



Faydra D. Fields

# **The Pride**

by Faydra D. Fields

cover design by Mark K. Bailey

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## **Preface/Introduction**

Several people have asked me “Why this story? Where’d it come from?”

The long-story-short answer is best summed up by a quote from Irish dramatist and socialist George Bernard Shaw’s 1921 play, “Back to Methuselah,” Part 1, Act 1:

*“You see things; and you say, ‘Why?’ But I dream things that never were; and I say, ‘Why not?’”*

**Faydra D. Fields**

August, 2011

## **Acknowledgements**

My inspiration:

the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

“The Pride” is dedicated to

my parents, Carson II and Bettye, my sister, Tammie, my brothers, Carson III and Tyrone, my best friend, Andrey Black, my “other mother,” Susan R. Winfield, and her daughters, my godsisters, Jessica Lee and Heather Bree, who have always supported me with unending love and respect,

And to anyone and everyone else who has offered me encouragement, a loving reproach, constructive criticism, quality time, a shoulder on which to lean, a place to rest, a genuine smile, and/or an avenue to be of assistance.



## The Lionesses

### Xavari

This is not how I planned my life. If you'd told me, back when I was 14, that I'd be doing what I'm doing now at 19, I would have cursed you out like I was so good at doing when I didn't care who heard me or how bad it made me look. Too many men considered me fine, so my behavior was the least of my concerns. I could pull them all. Cute got me over. Cute got me fed and clothed and entertained. Cute also got me into the situation I'm in right now. I've learned that "cute and stupid" is an ugly combination.

### Romina

I'm sick of people telling me what I *can't* do. My family thinks I'm crazy, but they can all kiss my ass! So what if school was hard for me? So what if I was in the slow classes? I'm not too slow to know what I want, and I'm going to get it. I can do it. I know I can. I just have to work three times as hard as I did before. I don't give a damn who thinks it's a bad idea. My family thinks anything I want to do is a bad idea. I'm tired of being treated like a dummy, and I will show them all. Now I just have to figure out how to make some more money.

### Denise

Life happens when you're making other plans. Isn't that what John Lennon said in a song? See, I'm a planner. When things happen that aren't in my day planner, it really messes things up for me. The biggest surprises of my life were not in my day planner, and my life just won't seem to go right. I guess what bothers me most is that I'm very intelligent and very well-educated, but I keep making the same mistake. I hate to think of them as mistakes, but when you boil it down to starch, that's what they are. I only say that to myself; never anyone else. As far as other people think, I've got it all worked out and I'm cool with everything that's happened in my life. If they only



knew. I figure if I keep dancing fast enough, maybe no one will notice I'm just a couple of beats behind the rhythm.

## **Angela**

It's whateva, you know? You think I'mo waste my time workin' two and three jobs for next to nuthin'? Please. I have betta things to do. Besides, me and mine is well taken care of. I have'ta jump through a few hoops here and there, but in the long run it's worth it to be able to kick my feet up 'n enjoy my youf while I'm young. The rent is paid, the food is free an'da docta bills neva come to me. The best times is during the holidays. I mean, that's when the suckas really come out the woodwork. I cain't remember the last time I had to do Thanksgiving or Christmas shopping. Haha. I'll be damned, though. That letter I got in the mail the other day means my whole world is gone change. I am **not** feelin' it.

## Chapter 1

### Angela

"Why you sittin' here lookin' in my mouth?" Angela rested the phone on her shoulder and looked with annoyance at Sonjie.

"I ain't lookin' in yo' mouth," Sonjie huffed.

"I know you lis'nen to my conversation. Why don't you gone somewhere? Go outside or something!"

"I'm on punishment, remember?"

"You don't need to be sittin' here tryin' ta hear what I'm talkin' about. You on punishment because you think you grown. Go read a book or something."

"I read all the books we got in this house. I'm bored."

"SONJIE, GET OUTTA MY FACE! I DON'T CARE WHERE YOU GO. JUST GET OUTTA MY FACE!"

"Can I go outside?"

"I DON'T CARE! JUST GO SOMEWHERE! UH! YOU MAKE ME SICK!"

Sonjie pretended to pout while she was facing her mother, but when her back was to Angela she grinned in triumph and hustled toward the front door. Before Sonjie could grab the knob, Angela's next words stopped her dead in her tracks.

"Take the baby with you. He need some fresh air," Angela said sweetly.

Sonjie would rather have had a shoe thrown at the back of her head than to have heard those words from her mother. She knew this was Angela's way of trying to keep her from cutting too loose once she



was out the door. Sonjie turned around and dragged back to the playpen that was sitting directly in front of the television. When she picked the baby up out of the playpen, and he lost sight of the television screen, he began to wail. Sonjie exhaled forcefully and rolled her eyes to the ceiling.

When she caught a glimpse of her mother's smile as she turned around and headed toward the door, Sonjie thought to herself, "If I wanted to get stuck with a kid, I'd have a kid." She wanted to say what she was thinking to Angela, but she wanted to get outside more than she wanted to risk making her mother change her mind.

