you,” I said to Tyrone.

“But I'm still gonna talk to him. Make sure that his head is on straight since I did let him go out earlier. And I'm going to talk to him about the suspension . . .”

This time I did roll my eyes.

“Make sure he understands the seriousness of it.”

“He does.”

“Make sure he knows it could've messed with his scholarship to UPenn.”

“He knows.”

“Make sure he understands why he won't be valedictorian now, even though he earned it.”

“He understands.”

“Well, if you can guarantee that he knows all of that, then, he's off lockdown.” Tyrone shook his head. “You're a softy, you know.” He kissed me again as he tied his robe. “Our son better thank you, 'cause if you weren't so cute . . .”

I laughed, but then stopped suddenly when the doorbell rang and a hard knock followed.

Tyrone and I frowned together. It was just a little after nine now, and I couldn't imagine who would be coming by our home. Marquis and his friends knew that they couldn't hang out on school nights, even when Marquis wasn't on lockdown.

No more than a couple of seconds passed before the visitor on the other side of our front door rang the bell again and then another knock.

"Who can that be?" I asked, pushing myself up from the bed.

Tyrone held up his hand. "You stay here. I'll get it."

But before my husband could make it to the top of the staircase, I had wrapped myself inside my robe and stepped into the hallway. Marquis's bedroom door was closed, which was the only reason why I was sure he hadn't bounced down the stairs to get to the door before his father.

By the time I made my way to the top of the stairs, Tyrone was at the bottom and opening the door.

"Mr. Johnson?"

The door was open wide enough for me to see the two policemen, one black, one white, standing shoulder to shoulder, looking like soldiers.

"Yes," my husband said, his voice two octaves deeper now, the way it always dropped when he stood in front of men wearing uniforms.

"May we come in?" the black one asked.

Those words made me descend the stairs even though I wasn't properly dressed for company. Not that two policemen showing up in the middle of the night could ever be called welcomed visitors.

"What's this about?" My husband asked the question for both of us.

The policemen stepped inside, though Tyrone hadn't extended an invitation. Both men glanced up at me as I stood on the second stair, gripping the lapels of my bathrobe to make sure it didn't open and trying to come up with a single reason why two officers would be in our home.

"Ma'am." It seemed that the black officer had been assigned to do all the talking as the white one just nodded at me.

"What's this about?" Tyrone asked again.

They once again stood shoulder to shoulder, at attention, as if this were a formal visitation. "Would you mind if we went in there?" The black officer twisted slightly, nodding toward our living room. "I'd like for us to sit down."

If the officer had been speaking to me, I would've said yes just because it seemed like the right thing to do.

But Tyrone said, "That's not necessary, just tell me what this is about," because that was right to him. My husband had been raised on the hard streets of Philly, where a policeman, no matter his color, was never an invited guest.

The officers exchanged glances before the black one said, "Marquis Johnson, is that your son?"

Tyrone's eyes narrowed while mine widened.

"What's this about?" It felt like that was the fiftieth time my husband asked that question, and now I needed to hear the answer, too.

"There's been a shooting . . ."

"Oh, my God," I gasped, and covered my mouth. "Did something happen to one of our son's friends?"

The officers looked at each other again before the black one continued, “No. It’s your son, Marquis. He’s been shot.”

“What?” Tyrone and I said together.

“That’s impossible,” Tyrone continued. “Marquis is upstairs. He’s in his room.” And then he yelled out, “Marquis, come down here.”

I didn’t let even a second pass before I dashed up the stairs, taking them two at a time, moving like I hadn’t in years. Not that I had any doubt. Of course Marquis was in his bedroom. He’d come home while Tyrone and I . . . had been spending some personal time together. I mean, he hadn’t come into our bedroom, but he never did when we had the door closed.

Tonight, he’d been home by eight, nine at the latest. I was sure of that.

Since Marquis had become a teenager, I never entered his room without knocking. But tonight, I busted in. And then I stood there . . . in the dark. I stood there staring at the blackness, though there was enough light from the hallway for me to see that Marquis wasn’t sitting at his desk, he wasn’t lying on his bed, he wasn’t here.

