

The beginning....

I never meant to fall in love with my best friend's husband.

I mean, who does that? Truly, that is the plot line for some dying soap opera or supermarket romance novel. This kind of thing never happens in real life. Women aren't that scandalous.

At least that's what I thought - until it happened to me.

It wasn't like I planned it, though I know that's no excuse. All I can say is that what happened to me was about situations and circumstances, it was the wrong man at the right time.

That's how it is sometimes, you know? Sometimes, Mars aligns with Venus, the stars set in the sky in a certain formation, the cow jumps over the moon, and bam! You're in the middle of your best friend's marriage.

I don't mean to sound like I'm making light of this whole situation. Because trust me, this was a sad state of affairs where people were hurt and hearts were broken. Even now, just remembering it all makes me sick, but not in the way you think. I'm sick with love. I have never loved a man the way I loved him.

I know that there are women - and men - who are ready to condemn me to death row, but the thing is, many of those who sit in judgment of me would've done the exact same thing, in the exact same way, if they'd been in the exact same place.

Victoria Christopher Murray
Never Say Never

But you know what? There really isn't any way to convince you; I need to show you, tell you every detail. Then, after you know how it went down, you can decide: would you or wouldn't you?

So, this is my story...well, not mine alone. This is the story of Emily Harrington - Taylor and Miriam Williams. And this is how it all began....

Victoria Christopher Murray
Never Say Never

Chapter 1
Miriam Williams

We were just three best friends doing what we always did. Three best friends having our monthly get together on the second Tuesday of the month -- lunch at Roscoe's Chicken 'N Waffles.

We'd been doing this for twelve years, since we'd graduated from UCLA. But today, we'd changed it up a bit. Today, instead of driving over to Hollywood and meeting at the Roscoe's on Gower, we decided to check out the new one closer to my home, the one on Manchester.

Maybe that was a sign. Maybe if we'd kept everything the same, the world wouldn't have changed. Maybe if we'd been in Hollywood, Michellelee wouldn't have gotten that call just as I was stuffing that first sugary bite of a waffle into my mouth.

We'd been talking and laughing - or rather Michellelee and Emily had been doing all the talking, and as usual, I was just laughing.

Then, Michellelee's BlackBerry vibrated on the table.

I had glanced at Emily and we rolled our eyes together. There was hardly a time when our celebrity friend wasn't called away from one of our lunches. That's just how it was for one of the most recognizable faces in Los Angeles. As the evening anchor for KABC, Michellelee, who had combined her first name Michelle with her last name Lee and was now known by just one name, had one of the top ten news jobs in the country, even though we were just a little more than a decade out of school.

"You know she's going to have to rush out of here," Emily had said to me.

I nodded, but then frowned when I looked back at Michellelee. Our friend wasn't talking; she was just listening, which was the first sign that something was wrong. My heart was pounding already. Today was Tuesday, September 11th and for the last ten years, on this date, I was always on edge.

"Okay, I'm on my way," she said. "I'll call from the car."

She clicked off the phone, and when she looked at me and Emily, I swore there were tears in her eyes.

"There's been a fire...."

Emily and I both sat up straight.

Michellelee said, "At that new charter school on Western."

"That would be Chauncey's firehouse," I breathed.

"Jamal's there today, too," Emily said, as if she needed to remind me that her husband worked with mine.

I hardly recognized Emily's voice, so different from the glee that was inside of her a few minutes ago.

Emily asked Michellelee, "What else did they tell you?"

Michellelee shook her head. "No names. But more than twenty children were taken to the hospital." Then her eyes moved between me and Emily. "And three firefighters were rushed to the hospital as well."

"Oh, no," I moaned and Emily took my hand.

"Don't go there," Michellelee said moving straight into her elder role. She was the oldest of the three of us, even if only by nineteen days. "This doesn't mean that any are your husbands. Let's not start worrying."

"I've got to get over there." Emily said what I was thinking.

Michellelee nodded. "We'll take one car, I'll drive." She scooted her chair away from the table and marched toward the hostess stand to pay the bill.

It took me and Emily a couple of seconds to follow, as if our brains were just a little behind. Finally, we jumped up, grabbed our purses and sweaters, leaving our half-eaten dishes right there on the table.

Now sitting in the back seat of Michellelee's Mercedes, I could feel every bump on Manchester as we sped down the boulevard. My eyes were closed, but I didn't need to see Michellelee. I could imagine her -- her camera-ready, perfectly plucked and arched eyebrows were probably knitted together causing deep lines in her forehead.

Then, there was Emily. I couldn't picture her expression, though I'm sure it was a lot like mine, a face frozen with fear. Every few seconds, I heard Emily sigh right before she said, "I can't reach Jamal." I stopped counting after she said that for the fifth time.

I wasn't even going to try to call my husband. It would be futile, especially if they were in the midst of a fire. Cell phones never left the firehouse.

But even when Chauncey was at work I didn't call. I never called because if I ever started, I'd never stop. I'd call every fifteen minutes for my own peace. So, he called me. Like he'd just done a little over an hour ago, as I was pulling into Roscoe's parking lot to have lunch with my girls. He'd called just to tell me that he loved me.

It sounded like command-central in the front of the car with Emily and Michellelee doing what they did best: taking control. So, I did what I knew, I took my cares to God. I prayed like my life depended on it. Because, it did. There was no way I'd survive if anything happened to Chauncey.

I didn't pray for my husband alone, I prayed for Jamal, too, because if anything happened to him, my heart would still be broken. Jamal was Chauncey's best friend, but he was dear to me, also. I'd known him for almost as long as I'd known Chauncey; I couldn't imagine our lives - - and definitely not Emily's life -- without him.

So, I kept my eyes closed and my lips moving like I'd done so often over the years. My husband was living the firefighter's life that he'd dreamed of as a child, but his dreams were my nightmares. The way he earned his living had me on my knees every time he walked out the door. The daily stress was so much that I'd once asked myself if I should've married him. I had started thinking that maybe it would've been better if I never fully loved him, than to love him with everything I had...and lose him one day.

But my bone-deep love for Chauncey trumped my fears and really, I'm glad about it. Because truly, it would've been impossible to walk away from that man and it would've been a travesty to miss out on all these years of love.

For a moment, I let those years flash like cards through my mind. From the time I first saw Chauncey when he was a counselor in my Upward Bound program, to the birth of each of our three sons, to when he kissed me goodbye this morning and every second in between.

The memories made me tremble. The memories made me pray.

But then in an instant, something washed over me. A calm that was so complete. It was almost as if Chauncey was there, wrapping his arms around me. I reveled in that space, knowing for sure that my prayers had been answered. After some seconds ticked by, I breathed. It was clear: Chauncey was fine.

But my heart still pounded, now for Jamal. I didn't have that same peace about my best friend's husband and that made me sick.

I shook my head. Why was I allowing all of this into my mind? There were fifteen firefighters on duty at any one time. Plus, for a fire like this, other stations would be called in. The firefighters who were hurt didn't even have to be from Fire Station 32.

So, I turned my focus back to God. I went back into prayer, crying out in my soul. I started praying for Jamal especially, but also for everyone who'd been at that school.

It felt like I'd only been praying for a minute when the car slowed down and I opened my eyes.

"Okay." Michellelee eased to a stop in front of Centinela Hospital. "I'm gonna park, but you two get in there."

I wasn't sure Emily had heard a word that Michellelee said because she was out and just about through the front door of the hospital before the car was in park. I jumped out and rushed behind Emily, though it was impossible for me to keep up with my friend's long strides. I'd expected her longer-than-shoulder-length hair to be flying behind her Sara-Jessica-Parker-Sex-in-the-City style. But she'd twisted her curly hair into a bun and I hadn't even noticed when she'd done that.

"We're here about the fire at the school," Emily said to the woman at the Information Desk. "Has the room been set up?"

Emily spoke as someone who'd been through this kind of tragedy. Of course, she had. As a Child Life psychologist, she was always in schools, and hospitals, and community centers helping children navigate through adversity.

Even with her slight Southern drawl, her words and her tone were professional, but I could hear the tremor in her voice. The woman didn't notice it; she wouldn't, it was so slight. But I heard the shaking, sure that I would sound worse, if I'd been able to speak.

"Are you one of the family members?" the woman asked.

Emily said, "I'm a child psychologist," as if those words alone were enough to give her a pass.

She was right. The woman nodded and pointed toward the elevators. "On the second floor," she peered at us with sad eyes, "room two-eleven."

As we marched toward the elevator banks, Emily explained, "Whenever something like this happens, the hospitals set up a room." She pressed the elevator button over and over as if that would make it come faster. "It gives the hospital administrators a central place." When the doors opened, we rushed inside and Emily continued, "Now, when we get up there, we'll probably see some of the parents of the children and maybe even family members of the firemen."

I nodded and breathed, relieved. It sounded as if Emily didn't think Jamal nor Chauncey were one of the injured. Maybe God had told her what He'd told me. Maybe both of our husbands were fine. And if that was the case, then I didn't need to be here; I wanted to go home.

But I didn't say that to Emily as we rode in the elevator, and then, once again, I was running behind her, taking four steps to her two as we strode down the hall. By the time we found the room, I was huffing and puffing.

She pushed the door open and I heard the collective intake of air. Every man, every woman held their breath as the door opened wider. All eyes were on Emily as if they expected her to say something.

It was the way she looked; on the one hand, with her long blonde hair and sea-blue eyes, Emily was the walking definition of what America called beautiful. But her manner and

authority were beyond that. She stood, back straight, shoulders squared, eyes wide-open and direct. She carried herself as if she knew everything.

Emily held up her hand in a little wave, letting everyone know that she was just one of them.

I wasn't sure if anyone in the room noticed me, but that was the way it always was when I was with Emily and Michellelee. At five-two, I was at least seven inches shorter than both of them. By nature, I just didn't stand out.

Not that I wanted to stand out today, especially not in this small room, with about two dozen blue chairs pressed against the stark, hospital- white walls. There were two more rows of chairs in the center.

My eyes searched for a familiar face; I expected to see at least one of the many firemen's wives that I'd met over the years. But through the sea of black and white and hispanic faces, I saw no one that I knew.

"Has anyone been in here to talk to you?" Emily whispered to an African American couple who sat by the door, holding hands.

The man glanced up and nodded. "Just to tell us they were getting the identities of the children who'd been hurt and then the ones who...." He stopped right there, and shook his head.

"None of us know anything."

I got that feeling again; I wanted to go home. I wanted to wait for Chauncey there. Tonight, he'd fill me in. It would be late when he got home, but I would wait up and then he'd tell me all that had happened. We'd grieve together. At home. Together. Away from all of this. Together.

"Emily, I'm going to go...." But before she could even turn to face me, the door swung open and now we were just like everyone else. We inhaled and focused on the three men who entered, all wearing hospital scrubs.

"We're looking for the parents of Claudia Baldwin, Kim Thomas...."

Each time a name was called, someone leapt from their seat and the air thickened with grief.

The family members were escorted out, but before the one who had been calling names could turn away, the man sitting by the door jumped up. "What about our daughter? LaTrisha Miller?"

"We'll be back in a few minutes," the doctor said in a voice that I was sure was meant to be compassionate, but sounded curt, sounded tired. "We'll let everyone know as soon as we can."

That was not enough for Emily. She marched behind the doctor into the hallway, and I was right with her. Stopping him, she said, "Excuse me; I'm Doctor Harrington-Taylor and I'm here to check on my husband. He's a firefighter and I don't know if he's here for sure, but I think he was at the school."

"Oh," the doctor said, looking from Emily to me. "Were you called?"

And then, there was a wail. A screech really, that was so sharp, it sliced my heart.

All three of us turned our eyes toward the sound that came from behind a closed door marked "Quiet Room."