"Don't go too far, JiJi," Angela cooed after her daughter as Sonjie and the baby disappeared on the other side of the closing door.

"You there? Yeah, she pissed. You should'a seen her face when I told her to come back and get Marcus. I could tell she wanted to say something, but that little fass tack wanted to get outside more than she wanted to fight with me. I keep tellin' that little heffa she cain't win when it comes to fightin' me. I'mo always come out on top. Shiii... I pay the cost to be the boss in this mugg," Angela said into the phone and chuckled.

"Anyway, tell me what happened with that dude from the club. He was fine! Did you let him hi... Hold on, girl. What?!?!" Angela's seven-year-old was standing in front of her with an empty sippy cup.

"Can I have some juice?" Kelvin held the sippy cup like it was an accordion and twisted it in both hands.

"What time is it, Kelvin?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, now you don't know what time it is? Um. OK. Well, since you cain't tell time, then you **sho'** cain't have no juice."

"Um, it's, it's..." Kelvin paused and studied the hands on the clock above his mother's head. After a few seconds, he dashed out of the room. Angela laughed into the phone.

"He ran in my bedroom to look at the digital clock. He think he slick. His little feelin's gone be hurt when he see what time it is.

Huh?

Oh, I don't let him drink after a certain time, because he pee inna bed.

I tried that, but he still do it.

Yup, tried that, too.

Hold on.

KELVIN, WHAT TIME IS IT?" Angela laughed to herself when her shout was answered with silence.

Kelvin walked slowly back into the room with his head hanging down and the sippy cup dangling in one hand.

"It's too late for me to drink something," he said with tears welling up in his eyes. Angela almost felt sorry for him, but she thought about having to walk five blocks to the Laundromat if he pissed his sheets again.

"Momma, please," Kelvin begged, "I promise I'll wake up if I have to go to the bathroom. Pleeaaaaasseeeee, Momma. Please!" Tears spilled out of Kelvin's eyes. Kelvin's face was contorted with pain.

Angela knew that look. It was the same one she used to have on her face when her mother did the same thing to her. One thing Angela refused to do to Kelvin, however, was spank him when he wet the bed.

Every time Angela wet the bed, her mother spanked her unmercifully, and it didn't stop Angela from wetting the bed. It only

terrified her out of going to sleep at night. Angela still bore a faint scar on her forehead, because she was so sleepy in class one afternoon that she toppled out of her chair and slammed her face into the desk of the student next to her. Her mother's response, when she'd come to get Angela from the nurse's office was simply, "That's what you get. Maybe you'll stop pissing yourself at night."

Angela didn't stop wetting the bed until she was almost 12. She got her period, and she just stopped wetting the bed. Since a menstrual cycle wasn't going to save Kelvin from bed-wetting, she hoped he would grow out of it somehow. She absolutely abhorred those extra trips to the Laundromat, so she restricted his liquid intake starting at 6pm each day.

"Go get the Vaseline, Kelvin, so I can put it on your lips." As Kelvin did as he was told, he tried very hard not to let her hear him cry. He knew bed-wetting wouldn't get him spanked but crying like a baby would. Angela hated whining and crying from anyone who wasn't a baby.

Angela pretended not to hear Kelvin's stifled sobs. As much as she hated walking all that way to wash sheets, she hated that she had to deny her son something as basic as water or juice when he was thirsty after dusk. The worst of it was how badly his lips dried and cracked during the night. She always knew which pillowcases to put back on his bed when she washed, because they all had little crescent-shaped, faded red marks on them. The Vaseline helped some, but Kelvin's lips always looked red and raw.

"Girl, let me call you back."

Angela hung up the phone just as her twin nephews rushed into the room, each one putting their little chests against one of her knees. Angela was babysitting for her sister. In unison, they whispered loudly, "Aunt Gee, Kelvin's cryin' again."

"Stop being tattle-tails," Angela said softly. The boys moved their faces closer to their aunt's face because she was whispering, too.

"Go help Kelvin with the Vaseline and say somethin' nice to him."

"OK," they said in unison and dashed off towards Kelvin's bedroom. As the boys left the room, the front door flew open and Sonjie ran in with Marcus still wailing on her hip. As Sonjie slammed the door and put her back up to it as if keeping out intruders, Angela stood up.

"Has he been cryin' this whole time, Sonjie? Why you let him keep cryin' like..." Angela stopped mid-sentence when she noticed the shocked look on Sonjie's face.

"Ma..." Sonjie looked like she wanted to say more, but the words wouldn't come.

"Sonjie, what's wrong with you?" Angela zipped over to her daughter.

"Ma..." Sonjie started breathing fast.

"Sonjie. Calm down. You scarin' me!" Angela grabbed for Marcus but Sonjie had a vice grip on the baby and wouldn't let him go.