“Marquis,” I called out anyway, then rushed back into the hall and headed to the bathroom. “Marquis!” Just like with his bedroom, I busted into the bathroom and stared at the empty space.

It was only then that I felt my heart pounding, though I’m sure the assault on my chest began the moment the policeman had told that lie that my son had been shot.

“Marquis,” I called out as I jerked back the shower curtain that revealed an empty tub.

“Marquis,” I shouted as I now searched our guest bedroom. No one, nothing there.

I returned to his bedroom, turned on his light, then swung open the door to his closet before I crouched down and searched under his bed. “Marquis,” I screamed as I went into my bedroom, wondering why my son was playing this game of hide-and-seek, something we hadn’t done since he was four. When he finally came out of hiding, he was going to have to deal with me!

I rushed back into the hallway and bumped right into Tyrone.

“He’s not up here,” I said to my husband as he grasped my arms. “He’s downstairs somewhere. Did you check the kitchen? Wait, I know,” I continued, without letting my husband speak. “He’s in the family room. I know you said he couldn’t watch the TV in there, but you were about to take him off lockdown anyway and you know that Marquis—”

“Janice.” Tyrone shook me a little.

I looked up into Tyrone’s eyes, which were glassy with tears.

“What?” I frowned. “You don’t believe those policemen, do you?”

He nodded at the same time that I shook my head.

“No, they’re lying.”

“They’re not lying,” Tyrone said softly. “They showed me a picture, just to make sure.”

Now I whipped my head from side to side because I didn’t want to hear anything else from Tyrone. I couldn’t believe that he would accept the word of two men in blue. Wasn’t he the one who always said that you couldn’t trust the police?

Well, if he wasn’t going to look for our son, I was. “Marquis!” I screamed.

Tyrone still nodded, and now a single tear dripped from his eye. “Janice, listen to me.”

For a moment, I tried to remember the last time my husband had cried. And I couldn't think of a single time.

"Janice." He repeated my name.

"No!"

"Marquis is gone."

"No!"

"He was shot over on Avon Street."

"No!"

"He's dead."

"Why would you believe them," I cried. "Why don't you believe me?"

My husband looked at me as if I was talking foolishness. And I looked at him and begged with every fiber of my being for him to tell me that he was wrong. Or for him to wake me from this nightmare. Either scenario would work for me.

But Tyrone did neither of those things. He just held me and stared into my eyes. And as I stared into his, I saw the truth.

Not many words that Tyrone had shared had made it to the understanding part of my brain. But four words did: Marquis. Gone. Shot. Dead.

"Marquis is gone?" I whispered.

Tyrone nodded.

"Someone shot my son?"

He nodded again.

"And now he's dead?"

This time, Tyrone didn't nod. He just pulled me close, so close that I could feel the hammering of his heart. But though there were few times when I didn't want to be held by my husband, I didn't want him to hold me now. I didn't want him to comfort me. Because if what Tyrone and these policemen were saying were true, then I didn't want to be in my husband's arms.

If everything they said about my son was the truth, then all I wanted was to be dead, too.

Chapter 2

Death.

I couldn't get that word out of my head.

Death.

Even though I kept trying to.

Death.

I had to stop thinking about it because if I didn't, the whole world would have to end.

"Okay, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson," the officer said as he opened the door, "if you can have a seat in here, I'll be right back."

"Please, I need to know about my son," I said. They had already kept us waiting in the front of the police station. Had us sitting there like we were in the reception area of a doctor's office or something. And now they were herding us back to some room, just to leave us to wait some more?

But our waiting didn't seem to be any kind of concern to the officer. He looked at me with eyes that didn't seem happy about having to explain himself again. "I need to get the detective and we'll be back."

"But when will I see my son?" I asked right before he closed the door.

Turning around, I moved farther into the room and imagined this had to be how it felt to be confined in a prison cell. This room was that small . . . and that cold. A rectangular table consumed most of the space, which was lit only by a single bulb hanging loosely from the

ceiling. There was a window, a small one, but no light came from the outside. There was only darkness.