It took a few seconds for Emily to compose herself and get back to her business. "No, we weren't called," she said. "We heard...about the fire." She paused and turned to me before she

added, "Our husbands were probably at the school. My husband is Jamal Taylor and hers is Chauncey Williams."

The doctor repeated their names and nodded. "I'll see what I can find out, Doctor Harrington," and then he rushed away.

That's exactly what I wanted to do, rush away and go home. My eyes were on the door of the Quiet Room as I said, "Listen, Emily. I'm going to...."

"Emily! Miriam!"

We both turned as Michellelee hurried toward us. "I went to the school, but Cynthia was already set up," she said, referring to another reporter from her station. "So, I told them that I would see what was happening over here." She looked at Emily and then me. "Have you heard anything?"

Only Emily responded, "Nothing yet. What did you find out?"

It was the way that Michellelee lowered her eyes and shook her head that made me want to cover my ears.

"All I know is that there were a lot of casualties."

I did everything I could to keep my eyes away from Emily. I didn't want her to see what I was thinking; I was so afraid for her husband.

"Okay," Emily said, her drawl more pronounced, showing me just how scared she really was. "That's horrible, but it doesn't mean that it's Jamal or Chauncey." She nodded as if that motion was helping her to stay composed.

I knew that I needed to stay right here, at the hospital with Emily. But more than needing to be here, I needed to go home. I had to get myself together so that I could be strong for Emily

if it came to her needing me. I wouldn't be able to be strong if I stayed here in front of this Quiet Room.

"Listen," the word squeaked out of me, "I'm going to...."

"Emily!"

The three of us swung around, at first, standing there in shock. Jamal ran toward us, but we were still frozen, at least Michellelee and I were.

Emily shrieked and then made a mad-dash for Jamal, although that's not really how it felt to me. This was playing out like one of those Hallmark commercials where the lovers raced toward each other in slow motion.

I watched my best friend wrap her arms around her husband before Jamal swept her from the floor and into his arms.

"Oh, my God," Emily said. "Thank God."

Finally, I found my legs and rushed over to Jamal. "I'm so glad you're all right," I said.

It must've been the sound of my voice that made him open his eyes. Slowly. Emily slid down his body and Jamal faced me. The tears in his eyes made me frown.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Were you hurt?"

"Are one of you Mrs. Williams?" someone asked over my shoulder. "The wife of Chauncey Williams."

But before I had a chance to turn around, Jamal whispered my name. "Miriam."

It was the way he said it that stopped me cold. "What?"

"Miriam," he said again, this time shaking his head, this time releasing a single tear from the corner of his eye.

My heart started pounding before my brain connected to what was happening.

"Mrs. Williams."

This time, I turned to face the voice. "Yes," I whispered.

"I'm Doctor Adams. Would you mind coming with me, please?"

"Where?" It was hard for me to speak through lips that were suddenly too dry.

"Over here." The doctor pointed across the hall. To the Quiet Room.

I shook my head. "I'm not going in there." Turning back to Jamal, I said, "Please.

Please. Where's Chauncey?"

His eyes drooped with sadness as he shook his head again.

"Is Chauncey back at the fire station?" I cried.

"Mrs. Williams."

The doctor called my name at the same time as Jamal said, "Miriam. I am so, so sorry."

I felt Michellelee's arm go around me. I heard Emily's sob as she took my hand.

But it wasn't until the doctor began, "Mrs. Williams, I'm sorry to have to tell you this but..." that I understood.

"No!" I heard a scream so sharp that I knew it couldn't have come from me, even though it rang in my ears. "No," I released my pain again.

Jamal stepped to me. "Miriam, I'm so sorry. But Chauncey...he died."

That was when my world ended. Because just like I said, if Chauncey was gone, then, I'd have to go, too. So right there, I let it go. My whole world stopped. I just let it all fade to black.

Chapter 2
Emily Harrington-Taylor

The bedroom was almost midnight dark, even though the sun still shone outside. But, I'd closed the mini-blinds and drawn the drapes, wanting to give Miriam complete rest since I wasn't sure when she'd sleep again. I was pretty sure the only reason she was sleeping now was because of total shock. My hope was that she wouldn't wake up for days so that she wouldn't have to face this.

I shifted in the worn oversized chair, keeping my eyes on my best friend. Well, I couldn't exactly see her, at least not well. But my eyes had adjusted to the darkness and I could make out her form on the bed. For just a moment, I closed my eyes, trying again to pray, but the burning behind my lids from unshed tears made me open them quickly.

Still, I whispered, "Thank you, God," and like before, guilt struck me like lightning.

How could I thank God for saving Jamal when Chauncey was gone?

I moaned, then covered my lips. But then, I realized that the sound hadn't come from me. Another moan; I jumped up and in three strides I was standing at the edge of the bed.

"Miriam," I whispered her name just in case she was still asleep.

Slowly she rolled over and I turned on the nightstand lamp. As I sat on the edge of the bed, I could see the confusion in Miriam's reddened eyes.

"Em?" Then, she glanced over her shoulder. "Where's Chauncey?"

At first I paused, not quite sure of what to say. But before I had to figure it out, I saw the memory of the tragedy flood Miriam's eyes and her tears flowed right away.

"Oh, God!" she sobbed. "I was hoping this had just been a nightmare."

"I know," was the only thing I could think to say.

"Em, how am I supposed to do this? To live without Chauncey? What are the boys and I going to do?"

Too many questions, and no answers. So, I did the only thing I could. I pulled Miriam into my arms and held her as she cried. And, I cried with her.

The door to her bedroom opened and over Miriam's shoulder, I saw Michellelee tiptoeing in. But once she saw me holding Miriam, she rushed over, jumped onto to the bed and wrapped her arms around both of us.

Michellelee and I were a human ball of protection around Miriam, a wall of Ralph Lauren pants and St. John's skirts, but even though we held her as tightly as we could, it wasn't enough. I knew it wasn't enough because it wouldn't have been enough for me. Nothing would be enough if I were to ever lose Jamal.

After a while, Miriam inhaled a deep breath and Michellelee and I pulled back. But not too much because if she started crying again, I wanted to be right there.

"This doesn't even feel real," Miriam said.

"I know." Michellelee reached for Miriam's hand. "It doesn't feel real to me either."

I took Miriam's other hand, but said nothing. Not that I had to; we were all so close that most of the time, no words were needed.

"Oh, God!" Miriam said suddenly and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"What's wrong?" Michellelee and I spoke at the same time.

"I've got to get the boys."

"Jamal went to get them, remember?" I said.

Her brows bunched together, and then, she nodded. "I guess I forgot. I'm a bit confused."

If it had been me, I would've been a lot more than confused. I ran my hand over Miriam's hair that had been smoothed back into a bun, exposing the patch of white hair along the left side of her forehead.

"What am I going to tell them?" Miriam whispered and her tone let me know that new tears weren't far away.

"Don't worry," I said. "We're going to help you. Jamal and I."

"And me," Michellelee piped in.

Miriam nodded. "Okay." She paused. "But, I still don't know what we're going to say. Especially to Junior. He was Chauncey's shadow, you know." She sobbed. "He wanted to grow up to be just like his dad."

I leaned forward to let Miriam fall against me once again.

Michellelee said, "Miriam, please don't cry," even though tears were streaking down her cheeks. "We're here. Remember, we're the Red, White, and Blue," she added, referring to the name some guy had given us at a frat party our sophomore year. The guy was drunk and the name had stuck.

Miriam sniffed and looked from me to Michellelee. "We've been through a lot together."

"We have," I said.

Miriam said, "I've known you guys half my life. And you've always been there for me."

"Just like you've always been there for us," I said.

"Well...not always." Miriam looked down and away from me.

"That was a long time ago, "I said, knowing exactly what Miriam was talking about. The thing that almost made me quit our friendship. When she had lost her mind when I told her that I was interested in Jamal.

But even though we'd come close to turning from friends to enemies, we'd worked through it, exactly the way women who were meant to be best friends for life were supposed to.

"Yeah, and we've had a lot more ups than downs," Michellelee said, wanting to shift the conversation away from bad memories.

"Yes," I said. "We graduated together."

"And started our careers together," Michellelee added.

"Or in my case," Miriam said, "started my family." She shook her head. "You guys were always there."

"That's what sisters are for," Michellelee and I said together.

After a moment of silence, I said, "We've done everything together, so we're not going to leave you now, Miriam. You can count on us."

There was a quick knock on the door and Jamal stepped in. I breathed deeply, with relief, wondering if I would do that every time I saw my husband. Though I was always knew Jamal's job put him in daily danger, that was never my concern. I'd decided long ago that there were only two things I could do about my husband's job: I could worry, or I could pray. I wasn't going to waste my time doing both. So I'd chosen prayer, believing that God involved was far better for my soul and my sanity. Once that decision was made, every day I would send up a prayer of protection when Jamal left home and then gave a prayer of thanksgiving when he returned twenty-four hours later.

But now, seeing Jamal, and experiencing that deep feeling of relief, made me wonder if my heart had changed? Would I now be filled with fear?

"Hey," Jamal said, looking at me with a slight smile, like he was glad to see me, too. He hugged me, though our embrace lasted for only a second. Then, he squeezed Michellelee's hand before he knelt in front of Miriam. "The boys are here," he said softly.

Miriam asked, "Did you tell them?"

There was a bit of hope in Miriam's voice. As if she hoped Jamal had already delivered the news.

"No." He shook his head. "I thought you'd want to do that." Then, he rephrased his words. "I thought you should be the one...to tell them."

Miriam nodded. "But...I don't know how...."

Before she could finish, Jamal took her hands into his. "We're here, we'll tell them together."

"You'll stay?"

The hope, the doubt, the fear, the pain that was all wrapped together in those two words broke my heart into a million little pieces.

"Of course," Jamal said, then he glanced over his shoulder at me and I nodded.

"Thank you," she said. "I couldn't do this by myself."

"Don't worry," Jamal said. "It'll be...." He stopped short of saying it would be fine, then added, "We're all here for you." Jamal rose to his feet. "I'm going to get back out there. The boys think I picked them up because their dad had to work an extra shift."

"Okay. I need a minute to make sure that I don't bust out crying the moment I see them."

"Take your time." Jamal moved toward the door.

"I'm going with you," Michellelee said. "I'll see if the boys want a snack or something."

"That's a good idea," Miriam said. "Thanks."

"Right after that, though, I have to leave. I have to get to the studio." Her apology was inside her tone. "Is that okay?"

"Of course," Miriam said. "You have to go to work. Life goes on...right?"

Michellelee hugged her.

"Are you going to be reporting on the fire?" Miriam asked.

She nodded. "It's the lead story. But I'll come right back here after I get off."

Michellelee rubbed Miriam's back for an extra moment, then hugged me before she followed Jamal out of the bedroom.

I waited until the door was closed before I told Miriam, "You can do this. And, it's okay if you cry."

"I have to be strong for the boys. They're going to be devastated."

"I know. But like Jamal said, he and I and Michellelee will be here for you and the boys. And you know, our pastor will be here and Chauncey's family, and so many other people who love you and the boys."

Miriam's brown eyes were glassy, but even behind her tears, I saw her relief. As if she was just beginning to understand that she was not alone. "Okay. I can do this."

I reached for her hand and helped her stand. She swayed just a bit, as if she wasn't standing on solid ground. I tightened my grasp. "I got you," I whispered.

"Thank you." Then after taking just two steps, she turned and hugged me wrapping her arms around my waist since I was so much taller than she was. "I love you, Em," she said.

Okay, that was it. I wasn't going to make it. All I wanted to do was sit right here in the middle of the bedroom and bawl like a baby. But I blinked rapidly, to keep back my tears, and hold back my grief. "I love you too, Miriam. Jamal and I love you and the boys. And we're here with you. Forever."