"Tell me what's wrong, Sonjie? Are you hurt? Did somebody try to do something to you?!?!"

"Ma, there's a lady coming down the street, Ma, and I swear to Go..."

"GIRL! You betta not take the Lord's name in vain!" Angela punched her fists into her sides and glared at her daughter.

"Ma, there's this woman comin' down the street, and, Ma, she got a baby on her hip who look just like Marcus. I'm not lying! She look like she's preg..."

Before Sonjie could finish her sentence, there was a knock on the door.



## The Cubs

### William, 15

(Denise's son)

I can't believe she's tripping over something so stupid. Boys fight. It's not like I'm going to be a criminal because I got into one fight. She's the one who has me going to this stuck-up, stupid school, anyway. If she'd let me go to the school up the block from our apartments, I'd be around more people who look like me and know what I'm going through. These white folks don't care nothing about me. Oh, God. I can hear her now, "Don't care *anything* about me." Ugh. I can't believe I have her voice in my head, sitting here correcting myself when she's not even around. How square can you get? I want to go live with my father, but how do I tell her that's what I want to do? There are too many people, too many females, in this two-bedroom apartment. I could use that argument to get out from under her thumb, but how do I convince Dad to let me stay with him?

### Naomi, 14

(Denise's oldest daughter)

I can't be pregnant. I cannot be pregnant. I. cannot. be. pregnant. Oh, God. What am I going to do? I can't believe I trusted that foolish Kenny! "We don't need a condom, baby. I can't even have kids. I had an accident when I was little," he told me. Mother will lose her mind over this, and I'm sure I'll lose my life when Daddy finds out. Kenny's mother just laughed when I told her: "Why you cryin'? I bet you wasn't cryin' when y'all was doing the **do**. Cryin' ain't gone help nothin'. It is what it is. If you pregnant, you pregnant. I'll take care of it while you finish school." She didn't even act like it was a big deal. She said all that to me without even turning away from the television, like she honestly thinks it's that easy. Doesn't she know my parents are going to kill me?!?! Oh, GOD! What was I thinking?

**Sonjie, 12**

(Angela's daughter)

Let me not crease this magazine, or Momma will know I found it under her mattress. Um! Look at his *thing*. I wonder what it would feel like to have that inside me. Momma think I don't hear her and Daddy in there at night. I hear them. They so nasty. She be moaning and calling his name, talking about, "Uh, that's my spot, baby! That's my spot! Right there, baby!" Haha! I can't wait to be with a boy. I like walking down the street in front of them high school boys. I don't look 12. My friends are still flat in front and back, but I'm not. Plus, I'm tall like my Daddy's people. They don't know I'm only in sixth grade. They cain't do nothing for me, though. If I didn't learn nothing else from my Momma, I learned this: don't ever hook up with a dude who ain't got money to spend on you. Yeah, I cain't wait to be with a boy, but he gotta have a car and some money before I give up anything.

**Quintenerra, 6**

(Romina's daughter)

My mommy embarrasses us. She doesn't mean to. She can't help it. I heard my grandma call her retarded. I asked my teacher what retarded means, and she said it means slow to learn. My teacher wanted to know why I was asking her about that word, and I told her I heard someone say it. She didn't say anything, but I know she knew I was asking because of Mommy. My teacher says I'm not retarded. She says I should be in the second or third grade, because I'm really smart. I asked her if I could go to the second or third grade. She said I need to stay with children my own age. My teacher's nice, though. She gives me higher-level work so I don't get bored with school. I was excited at first and then I took some of my high-level work home. My brother had to help me with it, because my mommy couldn't. I wish my teacher was my mommy.

## Chapter 2

### William & Naomi

William sat at the desk in his bedroom. He was trying to find the right words to put on the paper that would convince his father to allow him to move in with him. He reasoned that sending a letter was better than asking over the phone, because he could get all his thoughts out before his father interrupted with questions or just flat-out said no. William reasoned he could also be proactive in his letter and answer all the questions he could think his dad might ask.

"Yes," William responded to the soft rap on his door.

"May I come in?" Naomi's muffled voice traveled to him through the closed door.

"I'm busy, Mi-Mi. Can you come back later?" William scratched through a sentence on his paper and started it over on the next line.

"I really need to talk with you, Big Brother." Naomi never called William "Big Brother" unless she really needed to talk. She wasn't a pest like other people's little sisters. He liked talking with her, and he respected her. She was actually a great little sister, so he tried to accommodate her whenever he could. She did the same for him when he needed to talk.

"OK. Come in." William covered the paper with one of his school books. He shifted in his chair to face the door as Naomi turned the knob and pushed it open.

"Hey," Naomi said as she hugged herself and inched into the room. She closed the door with her back and leaned against it. She stood by the door studying her shoes. William found this odd, since she normally came straight over to his bed and sat across from him while he sat at his desk.



"Hey," William said focusing in on his sister's tear-stained face. "Mi-mi, why are you crying?" When she didn't answer him, he started to get concerned. "When's Mother coming home?"