Edging toward the table, I took in the glass on the opposite wall and I wondered if the police were behind that mirror, like on TV, watching me. Though I wasn't sure what they expected to see . . . I was just a mother about to die from grief.

I wanted to stand, but there was this blackened cloud that hung over me, making me weary. So, I sat on the wooden chair that felt harder than it probably was. But I sat on the edge, ready to jump with joy when the police came back and told me this had all been a mistake.

It wasn't until Tyrone took my hand and squeezed it that I even remembered he was with me, and if I'd had the strength, I would've thanked him. He hadn't left my side since we'd heard this news—what? One, two, three hours ago? He'd done just about everything he could, except breathe for me since. From dressing me (to make sure that I didn't walk out of the house naked), to holding me steady on my wobbly legs, it was because of Tyrone that my heart was still beating. He didn't know it, but he'd kept me away from the medicine cabinet that housed all kinds of old prescriptions that I never threw away, but couldn't stop thinking about from the moment he'd convinced me that what the police had said about Marquis was true.

“What are the police doing?” I asked Tyrone. But I didn't let enough time pass for him to answer. “Why do they have us locked in here? And why won't they let me see Marquis?”

He held my hand tighter as if that gesture was part of the answer. “They want to talk to us first. Get some answers.”

“What kind of answers can I give them? I'm the one with all the questions.”

“I know,” my husband said. “But let's be patient.”

That was when I knew for sure that the world had turned on its axis. My husband was calling for patience? With the police? For the first time I realized that he was in shock, too.

Tyrone kept on: "They have to talk to us now because if they let us see Marquis first . . ."

He didn't have to finish. Talk first because after seeing Marquis, not only would I no longer be able to speak, I doubted if I'd even be able to breathe.

I moved to stand, but before I could get out of my seat, the door opened and in marched the white officer who'd come to our home and with him this time was a different black man. This one wasn't wearing a uniform.

It was the one I hadn't seen before who said, "Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, I'm Detective Ferguson; I'm really sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," Tyrone said, though I didn't say a word. For me, for my heart, it wasn't official yet that I'd lost anything.

"We just want to ask you a few questions."

"I understand," Tyrone said. "But the thing is, my wife and I have questions, too." My husband continued in a soft voice that I'd never heard come out of him before. "What happened to our son? All we know is that he was shot dead."

The men exchanged a glance before the one named Ferguson nodded to the other. The other officer said, "Yes, but I think if we get some questions answered, we'll be able to fill in a lot of the blanks. Just a few questions."

Tyrone nodded his cooperation; I didn't move a single muscle.

The officer asked, "Do you have any idea why your son was over on Avon in Haverford?"

Tyrone said, “He was probably heading home after dropping his girlfriend off. She lives somewhere over in that area . . . I think.”

The officers looked at each other before the one who’d been doing all the speaking asked, “Girlfriend?”

Tyrone nodded. “Wait, was she with him? Is she all right?”

The officer asked, “What’s her name?”

“Heather . . .” And then Tyrone stopped.

He liked Marquis’s girlfriend so much, but he didn’t even know her last name. I answered, “Nelson. Heather Nelson,” because I didn’t like her. So I knew everything about her.

“And Heather lives in that neighborhood?”

“Yes, but is she all right? Was she with Marquis?” my husband asked again.

“She’s fine. She was with him. We only asked because we wanted to make sure that we were talking about the same young lady.”

“Oh, my God,” I pressed my hand against my chest. “She was with him when this happened? Then I need to talk to her.”

“We’ve talked to her, ma’am, and that’s why we needed to talk to you. Your son, is he a member of a gang?”

“What?”

“No!” Tyrone said at the same time. And then, the way my husband’s shoulders rose up, I could see that the patience he’d told me to have wasn’t a part of him anymore. “And why would you ask us that?” he asked, his voice once again strong, once again two octaves deeper. “You need to answer that question and a whole lot more for me. What happened to my son?”

They had mistaken my grieving-and-in-shock husband for a passive black man. But the way he sat now, leaning forward with his palms flat on the table, and his eyes giving them a stare that could have sharpened stone, the policeman decided to answer.