"Forever," she whispered as she stepped away from our embrace.

"Forever," I repeated and then added, "No matter what."

When the edges of Miriam's lips twitched into the smallest of smiles, I told her, "I promise." Then, I took her hand and led her out of the bedroom.

Chapter 3
Miriam

When people looked at Emily, Michellelee and me, no one ever said that I was the prettiest, that was a toss-up between Emily and Michellelee. Or that I was the smartest, another toss-up that probably didn't include me. I'm not putting myself down, I'm just being honest. I know my weaknesses, but I also know my strengths. And one of my strengths, one thing that I could do better than Emily and Michellelee: I could act my butt off.

I'd been part of the *Black Thespians* at USC and always received resounding ovations at the end of my performances. Whether I was Lady MacBeth during our summer Shakespeare festivals or Dorothy in our own rendition of *The Wiz*, I was respected by the audiences and my peers.

So many told me that I should take my dreams and my skills to Hollywood, though I never took them seriously. I mean, yeah, I was talented enough, but Hollywood had little to do with talent. It was all about how you looked. Not only am I African American, I am a short, stocky black girl, who is a realist. There was no place for me in that superficial industry and I wasn't about to go on auditions and get my feelings hurt.

But today, at this moment, I was using every bit of the talent I had as I faced my sons.

"Mom, where were you?" my youngest son, Stevie, said as I stepped into the kitchen.

"Uncle Jamal told you she was taking a nap," Mikey, my middle child answered before I could say a word.

Stevie glared at his brother before he turned to me. "You were sleeping in the middle of the day?"

"That's what a nap is, dummy!"

I was just about to scold Mikey, but Jamal jumped in.

"Hey Mikey, you're the big bro, remember? Remember what I told you? You don't want to talk to your brother like that."

Mikey poked out his bottom lip and even though he sat at the table all the way across the room, I could see his long lashes as he lowered his eyes. The kind of eyelashes that women paid for. Eyelashes just like his father's.

A sob rose up in me, but I held it back as I took in all of my sons. My two youngest boys, sat at the kitchen table with their school books and an opened package of graham crackers in front of them, while Junior (who hadn't looked up yet) sat at one of the bar stools at the counter.

The scene unfolded like just another ordinary end-of-school day. This was what it would look like when Chauncey would pick up the boys and then sit with them as they did their homework.

It wasn't until I saw Jamal staring at me that I realized that my bottom lip was trembling. I sucked it in between my teeth, but I couldn't stop the rest of my body from shaking.

"Uh, boys," Jamal said, though his eyes stayed on me. "Can you come with me and your mom in the living room?"

I hadn't even thought about where I was going to tell them this news. The living room was definitely better than the kitchen.

"Can I finish my homework?" Stevie asked. "'Cause last year, I got all A's and Mikey didn't."

"That's 'cause you were only in the second grade. Everybody gets A's in the second grade!"

"Boys!" I said, then reached out my hand toward them. "We'll get to your homework in a little bit. Come on; I want to talk to you."

My three sons stood and marched toward me. The youngest, Stevie to the oldest, Junior, looking almost like triplets. I had been pregnant for three years in a row, as if once Chauncey and I started having children, we just couldn't stop. And it had been fine with me. Junior had been born in March, 2002, Mikey, the following March and finally, Stevie, the March after that. I would've kept going; it was Chauncey who thought three was enough. Now, I wished that I'd had ten more of his children.

It wasn't until I turned around and bumped into Emily, that I remembered that she was here.

She hugged Stevie, then Mikey as they came out of the kitchen, but when Junior walked out, he stopped and took a long look at Emily, then Jamal, then me.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "I can tell something happened."

To be honest, I was kinda surprised it took Junior this long to figure it out. My ten-year-old was super-sensitive, so intuitive - just like his father.

I only had a second to decide the best response. "Yes," I said, "something did happen." In that instant, I imagined Chauncey kissing me this morning as he walked through the front door and I had to take a breath to keep the shaking out of my voice.

"Is it dad?" Junior asked.

I looked down and away and moved toward the sofa. I didn't want to say anything until the three of them were sitting down. "Come in here, Junior," I said in my no-nonsense tone.

He did as I asked, and just seconds later, we were all in place. I don't know how the seating got arranged: I was on the couch, next to Jamal and Stevie was next to me. Mikey and Junior sat right across from us on the love seat. And Emily stood behind them.

"Mom," Junior said. This time, he was the one with the no-nonsense tone. "What's going on?"

There was no need to prolong this. "You're right, Junior. It's your dad."

I watched my son swallow hard and the tears shot instantly to my eyes. "There was a fire today."

"Did Dad get hurt?" Junior asked before I could get out any more.

I nodded.

"Did he die?"

I lowered my head and sobbed.

Jamal answered for me. "Yes, Junior." Then, he looked at Mikey and Stevie. "I am so sorry. But, your father died in the fire today."

"Daddy died?" Mikey cried and Stevie joined him.

I held my youngest in my arms and motioned for Mikey and Junior to join me. Only Mikey leapt over to me.

"Why did Daddy have to die, Mommy?" Stevie asked, as he cried.

"I don't know, baby."

As I held my two sons, I stared at my oldest still sitting across from me, not moving, not crying. It didn't even seem like he was breathing.

Jamal said. "Are you all right, Junior?"

My son asked, "Did you go to the fire, too, Uncle Jamal?"

"Yes."

"Were you there when Daddy died?"

Jamal nodded. "I wasn't in the exact room. Your dad went in to try to save some of the kids who were trapped in the back of the building. He got them out, but he didn't make it. I was in another part of the school, but when they told me your dad was in there, I tried to go back in to help him."

"But you couldn't save him?"

"No," Jamal said, and as I held my sons, I could hear Jamal's emotions. "I wanted to, but it was too late. Your dad is a hero, Junior. He didn't want to leave you, but he had to help those kids, you know."

I watched as my son let seconds go by, then move his head up and down. His eyes were filled with water when he stood, and took small steps toward me and his brothers. Still holding my two sons as best as I could, I reached for my eldest. Junior knelt down, laid his head in my lap and finally sobbed.

I felt Jamal's arms around me and my sons. Across the room, tears streamed down Emily's face. She took a step toward us, then stopped, and backed away as if she didn't want to intrude. I closed my eyes and cried some more and settled into the little bit of comfort that I felt being this close to my three sons.

Jamal and Emily had stayed so long, that I almost invited them to spend the night. But they'd left and now, it was just me and my sons, the way it would be from now on.

I stared at my children lying every which way in my bed. Thank God it was a king-size or else I wouldn't fit in. I tried to remember the last time any of my boys had slept with me - children in our bed was against Chauncey's religion.

"The marital bed is for the folks who are married."

He'd always laugh when he said it, but my husband meant it.

I agreed with him, I always did. But tonight, I wanted my sons with me and I had a feeling that tonight, Chauncey would approve.

Slipping under the covers, I reached toward the lamp, then pulled my hand back and rested my head on my pillow. I wasn't afraid of the dark, it was just that I felt closer to Chauncey in the light. But when I closed my eyes, I saw nothing but darkness anyway.

The tears were coming, I could feel them. But then, a peace, a calm, and a memory....

July 2, 1993

I was deep into this book. Everybody had been talking about this novel, and I'd finally gotten my hands on a copy from the library. I'd just started, but I couldn't believe how Bernadine's husband had left her...for a white woman! I read a page, then turned. Read a page, then turned, never looking up. Reading was what I loved to do. Inside the pages of a novel, I didn't have to think about my life.

But then, I was interrupted, and I wasn't happy about it.

"Hey!"

It took me a moment to force my eyes away from Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, and Gloria. When I looked up, I was staring into the light brown eyes of a guy who'd I'd never seen before.

"Didn't you hear us calling you?" he asked.

"I didn't hear anyone calling me," I said, wanting this guy to leave me alone so that I could get back to *Waiting to Exhale*.

"Well, I've been calling you," he said, like he couldn't believe that I hadn't heard him.

"And what did you call me? Hey?" I asked trying not to twist my neck since I was really trying to act more sophisticated like Sandra and Denise on *The Cosby Show*. They never twisted their necks, not even when they got angry.

I wanted to be like them, but it was hard 'cause when I didn't like what someone was saying, my neck got to rolling. And right now, I could feel a roll comin' on.

I continued, "I don't answer to, 'Hey!'"

The boy's grin was wide, though I had no idea why he was smiling at me. I wasn't hardly smiling at him.

"Okay," he said, nodding. "You got me. So your name's not hey." He put one leg up on the picnic table bench and then leaned against it like he was cool or something. "Why don't you tell me your name so the next time I call you, I'll call you in a proper kind of way."

"Why would I tell you my name? Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Chauncey. Chauncey Williams. I'm one of the new counselors here at the camp this year."

"A counselor?" I asked, kinda surprised. He looked like he was my age. "How are you a counselor?"

"Well, I've been a part of Upward Bound program for a couple of years, and this summer, they said I could work here."

"They let *you* be a counselor *here*?"

"Why you gotta say it like that?" He laughed. "But to answer your question, yes, ma'am."

I frowned. "Why you calling me ma'am?"

"I'm just being polite."

"You don't have to be polite to a teenager."

"Yeah, I do. Everyone should be polite to everyone else. That's the way my mama raised me."

As soon as he said that, I looked away. Whenever someone told me about their mother, I got this little pinch in my stomach that made me sad all over.

He said, "So, now that I've told you my name," I looked back up at the boy, "and I've told you why I'm here, are you going to tell me your name so that we can be friends?"

I was sure there was a lot of doubt in my eyes. I didn't have friends and I wasn't interested in making friends. To me, friendship and trust went together and I didn't trust anyone. How could I? I could never trust my parents, not that I ever knew them. But how could I trust anyone who could just give away a baby and then never come to see if she was okay?

How could I trust anyone after I had lived with dozens of families who'd taken me into their homes, but never into their hearts.

And finally, I certainly couldn't have any trust in my heart after Mr. Barnes, my guidance counselor, who was the first person who ever believed in me. He told me I was smart and that I was going to be somebody someday. He was the first person I ever thought of a friend. But now, he was in jail for the things he'd done to me and some of the other girls last year when I was in ninth grade.

So having friends and trusting people didn't work for me. Being by myself was the safest way.

"So, are you going to tell me your name?" Chauncey asked again.

"Miriam," I said.

"Miriam. That's a pretty name for a pretty girl."

I had to blink. Several times. Pretty? No one had ever said there was anything pretty about me. Not my name which wasn't pretty like the other girls in my school: Monique, Nicole, and Sheree. Now, those were some pretty names.

And as far as *me* being pretty, this guy had to be kidding. No one ever thought the chunky girl with the white streak in her hair was pretty. Kids used to bully me all the time, calling me "Skunk." So, what was this guy's game?

"Well, Miriam." He said my name and then paused. "You need to go on into the clubhouse. They're serving lunch."

"I'm not hungry."

"You gotta eat."

"Maybe you didn't hear me," I said rolling my neck, "I'm not hungry."

"Awww, come on, what're you trying to do? Get me fired on my first day?"

It didn't look like this boy was ever going to leave me alone. With a sigh, I slammed the book shut, swung my legs over the bench, then stomped across the grass toward the clubhouse.

But as I marched away, Chauncey called out, "I hope we get to see each other again, Ms. Miriam."

I didn't turn around and for some reason, that made him laugh.

"Oh, you gonna play hard to get, huh?"

Victoria Christopher Murray
Never Say Never

Hard to get? I just kept on walking.

"Well," he was yelling now 'cause I was kinda far away from him, "I'm gonna be here all summer. And, I promise you that by the end, you and me, we're gonna be friends."

Still, I didn't look back, but for some reason, that last thing he said, made me smile.

Something I hadn't done in a long, long time....