"She'll be home in about three hours," Naomi responded without looking up. This caused William to frown slightly. He didn't have three hours to deal with whatever Naomi was crying about. *She probably got an A-minus on a test*, he said to himself.

"What's on your mind?"

"I have to tell you something, Big Brother. I need to know you won't go to Mother, please." Naomi didn't look up but her tears increased in volume.

"Of course I won't tell Mother. You keep my secrets. I keep your secrets. What's wrong, little mama?"

"Don't call me that, William," Naomi said through gritted teeth.

"Why not," William asked good-naturedly, "I always call you little mama." He was smiling, hoping he could get his sister to smile a little, too. His smile quickly disappeared when Naomi melted to the floor and started crying hysterically into her hands.

"Shhhhhh." William rushed from his chair and gathered his little sister into his arms. She was so tiny and thin for her age. He picked her up and carried her over to the chair he'd been sitting in and placed her gently on her bottom. She kept crying, even though he tried to comfort her. When he realized he just needed to let her get it out, he kneeled in front of her and placed her forehead on his shoulder and put his arms around her. He rocked her slowly and tried to remember the last time he'd seen Naomi cry.

Naomi didn't cry. He'd nicknamed her "little mama," because she was always so well-collected and organized, just like their mother. She would run the house when Denise wasn't home. Naomi made sure he and their little sister were fed, the dishes were washed, everyone's clothes were laundered and ironed and put out for the

next day of school, and she even read bedtime stories to Sarah when Denise wasn't home or was too tired to do it. It hurt him to see Naomi so distraught, but he knew he couldn't make her talk until she was ready, so he just held her and rocked her.

"William?"

"Yes, lit... I mean, Naomi?"

"William, I'm pregnant," Naomi choked the words out into her brother's shoulder. She felt him stop rocking. He put one hand on each of her shoulders and pushed himself away from her to look into her face. Her eyes were swollen and red and her nose was running.

"What did you say?" William looked Naomi square in the face. He was sure he'd heard her wrong.

"I'm pregnant," Naomi said again, forcing the words from her throat and trying not to break down crying again.

"What?"

How?

Who?" William let go of Naomi's shoulders and sat back on the heels of his feet. His mind was telling him to close his gaping mouth, but he couldn't do it.

"I was stupid, William. I let this boy put his penis between my legs and he wasn't wearing a condom. It was my first time, and he said he di..." Naomi stopped mid-sentence, as William held up his hands, closed his eyes tight and turned his head to the side.

"Who...the hell is this boy, Naomi?!?!" William could feel the blood rising in his face.

"He's my boyfriend." Naomi decided not to scold William for his profanity, since she was depending on him to help her with her situation.

"Your boyfriend?" William got to his feet and yelled down at the top of his sister's head. "YOUR BOYFRIEND? YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO HAVE A BOYFRIEND, NAOMI!" He saw her shrink into herself, and she started crying again. He realized he was yelling at her more out of jealousy than out of anger. How was it that his little sister had lost her virginity before him, and he was a boy and closer to being able to date than she was?!?!?

"I know, but all the girls liked him and he liked me," she said through sniffles and sobs.

"Naomi, we used to tell each other everything! You know everything about me! Everything! Now you're keeping secrets from me?!?! Mother explicitly told us both we cannot date until we are 16 years old. Now you're telling me that not only do you have a boyfriend, you're letting him put his penis inside your vagina?!?!"

"It was only one ti... Wait a minute. What?" Naomi stopped crying and turned her swollen eyes and frowning forehead up to look at her brother. She was confused.

"What do you mean, "What?! You heard me. You're letting some little boy put his penis in your vagina, and you don't even talk to me before you do that!" William dropped back to the floor with his legs crossed in front of him, Native-American style. His shoulders were hunched down and his chin was on his chest.

"Wait a minute. I didn't let him put his penis in my vagina." Naomi wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

"Don't start lying to me now, Naomi. That's the only way you could be pregnant."

"What? Wait a minute. That's not what that song said."

"What song, Naomi?" William was getting annoyed with her.

"Remember that one we snuck and listened to on the station Mother won't let us play? The guy said over and over *'Let me put it between*

*your thighs, so we can make a baby with my nose and your eyes.'*  
That's what Kenny did. He put his penis between my thighs and this white stuff came out of it and he wasn't wearing a condom. I got up fast and wiped it off. When I got home, there was still some of it dried up on my thigh and soaking into my skin. Why are you laughing?" Naomi couldn't see William's face, but she saw his shoulders vibrating like he was sitting in a paint mixer. She frowned and crossed her arms with a huff.

"I apologize, little mama. Oops. I mean... I forgot you don't want me to call you *little mama* right now," William was trying to stop laughing, but he couldn't get himself under control.