“The reason we’re questioning you is because we don’t know exactly what happened and we’re trying to put it all together.”

“Well then, tell me the part that you do know,” my husband said as if he were the one in charge now.

There was a brief moment of silence as the men glanced at me, then back at my husband. “It seems your son was in the car with his . . . girlfriend . . . and they were approached by someone,” the one who’d been doing all the talking said.

“A gang member?” Tyrone asked, then before the police could answer, he added, “I don’t care what that other boy told you, my son was not in a gang.”

Another glance exchanged, and then, “Well that’s why we’re asking you these questions.”

“So do you have the shooter in custody? Do you have the boy who murdered my son?”

“We’re still trying to gather the information,” he said, his voice as steady as a weatherman’s.

“So are you going to tell me the name of the punk who killed my boy?”

“We don’t want to tell you something and then later find out we were wrong.”

“Well, right now you’re not telling me anything!” Tyrone’s volume rose.

The officer kept his voice level as he said, “We’re telling you what we know and we’re trying to gather everything so that we can give you a full account.”

“How are you gathering information from us when we weren’t there?” I asked.

“You know things about your son—”

“Like whether or not he was in a gang?” Tyrone spat.

The officer nodded, as if he were now the one with patience. “We had to ask that.”

“Because that’s the first thing you think of when you see two black boys, right?” my husband said, his tone accusing them. “Well, I don’t know about the other boy, but our son wasn’t in a gang.”

The officer glanced at the detective, but the white officer was the one who kept speaking. “We had to ask, just like we have to ask did your son carry a firearm.”

Tyrone slammed his fists on the table, startling me and making both officers jump, though only the white one raised his arm as if he were reaching for his gun.

Just as quickly, I placed my hand on Tyrone’s arm, feeling the bulge of his bicep. My husband was ready to punch these men out. But since I’d just lost one half of the reason why my heart beat every day, I had to do everything that I could to keep the other half with me.

So I kept my hand on him, and just like I always did, I calmed him down by my touch alone.

“Mr. Johnson.” Those were the first words Detective Ferguson spoke since his greeting, and he called my husband’s name in a tone that sounded like he was giving him a warning. “We want to find out what happened as much as you do.”

A couple of long moments and hard stares passed between the two black men before Tyrone finally sat back and held up his hands. “We’ll answer your questions, and then you answer ours.”

The detective gave a slow nod. "Fair enough." He paused, glanced at the white officer, then leaned over. "Okay, so did your son have any guns?" Ferguson asked, taking over the interrogation.

"No."

"Not that you know of?" the other officer said.

With a glare, my husband repeated, "No."

Then, "What about anything else that he had in his car?" Ferguson asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Any kind of weapon?"

"Look, my son wasn't like that. Let me answer your next ten questions for you. My son wasn't violent; he was probably eight the last time he had a fight. He wasn't in a gang, he didn't sell drugs, he didn't carry any weapons of any kind."

"What about a baseball bat? Did he carry a bat?" Detective Ferguson asked.

I squeezed Tyrone's arm, but this time it was more for me than for him. Because this time, I wanted to stand up and punch somebody.

Tyrone said, "No, he didn't *carry a bat*."

"Not that you know of," the other officer said again.

Detective Ferguson must've known that was all my husband was going to be able to take.

"Okay, so let me tell you what we know," the detective offered. "Your son and Heather were sitting in his car . . . just talking, maybe. And this is where it gets murky. It seems that your son and the man who approached the car exchanged some words, but the man walked away."

Apparently, that was when your son got out the car and there was some kind of confrontation that turned into an altercation.” Then the detective stopped as if that were enough of an explanation.

“So how did my son end up dead?” Tyrone asked.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out.”

“So some guy just shot my son?” I said. “For no reason?”

“Your son got out of the car, ma’am,” the white officer said as if that were reason enough.

“And now there’s a death sentence for getting out of your car? That’s why he was murdered?” I cried.

“As we explained,” Detective Ferguson was back to talking, “we don’t have the full picture yet.”