Chauncey had made me smile on that day and so many days after that. No matter what was going on in our lives, he could bring me joy. With a hug, or a kiss, phone call, or an email, every part of me was happy, always.

And now, as I laid here in our bed, I knew for sure that there was no way I'd ever smile again.

That thought and knowing that my Chauncey was gone...made me cry all over again.

Chapter 4
Emily

I couldn't tell you who started it. I don't know if it was me, or Jamal. All I know is that right after I eased my car next to his in the underground parking garage of our building and jumped out, I was in his arms and our lips were locked.

How we made it across the garage, to the elevator, and then up to our condo, I would never know. All I know is that our lips never parted. We were like teenagers, kissing with abandonment, not caring where we were or who saw us. Not that I expected to be seen. It was after two in the morning. We didn't leave Miriam and the children until all the boys were asleep. Junior had tried to fight it, but finally, even he gave into the emotional exhaustion that came from hours of tears. When we left, only Miriam was awake and really, I didn't want to leave her. I wanted to stay all night, but she wouldn't let me.

"Go home with your husband," she'd whispered when Jamal had gone into the kitchen to make sure that all the pizza we'd ordered, but had not eaten, had been put away. "He's hurting, too," Miriam told me. "He knew Chauncey way longer than I did and today, Jamal lost his brother. He needs to go home to cry and you need to be with him."

I valued the opinion of my best friend, especially when it came to marriage. Miriam was an Olympic-Gold-Medal wife, as far as I was concerned. Not once in all the years that I'd known them, had I not seen a smile on Chauncey's face.

"You're right," I said to her.

But tears seemed to be far from my husband's mind. The moment we stepped into our condo, our clothes took off on a trajectory of all their own. By the time we hit the bedroom door,

Victoria Christopher Murray
Never Say Never

we were naked. By the time we hit the sheets, we were connected. And by the time the clock had ticked off five minutes, we'd gone to heaven and returned.

Then, we did it again, slower this time. Tenderly, gently, though I could feel Jamal's pain in every kiss, in every caress. I could hear his pain in every moan and every call of my name. His heart was crying as tears fell from my eyes.

Now, we laid still. Jamal was on his back with my head resting on his chest. I waited until I heard the smooth, solid rhythm of his sleep-breathing and then, I slowly lifted my head. He shifted, then settled down and I positioned my elbow so that I could rest my chin on my hand and just stare at my husband.

Only the moon that was slowly bowing to morning illuminated our bedroom, but it was enough to see Jamal. And the beautiful black of his skin. I held my arm out and now Jamal looked even richer against the paleness of my Caucasian genes.

This was one of the many things that I loved about me and Jamal. We were total opposites who fit perfectly together. I knew that from the moment I saw him, though it took us years to get to the same point....

January 26, 1998

I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Monica Lewinsky....

"Oh, my God, he's lying," I shouted at the TV as I scooted to the edge of the couch.

"So what?" Michellelee said. "I knew what he was when I voted for him."

I stared down at my roommate, stretched out on the floor with a bunch of magazines in front of her. Michellelee had been my suite mate for a year and a half now, along with Miriam, and in that short time, the three of us, each only children, had grown to be as close as sisters.

But, not once had we ever talked about who she -- the only one of us who'd had her birthday in time to register -- had voted for.

"You actually voted for Bill Clinton?" I drawled. I had been trying to keep the twang out of my voice now that I was in LA. But I couldn't help it. When I got upset the inner-Mississippi came out of me.

Michellelee sat up and crossed her legs, yoga-style. "Uh...yeah. Who else was I going to vote for? Bob Dole?"

"Of course. He was going to reduce taxes, and reduce government. The federal government is getting too big."

"That's what all you Republicans say. The government is your enemy, until you need a friend."

That was a smart retort, a line I'd never heard before, but I still had to stand up for the man my daddy had campaigned for. "Did you know Bob Dole has two Purple Hearts?"

Michellelee glanced up with a look that told me she thought my words were silly. "That Purple Heart qualifies him to be president as much as being black qualifies Bill Clinton."

I fell back onto the couch. "Why do black people always say that Bill Clinton is black? It makes no sense."

Michellelee shrugged. "'Cause he is. We gotta claim him 'cause, trust me, he's the closest we'll ever get to having a black president."

"Well then, you go right ahead and claim him because I don't want him. Just wait. You'll see what's going to happen." I wagged my finger at Michellelee. "He had sex with Monica and the truth will all come out. Then, Hillary will leave him and next will come his impeachment."

And then," I jumped up from the couch and flicked my wrist as if I was shooting a basketball, "Bob Dole will be president!"

Michellelee laughed. "No, you fool. Al Gore will be president."

Before I could tell Michellelee that I'd move to Canada and play college ball there if Al Gore were to ever become the president, the door to our townhouse busted wide open. "Guess what?" Miriam came in huffing and puffing like she was going to blow our house down.

"What?" Michellelee and I said together.

"I got you a date, my boyfriend's best friend. You're going with me to the Upward Bound Awards program tonight."

Michellelee and I stared at her for a moment and then Michellelee turned to me with a pointed finger. "She must be talking to you."

Now, Michellelee knew that wasn't true because in all the time I'd known Miriam, she'd never once tried to set me up.

"You know who I'm talking to." Miriam set her hands on her wide hips and spoke in that mother-scolding voice that she used.

"First of all, I do not need you to find me a man. I mean, look at me." Michellelee stopped for a moment, then twirled like the ballerina on the music box that my parents bought me the first time they'd taken me to Paris. "Out of the three of us, who's beauty personified?"

Michellelee's question was a rhetorical one that made Miriam and I roll our eyes, though I couldn't really be mad at Michellelee. She always said those kinds of things, not out of conceit. She was simply stating a fact and my parents had taught me to never be mad at the truth.

Michellelee continued, "So, I don't need your help 'cause I have no problem pulling dudes." She flopped down on the sofa next to me and picked up one of the magazines she'd been flipping through earlier.

Miriam whined, "But you never pull the right one."

"Says who?"

I leaned back and closed my eyes. I'd heard this track before. My best friends would go back and forth -- Miriam would tell Michellelee about some guy she thought was perfect for Michellelee, and Michellelee would tell Miriam to mind her business. They would keep at it until Miriam stomped away - because that's how it was going to end - Miriam would be mad and Michellelee would shrug her off.

Helping Michellelee find the right man seemed so important to Miriam. I guessed it had something to do with the way she was raised. From the moment we'd met, she'd made it known that she wanted a husband and a family more than she even wanted her college degree. It seemed to me that she was going to get her wish; her boyfriend Chauncey was the only guy I knew who wanted to get married as much as Miriam. So, I guessed, Miriam wanted the same thing for her friends - well, at least that's what she wanted for Michellelee.

Of course, she probably wanted the same for me, though she never did anything to try to help me. Maybe it was because she thought life was different for white girls. Or maybe she thought life was just different for me.

Actually, she had a point. While I was still in my mother's womb, she and my daddy had already planned for my wedding day. According to their dreams, I was going to marry Waldorf

Astoria, the fourth. That was not his real name, that was just what I called Clarkson Wells, the son of my father's medical business partner and best friend.

"This time, I'm not trying to set you up," Miriam's voice broke through my reverie. "You'll be doing Chauncey a favor. His best friend in the whole world just came home."

"Where's he been? Prison?" Michellelee smirked.

"No, that would be *your* last boyfriend. By the way, is Pookie out yet?"

I couldn't help it, I had to laugh.

"His name is Luke," Michellelee said as if she was more insulted by what Miriam had called him instead of what Miriam was saying about him, "not Pookie, and he wasn't in prison. He just had to take care of some outstanding warrants."

"Whatever!" Miriam said. "Look, Chauncey's friend just got back from Mississippi."

My eyes popped open. "Mississippi?"

"Not your part of Mississippi, Emily."

What was that supposed to mean?

"He's been in Mississippi taking care of his grandmother," Miriam explained. "She died two weeks ago and he's finally back home. Chauncey wants to cheer him up and he thought you two would have fun together."

"Oh, great. Just what I need, some guy crying on my shoulder all night about his dead grandmother." Michellelee shook her head. "Not interested."

"Please, Michellelee! I'm not asking you to marry Jamal. Just do this double date with me tonight and if you don't like him, fine. I will never ever ask you to go out with another guy again in life."

Michellelee closed the magazine and laid it flat on her lap. "So you're saying that if I do this tonight, you'll forever give up trying to hook me up?"

Miriam laid her hand across her chest like she was saying the pledge of allegiance. "I give you my word."

"If I were you, I'd get this in writing," I said.

Miriam glared at me, but when Michellelee said, "Okay, I'll go," Miriam clapped her hands with glee.

"But," Michellelee stopped Miriam's celebration with that one word, "I'll only go if Emily goes, too."

"What?" I snapped my head toward her so fast I was sure that I'd have whiplash in the morning.

"If I don't like this guy, I'll have someone to talk to."

"No, thank you," I said.

"Come on," Michellelee said. "It'll be like a triple-date, only you'll be alone." She laughed.

I tossed the pillow at her. "I refuse to be anyone's fifth wheel. Plus, I already have plans. I'm going to sit here and wait for K-Cal Breaking News and the announcement that Bill Clinton *did* have sex with that woman."

"Michellelee," Miriam said, ignoring me and glancing at her watch, "we have to be ready in like an hour and a half."

"So not only do I have to go on this date, but I have to look like a star in ninety minutes?"

"Yeah, but if anyone can do it, you can."

The obvious sucking up worked. Michellelee grinned. "Okay. I'll find something fabulous to wear."

While Michellelee strolled up the stairs to her room, Miriam rushed into hers which was right off the living room, and I didn't move from the couch. Instead, I turned from channel to channel watching and waiting for the news to come about the president. Just a bit more than an hour later, a knock on our door interrupted my viewing. I was annoyed, I didn't feel like entertaining Chauncey and his friend until Miriam and Michellelee were ready, but I had to be the good roommate.

Then, I opened the door, took one look outside, and stood straight at attention.

"Hey, Emily," Chauncey said.

"Hello." But I wasn't looking at him. My glance went straight over his shoulder and I took in the most beautiful vision.

Now, one thing you must know -- I wasn't one of those white girls who chased black men. Not that I was prejudiced, I just came from a long line of Mississippi Harringtons who preferred the pre-Civil war days. In my family, everyone stayed with their own kind. My grandmother had even told me that was biblical, and certainly, I was going to follow the Bible.

But my grandmother had never seen a man who looked like this. This guy was hot!

"So...you gonna let us in?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." I could feel the heat rise on my cheeks. I stepped aside, but I never took my eyes off of Chauncey's friend. Miriam had told us his name, hadn't she?

My eyes followed every step he took as he strolled past me. While Chauncey had on a fake-leather coat over his suit, his friend wore a tailored overcoat that was buttoned up, but still left a peek of his white with black pinstripe shirt and black diamond patterned tie. My mother had taught me to love a well-dressed man.

As I motioned for them to sit down, Chauncey finally introduced me. "This is my boy, Jamal."

Jamal!

"Nice to meet you," I said, holding out my hand. Now, my friends often teased me about my proper Southern ways. But, I wasn't so uncool that I shook people's hands. Right now, though, I had an ulterior motive -- I wanted to touch him.

Then, he opened his mouth. "Nice to meet you, too."

I had to hold onto the chair so that I would swoon! He sounded just like Barry White who Michellelee blasted from the stereo.

"So, I guess the girls aren't ready." Chauncey opened his coat and sat down on the chair. Which left only the couch for Jamal.

"No," I said. "But, I'll go check on Miriam."

"You don't have to," Chauncey said. "I'm sure she's just about ready."

"I don't mind." Moving quickly, I grinned at Jamal, then pushed opened Miriam's door without even knocking. Closing the door behind me, I whispered, "I'm going with you."