"STOP LAUGHING AT ME, WILLIAM! MOTHER IS GOING TO KILL ME AND YOU'RE SITTING HERE LAUGHING AT ME! WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING AT ME?!?! STOP IT! I HATE YOU! IT'S NOT FUNNY!" Naomi popped up from the chair and tried to dash past William, but he grabbed her arm and wrestled her to the floor, hugging her playfully and still laughing. Naomi struggled against him, but William continued to hold her and laugh.

"Woooo! Mi-Mi! Woooo. Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute! Woooo! OK, I'm going to stop, I promise. Woooo. For real. Give me a minute," and William leaned to the side, laughing uncontrollably and taking an obviously livid Naomi over with him. Naomi struggled to get away from him, more angry than upset at this point.

"Let me go, William! I hate you! Why are you doing this to me? My life is over and you think it's funny. I bet you won't be laughing so hard at my funeral! Let me go! I'll never tell you anything again! Never!" Naomi kept struggling to get away and William kept holding her and laughing.

"What are you all doing," a little voice said through the closed door. It was Sarah. William's laughter had awakened her from her nap.

"Nothing. Naomi is telling me a funny joke," William shouted at the closed door. The knob turned and Sarah poked her head into the

room. She saw William laughing like a madman and a scowling Naomi struggling to get out of his embrace. Sarah flung the door open and ran into the room.

"I want to play, too!" Sarah wrapped her arms as best she could around William and Naomi and laughed with William. Sarah twisted William in such a way that he lost his grip on Naomi and she leaped up from the floor and moved away from the mass of arms and legs and giggles.

"Sarah. Leave right now! I'm talking with William." Naomi stood by the door and held the knob.

"I just wanted to have fun, too," Sarah pouted when she realized how angry Naomi was. William figured he'd laughed enough at his sister's expense, so he helped her get Sarah out of the room.

"Sarah, come back later and we'll play, okay? Right now, Naomi and I need to finish talking. Give me hugs and kisses." Sarah hugged and kissed her big brother and walked toward the door. As she passed Naomi, Sarah poked out her tongue and rolled her little eyes.

"I like William better, anyway. He's not always bossing me," Sarah said as Naomi closed the door behind her. When Naomi turned back to William, he was standing by his bed with a book in his hand, flipping the pages and still chuckling.

"Naomi. I apologize. I shouldn't have laughed at you, but there's something you need to read."

"I don't want to read anything you have, William. I can't believe you would..."

"Hush, Naomi, and look at this with me, please. I think you'll laugh, too, when you read this."

"I doubt it. If it's not something to tell me how to get un-pregnant, it's not going to be funny to me." Naomi left the door behind and walked over to her brother. He offered her the seat at the desk and he

placed the book in front of her. Naomi read the header: *Human Sexuality and the Developing Teen Body and Mind*.

"You're learning about this in school?" Naomi's eyes grew large when she saw the pictures of naked men and women.

"Yes, and you will, too, next year. I think it's why Mother has the 'no dating before 16' rule," William said as he pointed to the part where he wanted Naomi to start reading.

Neither of them said a word as Naomi read to the end of the page and flipped to the next. William stayed next to her, one hand on the desk next to the book and one hand on the back of the chair, leaning over her as she read. When she was done, she closed the book and sat quietly for a few seconds.

William backed a couple of steps away from her to give her a minute to process what she had just read. For the second time, Naomi popped up from her chair, but she didn't try to dash past William this time. She jumped up to William's height and hugged her brother hard around the neck.

"Thank you, William, thank you," Naomi said as she exhaled and plopped back onto the chair at the desk. As she did so, her elbow pushed the *Human Sexuality* book and another book across the desk, exposing the letter that William had been writing before she knocked on the door.

He reached down to move it before she could see what it was about, but he could tell by her expression she'd seen enough to understand why it was hidden.

"Don't think that means we're done with the subject of your boyfriend and why you're playing with fire, young lady," William said with half-hearted conviction as he looked at the floor, folded the letter and shoved it in his back pocket. He was hoping and praying Naomi wouldn't press the issue. He wouldn't be so lucky.

"No secrets, huh? You're trying to leave us."



## The Alpha Male

### Emmanuel

What can I say?

I love children and I love women...

...in that order.

I live for my children, and I don't have enough of them yet. I'm thinking about stopping at 20 or 21...

...children, that is.

I'm 35. I figure I want to get them all "made" before I turn 40 and then spend the next 40 to 50 years watching them, and all my grands and great-grands, and probably my great-great-grands, grow up. I think I have time on my side. All my grandparents are still alive. So are both my parents. Barring a tragic accident, I should be able to make it into my 90s before I leave this bad, old world...knock on wood.

You should see my babies.

Every one of them looks just like me. I couldn't deny any of them if I wanted to, and I never would. The only thing they got from their mothers is skin tone. They're all shades; from the mellowest yellow to the deepest brown and every shade in between.

They are so beautiful.