“I just want to know one thing,” Tyrone said. He glanced at the officers as if he were telling them that they better have the right answers. “The boy who killed my son . . . has he been arrested?”

“Not yet . . .”

“Why not?” I screamed, feeling my tears on their way.

“Because we’re still working on this,” Ferguson said.

The other added, “He’s claiming self-defense. And if it were self-defense, then . . .”

I frowned. “Self-defense? But I know my son. He didn’t attack anybody.”

“He got out of the car and there was a confrontation, ma’am. And if anyone feels as if his life is in danger, he doesn’t have to retreat. He can stay and protect himself.”

My frown deepened as I thought back to the times when I’d heard words like that, similar ones on the news, with all of the recent killings of young black men. But that was down south. In

Florida. That kind of thing couldn't happen here. Not in the North. In Pennsylvania. And it certainly was never used when one black man shot another.

“You're making it sound like . . . like this . . . like he's saying he was standing his ground or something,” I said.

The officers nodded together and one said, “Pennsylvania is a stand-your-ground state, ma'am.”

“But . . . I thought that was just in Florida?” I was doing all the talking now.

“No, it's not.”

I wanted to burst into tears right then. I didn't know much about self-defense and stand your ground, except that everyone who used it in court seemed to get away with murder. Did this mean that the boy who shot my son was going to walk, too? And that's just what I asked the officer.

He shrugged. “We're going to do our best to find out what happened and to make sure justice is served . . . either way.”

I sat there, stunned. The way these men were talking – this was just some black-on-black crime to them. They weren't giving any indication that they would put much effort into this case.

There was nothing else for me to say, but that was all right because I knew Tyrone would take over now. And this time, I wasn't even going to try to hold him back. I didn't care if he started flipping tables or punching walls. Tyrone would demand justice, and by the time my husband finished, these officers would run out of here and arrest whoever had taken the light out of our lives.

I watched and I waited. Then Tyrone finally opened his mouth; but the only thing he said was, "When can I see my son?"

<CN>Chapter 3

<COT>There was nothing but silence in the car, though actually that wasn't completely true. There was Tyrone's silence and my tears. The police had dragged us down to the station, kept us there for hours, asked us questions that had nothing to do with Marquis, and in the end, they still didn't let me see my son!

<TX>"The body is with the medical examiner," the detective had said to Tyrone when my husband asked.

The body? That was no way to describe Marquis.

"So?" Tyrone had said. "We still want to see our son."

The detective had shaken his head. "That's not possible. Your son will be released to you when the medical examiner completes his report."

He'd already reduced my son to just a body, and then he spoke like my son was the property of the state. All I'd wanted to do was stand up and demand that they bring my son to me. But then I saw Tyrone rise up in his seat, and before he turned that prison cell/interrogation room out, I rested my hand on his shoulder, doing my best to hold back his rage.

My touch settled him. Or maybe it was my tears that made Tyrone turn his attention to me. Either way, instead of grabbing one or both of the detectives, all my husband did was take my hand and lead me out of there. Neither one of us looked back, nor did we utter a word.

But now that we were in the car, I was so close to telling Tyrone to turn back. Maybe we could plead with the police, convince them somehow that we had to see Marquis.

Or maybe I was just stalling because I didn't want to face my house without my son.

“I don’t want to go home,” I said.

Tyrone kept his eyes on the road, the muscle in his temple, throbbing. After a moment, he asked, “Where do you want to go?”

I wanted to tell him that I would go anywhere except where we lived in West Philly. But when I opened my mouth, “I want to see Heather,” came out.

He shook his head and I explained, “I want to know what happened.”

It didn’t take more than a moment before he said, “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“But she was the last one to see Marquis alive. I want to know, I have to know what happened.”

He gave it more thought, but still said, “No. We need to go home. We need to make . . .”

I completed his incomplete thought. He wanted us to start making plans for the rest of our lives without our son. But I couldn’t do that. Not yet . . .not until I found a way to understand this. Not until I saw my son myself and got my brain to convince my heart what I still didn’t want to believe.

And Heather could help.

“Don’t you want to talk to her?” I asked.

“No.”

“Don’t you want to know?”