"What?" she said louder than I wanted her to. "And why are you whispering?"

"Chauncey and Jamal are right out there and I don't want them to hear us, but I'm going with you."

"So Michellelee talked you into it, huh?"

"Yes," I said, thinking that was a good excuse. "But, I need thirty minutes to get ready."

She shook her head. "I have to be there for photos, so if you're not ready in fifteen, we're outta here."

I leapt out of her bedroom, grinned again at Jamal, then took the steps two at a time to my bedroom which was next door to Michellelee's. I don't think I'd ever moved so quickly, and before fifteen minutes had passed, I was back downstairs before either Michellelee or Miriam.

"So, you're going, too?" Chauncey asked, looking a little confused.

"Um...yes. Miriam didn't tell you?" Even though I was talking to Chauncey, I was looking at Jamal. "I love to support the Upward Bound program. It's such a good cause." Then, without giving either one of them a chance to answer, I slipped down onto the couch next to Jamal. "Were you with Upward Bound, too?"

"No." He shook his head.

Not Upward Bound? That was how Miriam and Chauncey had met; I thought Jamal had been part of that program, too. Well, I'd just have to find another way to connect. But before I could switch subjects, Michellelee sauntered down the stairs at the same time that Miriam came out of her room.

Since I wasn't supposed to be a part of this little party, I sauntered off to the side as the introductions were made. I watched Michellelee as she looked Jamal up and down, but her smile was steady.

"We'd better get moving." Miriam opened the door to the front closet where we all kept our coats.

Chauncey led the way and Miriam followed him, but before Michellelee could step out of the door with Jamal, I called her back. When Jamal looked back over her shoulder, I said, "I forgot something and I need Michellelee."

Michellelee frowned as I pulled her back into the townhouse. "What's up?"

Michellelee and Miriam were like sisters to me, so what was most important was my relationship with Michellelee. If she was into Jamal, then, I would back away. But if she was not....

"What do you think?"

"Of what?"

"Of him? Do you like him?"

"Jamal?" She shrugged. "He's okay; I'm just not into that kind of guy."

"You're not into the tall, dark, and handsome kind?"

She waved her hand. "He's fine, but in such an obvious sort of way. I like my men with a little more of an edge." Then, she paused. "Wait a minute...why're you asking me? Are you interested?" she said like she couldn't believe it.

I nodded.

"He's black," she said.

"I noticed."

"And you're blonde."

"I have been all my life and the carpet matches the curtains."

"Ewww!" Michellelee said. "You're nasty." But then, she grinned. "Well, go for it, girl."

"Are you sure? I mean, I don't want to start anything...."

"Oh, really? You don't?" Michellelee took two steps back, then looked me up and down the way she'd just done Jamal. "That must be why you just painted on that dress, 'cause you don't wanna start anything." She shook her head. "But I ain't mad at you. Go get yours."

Michellelee was right. I was wearing a Tadashi design that hugged every part of my six-two frame. I didn't have the hips that Michellelee swayed, or the behind that Miriam rocked. But I had boobs. And my girls were on full display in this dress with the V-neckline that almost went all the way down to my navel.

"Okay," I told Michellelee. "I'm going for him."

When we stepped outside, the car horn blared and we knew it was Miriam. She was standing outside of Chauncey's twelve-year-old Jeep when we rushed up.

"Come on," she said, "we've got to get going. You get in the middle." She directed Michellelee to the back seat where Jamal was sitting.

Before Michellelee could move, I slid in. "I'll sit in the middle." I made sure not to look at Miriam because I knew she was giving me one of those looks that could take my life away.

But there was nothing that Miriam could do. By the time she slipped into the front seat next to Chauncey, I was secure in my place. By the time we got to the Hollywood Palladium, Jamal and I were chatting as the friends that I hoped we'd be.

"So you agree with me about Bill Clinton," I said as Jamal helped me out of the Jeep. We'd been talking about politics all the way over.

"Yeah. I mean, don't get me wrong. He was my man before, I even did some work on his campaign. But with what's going down now...."

I grinned and turned to Michellelee with triumph all over my face. She just rolled her eyes. She'd been right. Jamal wasn't her type. He had political sense.

But the deal was sealed when we walked into the Palladium and Jamal helped me into my seat.

"By the way, how tall are you?" he asked. "About six-two?"

"Good guess."

He nodded. "So, do you model?"

I sighed wishing I had a hundred dollars for each time I'd been asked that question. Why in the world did people think every tall white girl was a model? It had to be the same disease that made everyone think every tall black guy was a basketball player. And since I was almost eye to eye with him in my three inch heels, I was sure he'd had that question a lot in his life. So I decided to just give him a pass and answer.

"No modeling, but my height does come in handy. I play basketball."

He frowned. "With USC?" When I nodded, he held up his hand, "Wait a minute. You're *that* Emily Harrington?" he'd asked, sounding amazed. I had been a highly recruited player from high school, so I wasn't surprised that Jamal knew me -- at least by name.

"Yes, how many Emily Harringtons did you think there were?"

We laughed together.

"Aren't you from Mississippi?" he asked.

"I am. And you just got back from there, right?"

The smile that he'd been wearing faded quickly and I was so sorry I asked.

"Yeah. I had to take care of some family business."

Wanting to get back to the happy place where we'd been, I changed subjects. "Do you play any sports?" I asked, getting dangerously close to that stereotypical question.

But it worked because his grin came back quickly. "Yup. Basketball."

"You're kidding."

"I played at Crenshaw."

"Crenshaw High? They have an amazing reputation."

"Yup."

"So," I began, "you didn't want to play at the college level?"

His smile went away again. "I was accepted to UCLA, but just a couple of days after graduation, I had to leave for Mississippi. You know, for my grandmother."

Well since this topic wasn't going to go away, I decided to use it. "Where does...did your grandmother live in Mississippi?"

"In Natchez. Do you know where that is?"

I nodded. "Natchez is about ninety miles south of Jackson."

"Which is where you're from," he said more like a statement, but, I answered like he was asking a question.

"Correct."

Though there were others at the table and a whole program that went on from the stage, Jamal and I kept talking, keeping our conversation to a whisper. I found out that he'd just enrolled at West Los Angeles College, the same college where Chauncey was as a second year student studying to become an EMT. He told me to become firemen was their lifelong dream.

We talked about school, sports, a little bit about our pasts and our hopes for our future. By the time Jamal helped me out of my chair when the program was over, and we walked back to the car, we were officially friends, the first accomplishment of my mission. When we got back to the townhouse, Jamal walked me and Michellelee to the door while Miriam stayed in the car with Chauncey.

At the door, Michellelee said, "Good night, Jamal," without even making eye contact with him as she spoke.

But once she stepped inside, I lingered outside with him. "It was great meeting you."

"Me, too. You're kinda refreshing."

I didn't know what he meant by that; it sounded positive, but I was certainly aiming for something more than refreshing. "So...I hope to see you soon."

"Oh, yeah. Definitely."

Definitely! That was a great word. "Okay, I'll see you later."

He stood right there until I stepped inside, then I leaned against the closed door, but I wasn't able to stay in that moment for long.

"You're really feeling him!"

My eyes snapped open. I'd forgotten that I wasn't alone. "Yes." I nodded at Michellelee. "I really like him," I said as I fell onto the sofa. "Not only is he hot, he's smart, and cool, and interesting, and...."

She held up her hand like she didn't want to hear my litany, which was too bad because I could've gone on and on and on.

She said, "I get it, and he seems like he's into you, too."

"He's going to call me." Then, I sat up straight. "Oh, no. I didn't give him my number."

Michellelee laughed. "Don't worry. He knows where to find you."

I settled back down. She was right. He was Chauncey's best friend. He was probably asking for my number right now....

I blinked three times and came back to the present, though the memories stayed with me. When I closed the door that night, little did I know that Jamal and I were a long road and many years away from our bliss.

But, we'd found each other, felt each other, and I'd always been convinced that anything that God put together could never be taken apart. So once we married, though I was aware of the danger of Jamal's career, it had never been a concern. We would last forever.

Of course, I knew no one lived forever. I just never thought death would separate us. Instead, I preferred to think that Jesus would come back, and lift me and Jamal up at the same time.

Today, though, had proven that I couldn't hide from reality.

That's why I didn't want to take my eyes off of Jamal. Not that I had ever taken my eyes off of him. From the first time I saw him, I knew that physically, he had all the gifts. He looked just like that actor, that my girls loved so much. Idris Elba. Yeah, Jamal was Idris Elba before there was even an Idris Elba. He was sexy and soulful. In the way he walked, in the way he talked.

But right now, I wasn't thinking about the brightness of his eyes, nor the fullness of his lips. I didn't care about the sharp angle of his jaw or the cleft in his chin. Tonight, I just celebrated the rise and fall of his chest.

Jamal parted his lips and released a small moan, though he stayed asleep. Then, as if he knew I was there, he lifted his arm and I laid back against his chest, now feeling the rhythm of his heart.

I was exhausted, but I refused to close my eyes. I wanted to dance to the beat of Jamal's heart. I wanted to twirl to every one of his inhales and swirl to each of his exhales. I wanted to celebrate because I now realized the preciousness of this gift in my bed. Lying with her husband was something that Miriam would never do again.

The thought of that made new tears flow. I had to save Miriam from as much pain as I could. I had to make sure that she would get through, and know that every day, in every way, Jamal and I would be there for her.

Always!

Chapter 5
Miriam

I couldn't believe my eyes had opened.

My wish, even in my unconsciousness, was that I would sleep straight through to eternity, but when I twisted my head to the side, I saw the reasons why I'd awakened.

My boys were next to me, a tangled mess of limbs that made me wonder how in the world had they slept? My lips tried to curl into a smile, but then a jolt sprang from my heart reminding my lips that there was nothing to smile about.

I pushed myself up, then wobbled a bit as I stood. My body was drowning in a sea of exhaustion, though I couldn't figure out why. I hadn't done a thing but cry. I guess grief made one weary.

My cell phone chirped and I grabbed it from the nightstand. The message icon indicated that I had twelve messages, which surprised me. I hadn't heard the alerts before.

I clicked on the icon, but only read the last message:

Our plane lands at noon. I've rented a car. Mama Cee said to tell you she loves you and the boys and I do, too.

Again, my lips tried to smile, but couldn't. Still, I felt relief as I read the text from my brother-in-law, Charlie, once again.

I tucked my phone into the pocket of my sweat pants, not bothering to check the other messages. I never received many - just Emily, Michellelee ...and Chauncey called me on the regular. But my voicemail was probably filled now with condolences and I just wasn't up to hearing everyone else's sadness.

I tiptoed across the room, though, I didn't need to. My children could sleep through an earthquake. But still I treaded softly, mostly out of habit. It was my way of not disturbing Chauncey on those days when he needed extra rest.

I never wanted to wake him, then. I would pay a billion dollars to wake him now.

Closing the door behind me, I stood in the hall wondering what was I supposed to do next? What did a woman do on her first day without her husband? Was I supposed to walk differently? Talk differently? What was I supposed to eat? What was I supposed to drink? What was I supposed to say? What was I supposed to think?

The ringing telephone stopped me from just standing there, and when I pulled out my cell, my lips tried to smile once again.

"Hey, Miriam," Emily said the moment I answered. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I kinda slept off and on, but I just got up."

"I didn't want to call too early, but I couldn't wait any longer. I had to check on you and the boys."

I took a couple of steps away from the bedroom. "They're still asleep." I didn't add that I wanted them to sleep for days so they wouldn't have to deal with this reality. Or maybe it was that I didn't want to deal with their reality.

Last night, I didn't think it was possible to hurt more, but with each tear that my sons shed, another piece of my heart was torn away. All I wanted to do was kiss my sons and make them feel better. But while kisses healed boo-boos, they did nothing for broken hearts.

