

Chapter 1

Keisha Jones

My mama was a whore.

Those words played in my mind as I stared at my mama's photo, then pressed the picture frame against my chest.

My mama was a whore and that was what killed her.

I held no judgment about how my mama lived. From the time I was a little girl, I knew Daisy Jones was a hustler, doing whatever she had to do to put a roof over us and food inside of us. So I could never judge a woman who took care of more than her business, she took care of her child.

Daisy Jones was more than my mother, she was my mama, and there is a difference. It was my mama that I loved, not the woman who serviced men at the truck stop right off of I-530.

And anyway, what else was she supposed to do, having been born in White Haven, Arkansas, before the millennium became new. Not that I had any issues with my hometown or with 1977, the year my mama was born. It was just a fact that if you were a black girl with only a middle school education, your choices were limited to cleaning somebody's house, frying somebody's fish, or going for that higher hourly position turning tricks.

My mama went for the dollars, and again, no judgment. Because if she hadn't worked hard for that money, I would never have been born.

Whatever she did, at least she worked until she couldn't. At least she kept a roof over my head until now.

Pulling the picture away, my fingers traced the outline of her jaw. If I closed my eyes again, I was sure I would be able to see her, feel her. Because she had just been here yesterday.

I swept my fingers over the glass frame as if I were combing her hair. Her beautiful hair, which was poofed into an Afro, silver, even though she was only forty.

I guess that was what a hard life did to you. Turned your outside old and your insides out before it was your time.

"Keisha?"

I faced the voice and the nurse standing in the doorway. She wore flowered scrubs again; today, they were blue. And she wore the same tight-lipped smile she'd been giving me all week. I gave that smile right back to her, even though I suspected hers was sincere. Mine was only proof that for everything Daisy had done wrong, she'd done her best to raise me right.

"You good?" Nurse Burns asked me.

Again, because I'd been raised right I didn't tell Nurse Burns she'd just asked the stupidest question in the history of stupid questions. How could I be good when my mom had died less than three hours ago? So instead of cussing her out, I turned back to my mama's bathrobe, which I'd just folded.

While the nurse stood not saying a word, I reached for Mama's comb and brush. Next, I went for the plastic case that held my mama's dentures, but the nurse said, "Don't take those."

I tilted my head a bit. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with the teeth for the bottom left side of her mouth. I didn't know if I wanted to keep them as some kind of memento that my mama had half a mouth of fake teeth—yeah, at forty.

The nurse walked over to the table and handed me Mama's toothbrush.

Really? She didn't want me to keep her teeth, but she was giving me her toothbrush?

She said, "The front desk has some papers for you."

I wondered what kind of papers were needed after you died?

Nurse Burns must've seen my question on my face because she explained, "You have to sign where you want them to take your mother."

Take her? "What?" I frowned.

"Which funeral home?" Her tone sounded like she thought I was slow. "I was thinking you wanted her over at Brown's, but you have to sign the papers and tell them that."

I paused. "If I take her to Brown's, won't I have to give them some money?"

She nodded and then she stared as if she were trying to figure me out. Well, it was my turn to explain some things to her. "I don't have any money."

"You don't have to use your own money. The insurance will take care of this."

For a second, I waited for her to laugh, and when she didn't, I did. "My mama didn't have no insurance. She didn't even have medical insurance."

"What about relatives? Or your church? Surely there are people who will help you bury your mother."

That only made me laugh harder. People who would help me? I guess since she didn't live in White Haven, she didn't know my life. "Look, I don't have no money, I don't have no insurance, I don't have no friends. So the people here, they're gonna have to bury her."

Her eyes widened. "No, Keisha, you don't want to do that. You want to give your mother a proper burial. And if you leave her here, and leave her to the state" – she lowered her eyes, shook her head – "you'll never know what happened to her."

"I know what happened to her." I paused. "She died." And then, I went right back to doing what I'd been doing before the nurse interrupted me with this foolishness. It wasn't that I didn't love my mama – I loved her lots. But there was nothing I could do for her now.

Looking at my mama's robe, I gathered the comb and brush, her dentures and toothbrush into the center. With the exception of a few things she'd left at home, this was all my mama had in the world.

"Oh, let me get you something to carry that out."

"Nah, I'll carry everything in this." I folded my mama's worldly possessions inside the robe, then pressed the bundle to my chest.

I nodded at the nurse, pursed my lips again into that tight smile, and walked past her.

She said nothing until I was at the door. "Keisha, wait."

Turning, I faced her and stared as she held up the book in her hand. "You forgot this."

I started to shake my head, but one of the things I'd learned about Nurse Burns over the weeks of my visits to this hospice was that she was one of those pushy broads who kept talking until someone made her shut her mouth. So instead of saying what I wanted to say, I decided I could show her better than I could tell her.

I tucked my mama's bathrobe bundle under my arm, then took quick steps to Nurse Burns. My eyes were on hers when I grabbed Mama's Bible and my eyes stayed locked with her when, I dumped the book into the trash next to where my mama had laid her head.

Nurse Burns gasped, and stumbled back and away from me, like she thought lightning might be about to strike.

I almost laughed, though I didn't because I pitied her more than I found her funny. So I said, "Bye," and turned away.

But when Nurse Burns called my name again, I whipped around. "What? I'm not taking the Bible."

She shook her head, she swallowed and pointed to the other picture that Mama had brought to the hospice with her. The picture that I always kept away from my glance.

“What . . . what . . . about . . . the picture?” She sounded as if she were afraid of me now. As if my blasphemy might be contagious and it was an illness she didn’t want to catch.

I was pissed, but I couldn’t take that out on Nurse Burns. How would she know that photo wasn’t really a photo, but a dagger that sliced my heart?

I shook my head, but then, Nurse Barnes got her groove back. Because even though I’d threatened her life by tossing that Bible into the trash, she still lifted the picture and held it toward me. She was doing that pushy thing again, and now, because she hadn’t left it alone, she was ’bout to get her feelings hurt – again.

That meant I had to walk across the room once more, though this time, I didn’t look at Nurse Burns. My glance was somewhere over her shoulder, looking out the window – my insurance that my eyes wouldn’t drop to the picture by accident.

I grabbed the frame, and with my gaze still somewhere on the horizon, I tossed the picture to the right.

My aim was great. The photo landed with a thump. Right on top of the Bible. Right in the trash, where they both belonged.

Again, Nurse Burns gasped, but this time there was more sadness than shock in her sound. And this time, when I walked to the door, I made my way all the way through because Nurse Burns didn’t have another word to say to me.