“I know everything that I need to know.”

Well, I needed to know more. I needed to know what happened between yesterday when Marquis kissed me before he dashed out of the house, to this moment when I had to live with the truth that I would never again feel my son’s touch against my cheek.

I didn't say that to Tyrone, though, because in the best of circumstances, I couldn't change his mind. So I just let him drive as the sun began its slow ascent, bringing the light and hope of a new day.

But there would never be light, there would never be hope in my life again.

Tyrone rolled our car to a stop in our driveway, but even when he turned off the ignition, neither of us moved. And even though I didn't turn to look at my husband, I knew that he was taking in the same view that I was.

Our home.

The second floor.

The window to Marquis's room.

Tyrone blew out a long breath, then slid out of the car. As always, he came around, opened my door, and held my hand as I got out. And then, with slow steps that were as heavy as my heart, I followed him.

I watched every move that Tyrone made, how he put the key in the lock, turned it, pushed the door open, then stepped into our home. He looked back at me and then frowned as I just stood outside. I wanted to follow him in, I really did.

But I couldn't.

"Come on, Jan," Tyrone whispered. He held out his hand, knowing that I needed a little extra help. And I wanted to take his hand, I really did.

But I didn't.

Instead, I turned and ran.

"Janice!"

I jumped into the car, grabbed my keys from my purse, and revved up the engine. By now, I expected Tyrone to be by my side. But he was still standing in the doorway. With tears in his eyes that matched mine.

I put the car in reverse, but I didn't pull out until Tyrone did what he always did before I drove away. He pressed the tips of his fingers to his lips, then blew me a kiss.

I wanted to give him a smile, but the corners of my lips were permanently fixed downward. So I just nodded, backed out, and drove away.

I never liked Heather Nelson. I mean, she was only a teenager and probably okay as a person, I guess. I didn't really know her like that. Even though she and Marquis had been dating for a year, I spent as little time as I could with the two of them.

That was my way of protesting, of letting my son know that I didn't approve. But now, Lord Jesus, what I would do to get back those moments. To just have a little bit more time with Marquis, even if Heather was with him.

I was parked in front of the imposing two-story brick home, but I still hadn't turned off the ignition. Instead, I sat and listened to Marquis's voice in my head.

"Mama, there's someone I want you to meet."

By his tone, his excitement, I knew he wasn't talking about introducing me to some guy. As I stood at that stove preparing dinner, I couldn't help but smile. My little boy was growing up and that tickled me.

I had already made the promise to myself that I wasn't going to be one of those women who didn't like any girl her son brought home. No, I was going to be accepting so that Marquis would always know that he could come to me about anything.

But then he walked into the kitchen, and when I looked up from the pan of onions I'd been sautéing, I had to use Herculean strength to stiffen my face and hide my shock. Or maybe it wasn't shock, maybe it was horror that I felt.

"Mama, this is Heather. Heather, this is my mom, the best mother in the world."

I said hello, and nothing else to the blond, blue-eyed, thin-lipped, no-butt girl. After all, what else could I say in front of her since I only had one question for Marquis: What the hell?

Since those were the only words I could think of, I kept them to myself and just smiled. I didn't say another word until Heather left.

Then I went in. "Really, Marquis, a white girl?"

"Mama, I never knew you didn't like white people."

"I didn't say that. I'm saying that I don't like you dating a white girl."

"Why you gotta be prejudiced?"

"And why can't you like one of those pretty black girls in your school?"

"'Cause none of them are like Heather. None of them will do the things for me that she'll do."

I was too afraid to ask him what that meant.

Then Marquis went on to tell me, "Mama, I can't help my heart."

"Boy, you're sixteen. You don't have a heart yet."

He had laughed; I didn't, because there was nothing funny about facts. After that meeting, my only hope had been that my son would be like every other teenage boy and drop his new girl after two weeks.

But that had been a year ago, and even though I'd made a dozen attempts to set him up with a girl I approved of and could be proud of, Heather Nelson was still the love of his young life.

So my hope had switched to college. I prayed that when he enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania and when Heather was three hundred miles away at MIT (yes, I had looked up the distance between the two schools), their relationship would fizzle.