I have pictures of every one of them plastered everywhere in my cubicle at work. People who don't know think some of them are my nieces and nephews. They're floored when I tell them they're all mine. I get the usual silly questions:

*"Do they all have the same mother?"*

*"You starting a little league team?"*



*"Did you start making babies when you were nine?"*

*"Which one is your favorite?"*

*"How can you afford all these kids?"*

*"I bet you do more with the boys than the girls, don't you?"*

*"Can I borrow a few of them at tax time?"*

It doesn't matter to me what people say or think. I love my children, I take care of my children, and I know and spend time with all my children. I was at every birth, my name is on every birth certificate, and they all have my last name. I've been to every play, athletic event, recital and preschool, kindergarten, sixth- and eighth-grade graduation that I have physically been able to attend. When it's necessary, and many times when it's not, I take them and pick them up from their schools, doctors' appointments and practices. It's not a burden or any trouble. You make time for the things you want to make time for, and my children come before anything or anyone else. My parents taught me that. My parents are the reason I've always wanted a big family.

See, I'm an only child, but my mother and father both had lots of brothers and sisters. Interestingly enough, they're both from the same itty, bitty town and they're both the oldest of all their sisters and brothers. I actually have aunts and uncles who are about the same age as me. The entire time I was growing up, one aunt or uncle from either my mother's side of the family or my father's side of the family moved in with us, stayed awhile and then moved on. When that aunt or uncle left, it seemed like another one took his/her place. The best times for me were when an aunt or uncle brought their sons or daughters with them. Then I had live-in playmates.

Being an only child, I enjoyed having other children to play with. My parents were very protective, and they didn't allow me to go to other people's houses and no one could come in our house. I played with a few neighborhood kids in our front yard, but they wouldn't stick around for long. There was only so much you could do in one tiny

front yard, and they opted to go ride bikes and play at the nearby park, which I wasn't allowed to do unless my mother **and** father were able to go with me.

My mother would get so frustrated with me, because I'd be so desperate for playmates that I'd give away any toy a "friend" requested thinking that would get him or her to come back and play with me. As an only, protected and doted-upon child, my parents bought me every toy I wanted, and constantly replaced the toys I gave away. It never occurred to me that the children were only coming back to be given more toys. I mean, I think they liked me at first, but my neediness for friendship drove many of them away.

At first, my mother lauded me for being willing to share my toys with my playmates, but then she discerned there was more going on than just childhood generosity. She realized she needed to strike a balance between my sharing and my bribes. She didn't want me to become selfish, but she didn't want me thinking the only way to have friends was to buy them.

Since I wasn't allowed to go into anyone else's house, and no one was allowed to come into my house, my mother decided to start choosing which toys I was allowed to take into the front yard. She developed a system of "inside" toys and "outside" toys. I still gave away whatever toys my playmates asked for, but the hit to my parents' pockets was far less damaging than before. Haha.

My best memories of childhood were the six weeks in the summer where I'd get to go to my grandparents' homes. I'd spend three weeks with my mother's parents and three weeks with my father's parents. My paternal and maternal grandparents lived so close to one another that the only thing that changed from the first three weeks and the second three weeks was where I slept. There'd be cousins and aunts and uncles everywhere, and we'd somehow all eventually meet in the middle throughout the days and nights. We children would get up at o'dark:30 to do chores on the farms, and then we'd play until the sun was simply a crescent on the horizon.

I wasn't restricted to a patch of grass in the front yard when I visited my grandparents. We children went everywhere; all over the farms, the creek, the woods, the store across the railroad tracks, the movie theatre in town, everywhere! At dinner, the whole family, and often nearby neighbors, would sit around the long table and eat and talk and laugh and just have a good time being together. We had our fusses and fights, too, but they were nothing compared to the good times we had. I'd go into a state of depression whenever it neared the time for me to go back to my patch of grass in my tiny front yard.

One summer, right after dinner, and the day before my parents were supposed to come get me, I ran deep into the woods and climbed a huge tree. I resolved in my young mind that they weren't going to take me home, where I had no one to play with. I was young and dumb enough to believe that my parents would come, look around for a while and then simply leave without me. Instead, everyone panicked when they realized I wasn't sitting in the living room watching television with all the other children. From my perch, I heard voices yelling my name from every direction.

At first, the voices were faint and then they grew louder. I remember my chest rising and falling quicker and quicker. When two of my uncles were so close to my hiding place that it sounded like they were shouting in each of my ears, I put my hand over my mouth to keep from yelling out. Their fear and panic, and the strained and panicked voices of everyone else, caused me to begin to get frantic, even though I was well aware of where I was and that I was fine.

My two uncles passed on by my tree and some more aunts and uncles and all four of my grandparents walked swiftly passed, going here, there and everywhere trying to find me. No one thought to look up, and that's how I overheard from two of my aunts why my parents were so protective of me. After everyone stopped searching in the area where I actually was, that bit of information is what made me get out of the tree and go back to my father's parents' home.