"So, how are you, honey?"

Surely, that was a rhetorical question. Or maybe, it wasn't. Maybe my best friend wanted to know that I wanted to die right now. Maybe she wanted to know that if I didn't have children,

I would have already taken a Costco size bottle of sleeping pills and joined Chauncey in paradise.

Then, Emily quickly spoke as if she read my mind through the phone. "We're on our way, Miriam. We were just waiting for you to get up."

"No, you don't have to come over," I said before I added the lie, "I'm fine and I know you guys have things to do."

"The only thing we have to do is there and do what we've always done for one another."

I glanced at the clock and it was barely seven. They had left only a few hours ago, but there was no talking Emily out of her plan. Once she made a decision, she never changed it.

"We'll see you in a little while," she said. "Love you."

"Mean it," I said, ending the call the way we always did. I hung up and breathed, relieved.

The truth was, I wanted Emily and Jamal here. I needed them to help me fill in the blanks until Mama Cee and Charlie arrived.

I tiptoed back into the bedroom. All I wanted to do was crawl into the bed and pull the covers over my and my children's heads. But I had to be the grown up here.

I grabbed fresh underwear from my dresser drawer, then went into the bathroom. Slipping out of the sweat pants and shirt that I'd changed into last night, I took a quick shower, then went about my regiment as if life hadn't changed. Brushed my teeth, twisted my hair into a bun, then slipped into my bra and panties. I glanced at the sweat pants that I'd just left on the floor, and after a moment, picked them up and jumped right back into them. The best anyone was going to get out of me today was clean underwear.

Before I left the bathroom, I glanced at myself in the mirror. Yesterday, I would've said that this was the best I could do as a Mommy. Today, this was the best I could do as a widow.

A widow.

That word stopped me cold. I was really a widow, really a woman who'd lost the love of her life.

Thank God the doorbell rang before that thought settled too much in my mind. I scurried from the bathroom, rushed to the front of the house, and then I took a deep breath before I pulled open the door.

I tried my best to lighten my voice. "I need to give you guys a key, huh?" This time, my heart allowed my smile to remain for a few seconds.

Emily smiled back as she hugged me, then she passed me to Jamal and he did the same. Jamal held me a little longer, as if he knew that I needed to feel the strength of a man's arms around me.

"How are you?" Emily said.

Then, I have no idea what happened. The dam broke and tears gushed out.

"Oh, Miriam," Emily said as she put her arms around me again and led me to the sofa.

"I'm sorry," I said and tucked my sobs back inside. "I don't know what happened. I've been doing so well."

"You don't have to do well, honey. You don't have to hold anything in."

Emily and I sat, and Jamal stood in front of us, shifting from one foot to the other. For the first time, I really looked at him and saw the reddened rims of his eyes.

He said, "Uh...are the boys asleep?"

I nodded. "They're still in my bedroom and I didn't want to wake them up."

Jamal's eyes moved between me and Emily. He finally settled on Emily when he said, "I'm gonna go check on them," before he left us alone.

I shook my head. "Em, how am I going to do this?"

"It's going to be so hard. And, I can't say that I know how you feel, but I do know that you're going to be able to do it. With your friends, with your family...and most of all, with God."

With God. I hadn't thought about God at all. Not since He let me down.

"Not sure how much God's going to help me."

Emily reared her head back. "Miriam!" she said, as if my words were blasphemous.

I knew that was a shocker. Emily had started going to church with me when we were in college and we'd both been members of Hope Chapel ever since, so those words had to sound like craziness from my mouth to her ears.

"Why would you say that?" Emily questioned.

I recalled the moment when God had let me down. "When we were in the car with Michellelee rushing to the hospital, God told me that Chauncey was all right."

"He did?"

I nodded. "I felt such peace. The only one I was worried about was," I paused giving myself time to lower my eyes, "I was only worried about Jamal. And so, I prayed and prayed for him."

Emily squeezed my hand. "Thank you for praying for my husband."

"I prayed for both of them," I said. "But God lied about Chauncey. Chauncey wasn't fine."

"Well," Emily paused and pondered her next words. "Maybe God did say that because really, Miriam, what can be finer than being with God? And that's where Chauncey is, so he *is* fine."

I wondered if what Emily said was true. When I felt that peace, was that the exact moment when...I shuddered and ran my hands up and down my arms trying to warm my suddenly chilled skin.

"You cold?"

"No,"

"Okay." A beat, "You know God didn't let you down, right? You know He's here and He's going to stay."

I shrugged. "Whatever. He can be wherever He wants to be. He just doesn't have to worry about hearing from me because I don't have anything to say to Him."

"You can't stop praying."

I shook my head, but then, Jamal saved me from having to disappoint Emily any further when he came back into the living room. "The boys are still sleeping."

"That's good. And, I hope they stay that way until my mother-in-law gets here. She'll cuddle and coddle them...." Another smile came to my face as I thought about my mother-in-law with my sons. But like the rest of my smiles, this one didn't last long." Looking up, I said, "Jamal, I need to start making," I paused for a second, "the arrangements...and I don't know who I should talk to."

Jamal lowered himself onto the ottoman in front of us and while Emily held my hand, he said, "Are you sure you want to do this now?"

I nodded. "It's not like waiting is going to change anything."

"Okay," Jamal said before he gave a quick glance to his wife.

"Plus, I don't know how long Mama Cee will be able to stay in Los Angeles," I said. "I want to do everything so that she can get back quickly."

"I'm sure she's not thinking about leaving you any time soon," Emily said.

"Well, whether she stays or goes is fine," I said. "I'm still ready to get started." Looking at Jamal, I added, "So....."

Emily's ringing cell stopped Jamal from speaking, and as she answered it, then stood and took a few steps away from us, Jamal took my hands into his. "How are you doing?" he whispered.

I studied him a little longer this time, and his eyes were glazed with the sadness of the thousand tears he'd probably shed. But also in his eyes, I saw the love that he'd felt for his best friend. Though best friend would never completely define Jamal and Chauncey's connection.

Theirs was a brotherhood that was thicker than blood. Finally, I responded, "I'm doing about as good as you."

When he squeezed my hands and nodded, I knew that he understood and I wasn't alone. We shared seconds of silence as he held my hands and waited for his wife.

Finally, Emily came back. "I don't know why I hadn't thought of this," she said. "That was the school board. They need me to come and speak to the children."

I don't know why I hadn't thought of it either. Dr. Emily Harrington-Taylor was one of the best child psychologists and life coaches in the country. Even though she had a private practice, she was usually one of the first called for any kind of tragedy or trauma that involved children.

Jamal asked, "Where are they meeting?"

"They've gathered the parents and children at First Baptist of Inglewood."

"For classes?"

"No, for a session to discuss what happened, to let the parents know next steps and to bring the children together to grieve. It's actually a good idea, but honey," Emily eased back down to the couch and turned to me, "I hate to leave you."

"Oh, no. Go, Em. You have to go. You're the best and you have to help those children."

"What about you?"

"I'll stay," Jamal said. "I'll help Miriam start the arrangements and take care of the boys when they wake up."

I watched Emily's shoulders slack with relief as if she didn't feel like she was abandoning me altogether. "Thank you, sweetheart." Then, to me, she added, "I'll get back here as soon as I can."

I shook my head. "Don't worry about me. I'll be surrounded in a few hours. My mother-in-law, my brother-in-law, and your husband." I tried to smile again. "Seems to me, I'm in good hands."

Emily stood and grabbed her purse. "That you are." She kissed her husband, a soulful kiss that made me turn away. I couldn't watch that kind of kiss that I would never have again. "Bye, babe. I'll call you." Then, she hugged me.

The three of us walked to the front door together and then Jamal and I stood, side-by-side as Emily stepped outside. "Wait!" Facing us, she said, "What about the car? We came in mine, remember?"

"Someone will drive me home." He added, "Don't worry, you go talk to the kids."

She smiled. "I will. And you take care of Miriam."

Chapter 6
Emily

Slipping into the car, I glanced back at Miriam and Jamal standing at the door, and for a moment, that picture of them startled me. They stood the way Miriam and Chauncey always did whenever Jamal and I were leaving their home, side-by-side and waving as we drove away.

I didn't think it was possible, but my heart ached even more now. I would never see Miriam and Chauncey like that again, and my eyes filled up. I waited until I rounded the curve of the street and was out of their sight before I eased my car to a stop.

Except for the moment when I'd heard that Chauncey had died, I'd fought to keep my tears inside. But now, I leaned my head against the steering wheel and let them flow. I wasn't crying for just Chauncey and the others who'd died. My tears were also for the ones left behind. Especially Miriam, who had loved Chauncey just about her whole life. It was impossible to imagine what Miriam would be like without him. Would she ever laugh again, have fun again, or even love again?

And what about their children? After eight years of marriage, Jamal and I were still childless. That had never been a big deal for us. Testing showed we were fine, so Jamal and I believed if we were supposed to have children, we would. But in the meantime, Junior, Mikey, and Stevie filled our lives with joy and thinking of them without their father made me sob harder.

There was so much pain. That was the problem with grief. It left physical and mental devastation in its path.

This was going to be the most difficult time of Miriam's life, but I was going to be there with whatever my best friend needed.

My best friend.

At least the thought of that brought a smile to my face. Because while we loved each other dearly from just about the moment we met, we had that one little hiccup where I swear, I came close to tossing our friendship aside. And it was all because of Jamal...

February 2, 1998

I knocked just one time and then barged into Miriam's bedroom. She was pretending that she was asleep, but I knew that she wasn't. So I bounced on her bed.

Miriam didn't think I could see her, but through the reflection in her mirror, I could tell she was squeezing her eyes tighter as she snuggled into her pillow.

Okay, I knew my suite mate was not an early riser on a good day, and certainly not on a Saturday. But after eight wasn't early, right? Plus, I had waited a week and I needed to talk now.

I whispered. "Are you awake?"

"No!"

"Yes, you are!" When she didn't move, I added, "Come on, I need to talk."

With a sigh, Miriam finally rolled over and pushed herself up. She pressed her back against the headboard, crossed her arms and glared at me. "This had better be good. And by good, I mean something like Oprah announced she's running for president, or you've just won the lottery. Anything else could get you cut up for waking me this early."

I laughed because that was a good one. I didn't think Oprah was a Republican, but I'd vote for her. But even though I laughed, Miriam didn't. "Okay, okay," I said. "You're going to love what I have to say." I paused, wanting to build up the moment. "Give me Jamal's telephone number."

"What?"

"If you don't have it, get it from Chauncey."

"I have it," Miriam said, "but why...."

I didn't even let her finish. "Because!" Then, I grinned.

She stared at me for just a second more, then, she scooted back down in the bed and pulled the covers all the way up and over her head.

"Miriam!" I snatched that blanket away, knowing that she'd be freezing in that little babydoll nightie she had on.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" she asked.

"You didn't say anything."

"Well, let me give you another hint." She grabbed the blanket from me and covered up again.

For a moment, I just stood there, incredulous. "Why won't you give me his number?"

Miriam didn't say a word, but she knew me better than that. Did she really think I was going to walk away just because she didn't feel like talking?

"Miriam!" I kept calling her name until she tossed back the blanket and sat up again.

She crossed her arms again and poked out her lips. "Emily," she said my name slowly, "I introduced Jamal to Michellelee. I wanted the two of them to get together."

"They didn't like each other," I said. "You saw them together. They didn't say a word after hello."

"That's 'cause you were doing all the talking."

"No. Jamal and I were talking together. Look, if I thought for a moment that Michellelee was into him, I wouldn't be asking for his number."

"I'm surprised that you're asking for his number anyway."

"Why?"

She threw up her hands as if I was aggravating her. "Jamal? Really? You're trying to tell me that *you're* interested in Jamal?"