Those had been yesterday's worries.

Pushing myself out of the car, I looked up at the grand house that was like so many of the other houses in Haverford. I'd never been here, but from the moment I met Heather, I'd made it my business to know everything about her, including where she lived. Because I was *that* mother—involvement in every part of my son's life.

That mother. Now that my only child was dead, was I still a mother? Or was I a motherless child who was now a childless mother?

My heart contracted, forcing a moan through my lips, but I didn't let it stay there. I wouldn't be able to talk to Heather if I were sprawled out, bawling in the middle of the street.

So I sucked it up, then trudged up the long driveway until I stood in front of the door that looked like it had been made for a giant. I pressed the bell; the chime echoed through the door. Made me want to raise my hand and press the bell again just to hear the first few notes of the Mozart sonata, the piece that Marquis had played at his piano recital last year. But if I rang the

bell and heard it again, Heather and her family would open their door and find me on this step buckled over in grief. So I stood there and tried not to cry. And then the door opened.

I wasn't sure what I expected. It wasn't like I had the strength of mind to think this encounter all the way through. But I didn't expect to be looking into the eyes of Agnes Nelson.

Her eyes were bright blue, and matched the silk blouse that she wore along with her tan pants. But the look in them was not at all welcoming. Not that I expected the roll-out-of-any-color-of-carpet, but it wasn't like she didn't know me. We'd met at various programs at our children's school and we'd always been cordial, though we'd never shared a genuine smile.

Agnes Nelson didn't care for me, not that it was personal. I was just the mother of the black boy that her daughter was dating. So our disdain and the reason for it was mutual.

But even if our children had never met, Agnes and I would've never been friends. How could we be when we were from worlds that were so far apart we could've been living in different galaxies?

She'd been born and raised right here in Haverford, one the most affluent neighborhoods in Philadelphia. I was from the heart of Philly. Her allowance as a child probably rivaled what I earned now as an adult. And don't even start me on our politics. I'd read that she'd hosted a Mitt Romney fund-raiser at her home. Of course, I was on the other side.

"Mrs. Johnson," she said softly. She spoke to me through a sliver of a crack in her door. As if she didn't want me to see or even think about coming inside.

"Please call me Janice."

She nodded and then waited for me to say more.

She had to know why I was here, so I waited. But when she said no more, I continued: “Is Heather home?”

And then for the first time, I thought about time and space. What day was this? What time? Was this a school day? Had Heather already left for school?

Again Agnes nodded. “Heather’s home, but she’s resting,” she said, not opening the door even a few more inches.

“I need to talk to her—about last night.”

“I’m really sorry,” she said, finally acknowledging my sorrow, “but I don’t want her involved.”

I frowned. “But she was there. She has to tell me—”

“She already spoke to the police,” Agnes said. “They brought her home and they were here for hours. She didn’t get to bed until very, very late.”

“Please,” I said. “She was the last person”—I swallowed—“to see my son alive.”

If this woman had liked me, this would’ve been the moment when she opened her door and her heart and let me in.

But Agnes didn’t make any kind of move like that. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for Heather to talk to anyone,” she said. “The police—”

Then, from behind her, I heard, “Mom, let her in.”

Still, more than a couple of seconds passed before Agnes stepped away from the door. And in her place, there was Heather. She looked normal enough, in a white T-shirt and rolled-up-to-her-knees gray sweatpants. But her eyes told me part of the story. I could hardly see the blue

of her eyes for all the red that was there. She opened the door wider and the moment I moved beyond the threshold, she pulled me into her arms, holding me tight.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Johnson,” she sobbed into my shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

I closed my eyes and held on to her, feeling every tremble of her body. To this moment, I didn’t think anyone’s grief could match mine. Not even Tyrone’s. Because I was the mother.

But as I held Heather, I learned in her embrace that my sorrow was shared.

Finally pulling back, I asked Heather, “Can we talk?”

“Of course.”