On top of the shock of what I'd overheard, I had so many people yelling at me and smacking me upside my head and shaking my shoulders, I didn't know how to react.

*"Boy, is you crazy?!?! Do you know what yo' momma would'a done if she got here and couldn't find you?!?"*

*"Thank you, Jesus! Thank you for bringing my nephew back to us."*

*"Manny, I ought to whip your rump for scaring us all like that! Don't you ever, ever, ever do something like that again!!"*

*"I'm so glad you came on home, son. Yo' grandma and me was powerful worried about you, powerful!"*

*"Lord, Jesus, just take me now!"*

*"Where were you, boy?!?!"*

*"Is you hungry, baby? Is you cold?"*

*"You keep this up, and I'll be dog-gone if you come back here, boy! You ain't gone have yo' daddy trying to kill me for your foolishness!"*

I just sat in a chair...

...in the middle of the room...

...and let all their panic, stress and relief wash over me.

I'd just learned the worst thing anyone could have told me, and I couldn't tell any of them what I'd overheard.



## Chapter 3

### Xavari

"When are they coming to fix the air conditioning? This fan isn't doing anything but making a lot of noise and blowing hot air around the room." Regina had to speak loudly to be heard over the fan oscillating in the kitchen.

"The guy said he'd be here first thing in the morning. I can't wait. I took the little window unit out of my room and put it in Xavier's room so he doesn't wither away from the heat. His little body is all broken out with heat rash." Xavari was sitting at the kitchen table and her sister was standing behind her styling Xavari's hair into cornrows.

"Did you remember to put that part of the crib that slides down back up after you changed him? I remember that one day you forgot and Xavier rolled out onto the floor. One minute I'm talking to you. The next minute we hear this thud." Regina laughed as she recalled the sound of Xavier dropping to the big pillows Emmanuel had placed right next to the baby's crib for just such an occurrence. Xavari didn't laugh. She was remembering the chewing out that she had received from Emmanuel for being so careless.

"Regina. Even when Xavier's 50 years old, that's not going to be funny to me. My baby could have hurt himself badly." Xavari was annoyed that Regina always recalled that incident with such amusement.

"Girl, please. Babies are more resilient than we think. Besides, Manny was well-prepared for it. Nothing happened to your baby, so get over it."

"Whatever. I just don't think it's funny."

"Whatever. If you weren't so proud, you would have had a new crib for Xavier, instead of that ol' raggedy thing you got at the thrift store, but you didn't want Daddy to buy you anything for this hole in the

wall. I don't know why you didn't just stay at Daddy's instead of moving into this roach motel of an apartment building," Regina teased as she worked on a braid.

"I just needed my own space. I got tired of Daddy trying to tell me how to raise Zay. It was like he thought since he was paying the bills, buying the food and putting clothes on our backs, he could just run me," Xavari spoke loudly to be heard over the fan.

"Well, duh. He was footing the bill, so you have to deal with his rules. You know how Daddy is." Regina was using the spiked end of the rat-tail comb to part Xavari's hair so she could start another braid.

"Yeah, I know how Daddy is. That's why I had to get out of there. He was driving me up the wall." Xavari closed her eyes and tried to concentrate away the pain in her scalp.

"I can't blame you for that. It's why I couldn't wait to get married, but now what are you going to do, Xavari?"

"Ow! Could you quit pulling so hard?!" Xavari hunched down in the chair to try to move away from Regina's hands. Regina kept a firm grip because she didn't want the braid to get twisted.

"Look, I can't help it if you're tender-headed. Stop squirming and sit still or this braid is going to be all zigzag, and you ain't Allen Iverson." Regina repositioned Xavari's head so she could finish the braid.

"What do you mean '*what am I going to do*'? What can I do?" Xavari squinted her eyes and hiked her shoulders up to her ears to try to lessen the pain of having her hair slowly pulled from her scalp into another cornrow.

"Quit squirming, Zee, or I'm going to leave your head half-done. Why do you do this every time? You're the one who wants these tiny little cornrows, and you know what I have to do to make it look right. It wouldn't hurt so badly if you let me make them a little bigger," Regina complained.

"I like them small. They look better that way to me," Xavari said as she futilely tried to move her head to a position that was more comfortable as her sister continued to tightly braid her hair.

"They look good any way I do them, so you can kill that noise."

"Whatever."

"Whatever, nothing. You wouldn't ask me to do it all the time if I didn't have you looking boss, so don't even front, little girl." Regina finished the braid, put a faux cowry shell on the end, created another section and started another braid.

"Ow! I know you don't have to pull that hard, girl! Can we take a break? I feel like you're going to pull my eyes into the back of my head," Xavari asked with exasperation.

"Let me finish this one, and I'll let you take a break." Regina eased off the braid a bit. She finished it and put a faux cowry shell on the end.

"Whu! Cheese and crackers! How much more do you have to go?" Xavari felt around her head to see how much loose hair was left unbraided. She frowned when she realized Regina wasn't even halfway done and her frown deepened when she looked over at the fan. It was just whirring away, making a lot of noise, but it wasn't shooting out any cool air.