"Yes," I said with a frown. "Why wouldn't I be? He's really cute, really smart, loves basketball, hates Clinton, and he's an overall great guy. Oh, and he's Chauncey's best friend, so can you imagine the fun we'll have? Best friends with best friends?"

"You forgot one thing." She paused. "He's...black."

I blinked a couple of times, because that is not what I expected. "And your point is?"

"He's black, Emily!"

"What is with you guys?" I asked. "Michellelee said the same thing, that Jamal black. As if I couldn't see that for myself."

"Well, if we both told you...."

"I know what color he is. But, I also know that he's really cool and I want to get to know him."

"What about your boyfriend?"

"Boyfriend?" She must've known something that I didn't because I didn't have a boyfriend, not even a casual one.

Miriam said, "You know, Waldorf Astoria."

"Clarkson's not my boyfriend."

"He calls you all the time."

"He calls me from Mississippi, so what? He's the guy that my parents want me to marry, but I haven't been interested in him since kindergarten, and you know that."

"Maybe you need to give him another try. He might make a good husband."

"Husband? I'm not looking for a husband!" I shouted. "I don't want to marry Clarkson or Jamal. I'm just trying to talk to him."

The way Miriam tucked her chin to her chest and folded her arms tighter, let me know that she was buckling down. She was not about to be moved. "I don't think you should talk or do anything with Jamal."

Even though we'd been going back and forth for a couple of minutes, I couldn't get my best friend's words to compute in my mind. Slowly, I sat down on her bed. "Really?" I whispered. "You don't think I'm good enough to see Jamal?"

"It's not that." She loosened her arms and softened her voice. "Okay, let me give it to you real, let me give it to you straight. Have you ever read the book or seen the movie *Waiting to Exhale*?"

"No," I said, wondering what in the heck did a movie have to do with our conversation.

"Well, you should see it. 'Cause this brother leaves his wife...for a white woman."

At first, I pressed my lips together. "And?"

"And? It was awful and terrible and I hated reading and watching every second of that."

"Wait a minute," I paused, "is Jamal married?"

"No!" she said as if I'd asked the stupidest question.

"Then, what does this have to do with...."

"Look," Miriam said, not letting me finish. "There aren't enough brothers out there. Do you know the ratio of black men to black women?"

I shook my head.

"Well, neither do I, but that's not the point. Whatever the ratio is," Miriam said, "the fact is, there are not enough black men to go around. So many sistahs don't have a man, and will never have a man because our men are either in prison or are batting for the other team, or," she paused, as if she was going in for the big finish, "they're hooking up with white women."

I couldn't even get the word out of my mouth, but finally it came. "Wow!" I stood up and moved toward her bedroom door, but I couldn't leave like this. When I turned around, the heat of my anger was already flashing beneath my skin. "So, you're saying that you're going to help the cause by keeping me away from Jamal?"

She hesitated, and spoke even softer this time. "Something like that."

"Because I'm white."

I felt like I'd hit a three-pointer with those three words because Miriam slid down in the bed a little. Maybe I made her feel bad, and that was good because my feelings were so hurt. But I didn't make her feel bad enough because after a few seconds, she nodded.

All I could do was shake my head. "I thought we were friends."

"Don't go there, Em. You know we are."

"No, we're not. If we were, then all you would want is for me to be happy."

"Come on, Em. I do want that. But we also said we would always be honest with one another, right?"

That was the truth. That was our promise. "Yes. Honesty." I turned back to the door. "Thanks for being honest," I told her, barely glancing over my shoulder.

"Emily!"

I grabbed her door, swung it open, and then slammed it shut.

"Emily!"

I heard her calling me until I got up to my room. Then, I slammed my door for good measure.

If anyone had ever told me I'd have this conversation with the woman I thought of as my sister, I would've called them a liar....

What had been even more unbelievable than Miriam's reaction, had been Jamal's. I'd gotten his number, thanks to Michellele and her budding investigative reporter skills. But when I called Jamal, his response had been much the same as Miriam's.

"Uh, Emily, I think you're cool and everything, but..." He didn't even have to finish. After talking to Miriam, I knew what he meant. But he went on anyway, "I'm not trying to hurt your feelings or anything, but I'm not into..."

"White girls," I had finished for him and then slammed down the phone.

I smiled a little now as I remembered the way I had called him and Miriam, every single name listed in the Book of Curses. I had paced in my room, ranting to myself about how it wasn't just white people who were prejudiced. I'd made a commitment that day that I would never have anything to do with Jamal.

But God had different plans. Me and Jamal, Miriam and Chauncey. The four of us had grown into happy family.

Now though, we were three, and I prayed that we would be able to find a new happiness among us. But, we'd need help with that.

I put my car back into Drive and once I reached the traffic light, I pressed the button on the console to activate the Bluetooth feature.

"Call Pastor Ford," I said.

Three seconds passed, then the ringing of the phone. Five rings and I was just about to hang up when my pastor answered.

"Good morning!" Pastor Ford's groggy voice came through the car speakers.

I glanced at the clock on the dashboard and cursed inside. I was so unfocused, I hadn't even remembered the time; it wasn't even eight o'clock.

"Pastor, this is Emily; did I wake you?" And before she could respond, I added, "I'm so sorry to be calling this early."

"No, no, it's all right. I was just up late last night. So much going on."

"I know." I sniffed back my emotions and said, "I should've called you last night, but...." Another breath. "Pastor, Chauncey Williams died."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "In the fire?"

"Yes."

"I was going to call you and Miriam this morning to make sure everyone was all right. Yesterday was crazy. Quite a few of our children went to that school; so many were hurt and we lost one."

"Oh," I groaned.

"Yeah, I know. I was with the Millers all last night; they lost one of their six-year-old twins and it was all that I could do to comfort them." There was silence and I could imagine the pastor shaking her head. "Now, Chauncey. How're Miriam and the boys?"

"I'm worried about her, Pastor. I talked to her this morning and she's really upset with God." I repeated the conversation Miriam and I'd had. "She won't even pray," I said, finishing up. "And that scares me."

The slight chuckle from Pastor Ford sounded more bitter than sweet; still it surprised me. "You don't have to worry. Miriam has enough in her, believe me. She's been praying to God for so long, she might stop, but her heart won't."

I shook my head even though my pastor couldn't see me. "I'm just afraid because now is when she needs Him the most."

"You're right about that, but just because she's mad doesn't mean God's going to turn His back on her. We might do that to people when we get mad at them, but He doesn't do that to us."

"She's alright Emily, and it's okay that she's upset. She serves a big God and she has big expectations, so right now, it's understandable. But there are two things I know: she'll get over it and God is fine with it."

"Okay," I said, feeling just a bit better.

"I need to get over there," Pastor said. "Are you there now?"

"No, I'm on my way to First Baptist. Some of the parents are bringing their children over for some counseling. I was called in to help."

"Good. So, who's with Miriam? Her mother-in-law?"

"Not yet. She's on her way; right now, only Jamal is there."

My pastor paused for so long that I called out her name to make sure that the call hadn't disconnected.

Finally Pastor said, "So, how's Jamal? I know how close he and Chauncey were."

I sighed. "He's doing well. We've both shed quite a few tears."

"I know you're concerned about Miriam, but make sure you take care of him, too."

"Oh, I definitely will, Pastor."

"And just keep praying around Miriam. Soon, she'll open up her mouth, too. I'll give her a call now and I'll see you over there later."

"Thanks, Pastor."

I clicked off the phone, but then hit the call button again.

"Call Red," I said into the speaker.

I could barely understand Michellelee when she mumbled, "Hey, girl."

"You just getting up?"

"Yeah, a long, long night. Are you with Miriam?"

"I was, but I just left. I was called in by the school district."

"Girl, there's so much tragedy behind that fire. Chauncey and nine kids."

"Wow! I didn't know it was that many."

"Yeah, and now they're pretty sure it was arson."

"Are you kidding?"

"Yup, and because it was September 11th, Homeland Security is all up on it."

"I cannot believe this. Well, I just spoke to Pastor and she's on her way over to Miriam's."

Michellelee groaned. "I cry every time I think about her."

"I just had my own breakdown, I couldn't even drive. But we're gonna make it. All we have to do is stay close to Miriam. Between you, me, and Jamal, we're going to have to keep her covered twenty-four-seven. Are you in?"

"You know I am. What do you want me to do?"

Victoria Christopher Murray
Never Say Never

I smiled, though, I wasn't surprised. This was just how the three of us were with each other.

We were the Red, White and Blue and would get through this tragedy together.

Chapter 7
Emily

There was no other way to say it, I was just sad.

And this was only the first day. As I sped from the church, I prayed that the crying that was still in my ears would fade. The entire sanctuary of First Baptist had been filled with parents and teachers...and the children who were still traumatized and would be suffering for a long time. All of those children had been in the building when the fire started. More than half had been rushed out when the smoke alarms first sounded, but the fire had been aggressive. Dozens had been trapped, and those children had had to experience the abject fear that came with the edge of death. They'd seen the flames, inhaled the smoke, felt the smothering heat, and some may have even seen their classmates die.

I'd explained to the parents that this was going to be a long road to recovery and though I'd given them tips about not leaving their children alone, and letting them sleep with the lights on, I wasn't sure how I was going to handle all of this trauma and tragedy. The city had called in only three psychologists. But three were not enough with this devastation.

Turning my car onto the freeway, I accelerated, so glad that I was heading toward home. But even though I was three miles away from the church, I could still hear the wailing in my ears. Especially, the cries of LaTonya Miller.

I'd shed so many tears since yesterday morning, it was a wonder that I had any left. But, I had plenty now, for LaTonya, the six-year-old who lost her identical twin sister. That gorgeous, precious little girl still pierced my heart.

"Mommy and Daddy said LaTrisha died!"

She kept saying that over and over, though I was convinced that she didn't have a complete understanding of what that meant. Or maybe, because she was a twin, she did. I was concerned about all the children, but especially LaTonya. I suspected that her closeness she and her sister shared, a relationship that had been established before they were born, could bring a ton of other issues. It was these unknown issues that truly concerned me. It was why that little girl had already captured my heart.

I was grateful that LaTonya was with both of her parents and even though the Millers were grieving the death of one daughter, they were willing to do whatever they had to do to help the child who was still with them. The Millers, though only in their twenties, seemed to be parents who understood their love would save their child.

The Millers were parents who were so different from mine.

I glanced at my cell phone, hesitated, then pressed the Bluetooth before I could change my mind.

"Call Mom," I said into the speaker quickly.

As the phone rang, I held my breath, praying that the call would be answered. It rang, and rang, and rang. Just when I was sure that my mother would let my call go to voicemail once again, I heard her voice.

"Emily?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Call me at home. He's not here."

"Okay, I'm going to call you right back. Please pick up."

"I will, honey."

I clicked off and then commanded the hands-free unit to call home. As she waited for her house phone to ring, I imagined my mother deleting my call from her cell, erasing the evidence that she'd spoken to me.

When my mother picked up on the first ring, I was happy and sad at the same time. Happy to speak to her, sad that I could count the number of times that I had in the last year.

"How are you, sweetheart?"

Those words resonated through the car and then wrapped around me like my mother's arms, making me feel loved and safe for a moment.

"I'm...okay."

"What's the matter?"

It had to be her mother's intuition, another sign that we were still connected, that she still loved me.

I answered, "It's Miriam...her husband died."

She hesitated for a moment. "Miriam?"

"My best friend." I sighed inside.

"Oh, my! What happened?"

"He died in a fire."

"Oh, goodness. That's so sad. How is she?"

I let a beat or two pass, wondering if my mother would back track and ask about Jamal since I had mentioned that it was a fire. Then, I said, "She's not good."

My mother tsked and moved on. "Well, I'll say a prayer for her."