She led me into the living room, which had three walls of glass and looked as if it could hold the entire first floor of Tyrone and my home. But I didn’t have time to marvel at the extravagance of a lifestyle that I had never known. Instead, I sat on the brocade sofa and reached for Heather’s hand when she sat beside me.

Tears were still rolling down her cheeks when she said, “I can’t believe this. I just can’t believe that he’s gone.”

“What happened?”

“Heather, maybe you shouldn’t . . .”

That quickly, I had forgotten about Agnes. Looking over my shoulder, I saw her standing there, under the arch that led to the living room, her arms folded like a gatekeeper.

“Mom, it’s okay.”

“But, your father and I . . . we don’t think you should get involved.”

“I *am* involved,” Heather said. And then, as if she were dismissing her mother, she turned back to me. “I don’t even know what happened,” she began as she shook her head. “Marquis and

I were sitting in the car, just talking. We weren't doing anything. And then the man came up and tapped on the window. He asked if I was okay. And even though I said I was, he kept asking us questions. And then Marquis told the man to mind his business and get away from his car.

“Then the man told Marquis to get out of the car and say that to his face. I tried to stop Marquis, but he jumped out anyway. And then it was like just two seconds later and . . .” She lowered her head and her tears dripped onto our entwined hands.

I waited a moment, knowing she needed time. But I had to know, so I encouraged her with my question again. “What happened?”

“I don't know,” she sobbed, looking up at me. “I was trying to see out of the back window of the Jeep, but it was dark and all I saw was the man. I didn't even see Marquis because he was on the side of the car. And then I heard the shot. I was too scared to move. I didn't know if the man was going to shoot me, too. So, I just crouched down on the floor and called 9-1-1.”

I squeezed her hand. “I'm really glad that you're okay.”

She nodded.

“So he just shot Marquis?”

“Yes. Marquis didn't even do anything,” she cried. “The man just shot him as he came around the car.”

I still held on to Heather's hand, but now it was because I thought I was going to pass out. Hearing the way someone had just shot my son in cold blood. He'd shot him . . . why? Did a gang member really just walk up to my son's car and shoot him? And in Haverford?

But then, right behind all of those questions, I had a thought. Because of the way Heather referred to who killed my son.

The man.

The man, she'd said over and over.

She never talked as if he were a peer. "So you didn't know *the man* at all?"

"No! I'd never seen him before."

I wanted to come right out and ask, but instead I phrased the question in the politically correct way. "What . . . what did *the man* look like?"

"Heather!" Her mother said her name as if she were giving her a command and marched right over to the sofa. She stood over us and took Heather's hand away from mine. To me, she said, "I hope you'll understand, Mrs. Johnson, but I think that's enough. This has been traumatic for Heather and I'm sorry about what happened to Marcus, but now I have to look out for my daughter."

"My son's name is Marquis," I said, hoping that my words didn't sound like the growl that I felt rise within me.

She gave me a dismissive nod and said no more.

I glanced at Heather, hoping that once again she would defy her mother. But even though I pleaded with my eyes, her lips were pressed together as if they'd been zipped and locked.

I wanted to sit there until I heard the answer to the most important question. But from the way Agnes stood, I knew she would not be moved—and she wouldn't let her daughter be moved either.

So I pushed myself up only because I had no choice, then turned away from the two women. Neither of them made any moves; I guess I had to find my own way out.

Then, right as I put my hand on the doorknob, Heather called out, "Mrs. Johnson."

I paused.

She took a few steps toward me. “The man who shot Marquis . . .” More steps brought her closer until her mother put her hand on her shoulder. But Heather slipped from her grasp and came to me. Looking straight into my eyes, she finished, “He was white.” She paused, then put her sentences together. “The man who shot Marquis was white.”

I took in her words, took in their meaning. I whispered, “Thank you,” then left their home.

But once I stepped outside, I couldn’t move. So I leaned against the door that had been made for a giant and let the reality settle inside of me.

My son had been shot by a white man. And the reason for his death was inside those words. My son was murdered simply because he was black.

I’d wanted to know why, I’d wanted to understand. Now I did.

And the blackened cloud that I’d been carrying since the police had come to my home last night weighed heavier and became darker, darker than midnight.