I attributed my mother not asking about my husband to her not remembering that Jamal was a fire fighter, too.

"Anyway," I began, deciding to move on as well. "I've been called in to work with the children who were in school at the time."

"The fire was at a school? Oh, my goodness."

"It's been pretty tough, and so I just wanted...I just needed to speak to you. To hear your voice."

"I'm glad you called, sweetheart, because you have to be strong. For the children. They need you and they're lucky because you're one of the best."

"Thanks for saying that, Mom. Anyway, how are you?"

"We're doing well here. You know, I'm still very involved with DAR," my mother said.

That made me smile. My mother had been one of the key women in the Mississippi chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution since I could remember. When I was a little girl, I loved to go with her to the auxiliary meetings. She didn't let me go often, but I lived for the afternoons when I could be with all of those women, wearing their Sunday best, sitting around drinking tea and eating crumpets, and teacakes. It felt so grown up to me. I always thought I was going to be just like those women with their demure ways and Southern sensibilities.

But, I was so wrong. Maybe, it was because I was too much of a tomboy. Or maybe it was because I'd soon grown to be so tall. Or maybe it was because once I was a teenager, I didn't care much about the ways of the women who were lineal bloodline descendants of someone who fought in the American Revolution. I cared more about the present than I did the past.

"This year," my mother continued, "I'm working with the scholarship committee and the literacy outreach program that we just started."

"That sounds so good, Mom. I wish I were there, we could work on that together."

There was a moment of silence as both of us reflected on my words. We both knew that I wouldn't be there with her. Probably never again.

After a moment, I asked the question that I knew would make both of our hearts break.

"How's dad?" My question wasn't perfunctory. I truly wanted to know.

"He's playing golf," she said as if I'd asked an ordinary question about an ordinary father.

"Mom...do you think...if I called him...."

She didn't even let me finish and I could almost see my mother, sitting in the Victorian-decorated parlor (they never called it a living room) of the six-thousand square foot home that I'd grown up in, shaking her head.

My mother answered my question with her own. "Are you still with Jamal?"

"Mom, you say that as if we're just dating. We're married."

"That is exactly why your father won't speak to you," my mother said in a tone that sounded like she was scolding me.

"You don't approve of my marriage and you speak to me. Even when you know Dad's going to be mad if he finds out, you still do it. Why can't he love me the way you do?" I cried.

My mother sighed. "It's different for me," she said. "Your father's heart is truly broken. He doesn't understand it and in a way, he blames himself."

"This is so ridiculous. He's blaming himself like I went out and became a stripper or something."

"And, that may have been easier for him to accept!"

Why did I keep doing this to myself? Every time I called, I went there. And every time I went there, I got my feelings hurt.

"Emily," my mother said, her voice much softer this time. "Your father will never accept your marriage. If you want him to forgive you, you know what you have to do. Until then...."

"I'm not forgiven and I'm disowned," I said, finishing for her. "Can you at least tell him that I called, and that I asked about him?"

"I'll see. I don't like getting your father upset."

That meant my mother would never say a word. It was the way she was raised - she was old-school Southern. She lived to please her husband. That was her job and she'd done it well. Growing up, I never once saw my parents disagree in any way about anything. Because my mother always went along.

That's what she was doing now, agreeing with her husband, even though he was wrong.

"Okay," I finally said. "Well...." I didn't want to hang up, but there was nothing else to say. I wanted to add something like, 'I'll see you at Thanksgiving,' or 'I can't wait 'til Christmas.' But I hadn't celebrated a single holiday with my parents in the eight years since Jamal had put the ring on my finger.

"You be well, sweetheart."

"I will." Then, I hung up, wondering why I had made that call. I felt worse than before.

My heart yearned for the old days. The days when I was daddy's girl, and mother's princess. The days when I woke up every morning, knowing that I was special, knowing that my mother was proud, and I was the apple of my daddy's eye. I longed for the days when I knew both of my parents loved me in all ways and would love me always....

May 12, 2000

"This is absolutely ridiculous," I said as I came down the stairs, stepping carefully as the graduation gown bellowed around my ankles. The smell of white roses had assaulted me from the moment I'd walked out of my bedroom.

"I already told her that it smelled like a funeral parlor up in here," Michellelee said, even though she didn't look up from the notepad on her lap.

I figured that was Michellelee's Salutatorian speech. She hadn't parted with that pad from the moment she'd learned that she'd been selected to speak.

"I would prefer to say that it smells like a flower shop," I said, sitting down next to Michellelee.

Miriam looked over her shoulder, smirked, then went back to smelling one of the bouquets of white roses. "Don't hate 'cause I'm so loved," she said. "My boo did the dang thing, didn't he? I mean, one hundred flowers? How many did you guys get?" She stopped for a moment. "Oh, wait. Y'all didn't get any."

She laughed, and I laughed with her.

What Chauncey had done for Miriam was definitely special, but that's how it'd been the four years I'd known him. Every day, Chauncey made sure Miriam knew that she was loved. And, that made Chauncey an amazing man to me. He loved the ground that Miriam waddled on, and she deserved it. All the love she'd missed in her childhood, she had now. There was nothing more wonderful than that.

When the bell rang, Miriam tore her nose away from the flowers and dashed to the door. "My boo!" she shouted.

I looked at Michellelee, she looked at me, and we both rolled our eyes. True love was so special, I guessed.

"Miriam, it's just supposed to be the three of us this morning," I said.

"I guess Chauncey couldn't stay away." She swung the door open. "Boo," she began, but then her voice faded.

"Emily!" my mother drawled as she sailed into our townhouse with her arms open wide. She didn't say a word to Miriam who still stood at the door, holding it for my father, who had a big old camera in his hand.

I jumped up from the sofa. "Mom, Daddy. I thought you guys were meeting us at the campus. You have to get over there because it's going to be hard to get seats." That had been my excuse to keep my parents away. I loved my parents dearly, but sometimes, they could be a bit over the top. I added, "There're going to be over thirty-thousand people there."

"We don't have to worry about seats," my mother said. "Your father talked to Michael this morning."

"Michael?" I asked, having no idea who she was talking about.

"Michael Eisner," she said in a tone like I should've known. "Didn't you know he's one of the commencement speakers?"

"One of the commencement speakers, yes, one of your friends, no."

"Of course I know him, daughter," my father piped in, calling me by the not-so-original nickname he'd given me when I was born. "He's a member of Delta Upsilon, too, and we've gotten together a few times over the years. I talked to him last night and now we're in the reserved section."

See what I mean? Whose parents did that?

My father added, "Though with as much money as I paid this school over these years, I should've been sitting on the stage."

My parents laughed, but my father meant what he said.

"I think you should still get over there as early as you can. The lines are going to be outrageous."

"Now, why would we go over there when we can be here?" my mother said. "We want to spend some time with you, Emily."

"That's right, daughter," my father piped in. "Last night you ran off right after dinner."

"Sorry about that, but we really wanted to get to that party," I said.

My mother waved her hand. "We forgive you. All I want to do today is focus on your graduation." She took both of my hands into hers. "I am so proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Yes, Doctor Harrington. We are very proud," my dad said before he kissed my cheek.

"I'm not a doctor yet, Daddy."

"But you will be very soon," my mother said. "Proudly following in your father's footsteps."

I grinned, pleased that my parents were happy. I wasn't following in the exact footsteps of my father; he was a pediatric heart surgeon. But with my PhD in Psychology that I'd get in the next four years, at least I'd be in the 'Dr's' club. That was good enough for my parents.

My father said, "The only thing that would've made me happier is...."

Before my father could finish, my friends piped in, "if you had gone to Ole Miss!" And then, they giggled.

My parents filled up any room they entered, so for these last few minutes, I'd forgotten that Miriam and Michellelee were here. Now, I was horrified. I couldn't believe my friends were making fun of my father like that. It was true that he had said those exact words at least one hundred times last night when my parents had taken us all out to dinner. But to repeat his words back to him this way; my friends didn't know who they were messing with.

It was the mood of the day that saved Miriam and Michellelee. The only thing my mother did was turn her head slightly and say, "Oh, hello, ladies," as if she was just noticing them. Even though Miriam was the one who had opened the door, and even though my mother had almost been standing on Michellelee's feet, she truly hadn't seen my friends.

My parents! I had to love them and I believed they really did try. But they lived in such a secluded community. Not just in terms of where our home was, but in terms of where their minds were. My parents came from old money. Both of them. Generations of doctors on my father's side and federal judges on my mother's side. My parents only dealt with people in their class **and of their color**.

"Anyway," I said quickly, trying to divert the attention away from my girlfriends. "Miriam, Michellelee and I were going to stay here and take some pictures before we headed over to the campus."

"No time for pictures," my father said, waving the hand that held his camera.

I glanced at my friends and apologized with my eyes.

My father continued, "There is something we have to show you before we go over to the school."

"What?"

My mother said, "Don't ask any questions, just come with me." My mother took my hand and led me toward the door.

As I passed Miriam, I shrugged. From the stories I'd told them, and after finally meeting my parents last night, my friends surely understood. When my parents were around, it was all about Dr. and Mrs. Harrington.

"I'll be right back," I said as I followed my mother.

Not that I expected Miriam and Michellelee to stay behind. My friends were way too nosy for that. I didn't have to turn around to know that both of them were right behind me.

I took two steps out of the townhouse and screamed. Well, I didn't scream. I opened my mouth to scream, but I didn't have the chance. Miriam and Michellelee screamed for me.

There it was - my dream car. The car I was absolutely sure my parents would buy for me four years from now when I received my PhD. But it was here now. A red Porsche 911. Sitting in front of our townhouse. With a white bow on the grill.

A bunch of people stood around the car, gazing at it in awe.

"Oh, my God," Michellelee said. "It's red! That must mean it's mine."

Those words made me find my voice. "I don't think so." Turning to my parents, I could barely breathe. "It's mine?"

"It's yours, sweetheart," my mother said.

"Yes, it's yours, daughter," my father added.

"Thank you," I said, squeezing them both as tightly as I could.

"I had wanted to get you two of these," my father said, "but your mother stopped me."

When he laughed and my mother didn't, I knew he was telling the truth.

Turning to Miriam and Michellelee, I clapped my hands and squealed. And my girls joined in with me.

"We've got to go for a ride!" Miriam exclaimed.

"But it only has two seats," I said.

"That's okay; we'll stuff Miriam in the back."

Any other time, Miriam would've been pissed at Michellelee. But now, she nodded as if that was a good idea.

I turned to my parents. "Can we?"

My father dangled the keys and I jumped up and down.

"Thank you, Daddy. I love you so much."

"And I love you, daughter. In all ways and for always," he said before he snapped the first photo....

In all ways and for always. Those were words my father had said to me every day of my life. In the morning when Nellie (the woman who helped raise me) got me up, dressed, and to the table for breakfast, my conversation with my father was always the same.

"Good morning, Daddy."

He would lean over so that I could kiss his cheek. "Morning, daughter." Then, he would wait until I climbed into my chair before he added, "Do you know how much I love you?"

Even though I knew what he was going to say, I asked, "How much?"

"In all ways and for always."

And at night, after I said my prayers, whenever my father was home, he would come in and say the same thing before he tucked me into bed. It was our little game. A game that told me how much I was loved and how I would always be.

But those days were so far away. I no longer had that car, just like I no longer had my father's love. I'd had to sell that car for funds when my parents had taken their support away.

And, I'd have to walk away from Jamal, if I wanted my father in my life again.

That was never going to happen. I'd never leave Jamal because he loved me in a way that I thought my father did, but didn't. Jamal really did love me in all ways and for always. No matter what I did, no matter what mistakes I made, no matter what, Jamal would be there. Just like I would be there for him—in all ways and for always.

At least that was one promise of love that I would always be able to depend on.