"Answer my question, little girl. I want to talk about this before your man gets home." Regina spoke to Xavari over her shoulder as she washed the grease off her hands in the kitchen sink.

"Emmanuel doesn't live here," Xavari retorted.

"He has a key and you let him come and go as he pleases, so he lives here, even if it ain't fulltime," Regina shot back.

"Whatever. He didn't say he was coming over tonight. I asked him to be here tomorrow to let the air conditioning guy in, but he said he'd



have to let me know if he'd be able to work from home tomorrow. I need to call him and find out."

"Girl, please, you don't know when you're going to see that man." When Regina turned around from the sink, Xavari had her eyes closed and she was resting her head on her arms on the table. With excitement in her voice, Regina said, "Oh, hey, Emmanuel." Xavari whipped her head up from the table and looked behind her to view the empty door frame. Regina laughed.

"You punk. You play too much." Xavari tried not to register the disappointment on her face that she felt in her heart. She always got excited when Emmanuel came through the door.

"Little girl, what are you going to do?" Regina asked again. She was drying her hands on a dish towel.

"What do you think I'm going to do, Gina? It's not like I have any choices," Xavari snapped.

"Yes, you have choices. You just don't want to admit you have choices." Regina sat across the kitchen table from her sister.

"I'm not having an abortion, so I don't have any other choice, Gina." Xavari wouldn't look at Regina. She put her elbow on the table and rested her cheek on her fist.

"I don't understand why you're being so adamant about this, Zee. Why would you have a baby you don't want?"

"It's a sin against God, Gina! I'm not doing it!" Xavari was getting annoyed with this conversation.

"Well, when you were "doing it," were you thinking about sinning against God?"

"Excuse me?!?!!" Xavari's voice went up a few octaves.

"Xavari. You are 19 years old, and you're about to have another baby with a man you say doesn't want to marry you and what's

worse is you don't want to marry him. I can't believe you didn't learn from my mistakes. You know how disappointed Daddy was when I got pregnant the first time. I thought the man was going to have a stroke the second and third time I got pregnant. You watched me give up high school, friends, parties, the prom, graduation, the senior class tri..."

"I know, I know, but it's different for me. I graduated from high school. I'm in college," Xavari said with an attitude.

"For now. What are you going to do when you're too sick or too tired to go to class?" Regina gazed steadily at the top of Xavari's head, because Xavari refused to look at her.

"I won't be too sick or too tired. I'm going to finish college. I **have** to finish college. If I don't, I won't be able to get a decent job or..."

"Xavari, listen to yourself. You don't know what's going to happen during this pregnancy. Remember what you went through when you were carrying Xavier? Your body hasn't recovered from **that** pregnancy, and now you're pregnant again. You're going to have two kids in diapers at the same time and..."

"JUST LIKE YOU DID!" Xavari yelled at Regina and shot up to her feet and squared off on Regina.

"YES, XAVARI, JUST LIKE I DID, AND YOU THINK YOU'D HAVE LEARNED NOT TO BE JUST LIKE ME!" Regina's fists were balled at her sides and she was breathing heavily. Xavari was in the same stance. They looked like mirror images of one another.

"I'M NOT GOING TO BE LIKE YOU, BI...!" Xavari stopped herself before the "ch" escaped her lips.

"I wish you would," Regina said slowly in a low growl. Neither one of them breathed for a few seconds. The only sound in the kitchen was the droning of the oscillating fan. Their eyes were locked as though they were playing the staring game they used to play as children to

see who would blink first. Xavari conceded. She crumpled into the chair directly behind her and broke down into tears.

"Oh, God, how could I let this happen again? I don't want another baby right now!" Xavari covered her face with her hands and sobbed like a woman who was mourning the death of a child, not a woman giving life to a child. Regina felt a lump in her throat and tears starting to well up in her eyes. She hurried to her little sister and put her arms around her. She spoke softly to Xavari.

"Hey, little girl. It's going to be okay. We can deal with this. Xavari, you don't have to have this baby. Have you told Emmanuel?" Regina rocked Xavari to calm her down. Every few seconds the warm air from the fan blew on them as it oscillated from side to side.

"No, but I think he suspects," Xavari replied into her sister's neck.

"Xavari, you don't have to have this baby. Women have abortions every day. It's not that big of a deal," Regina said as she gently pushed Xavari away from her and wiped Xavari's eyes with the flat of her palm.

"Regina, how can you say it's no big deal? You're asking me to murder my child." Xavari looked into her sister's eyes for the first time since they'd started the discussion about the pregnancy.

"Xavari, it's not murder. Don't think like that. It's an alternative to having a baby you don't want." Regina's voice was compassionate but firm.

"How can you say that? The Bible says that God knew every one of us before we were even formed in our mothers' wombs. I don't care about all this "when does life begin" crap that the scientists and politicians are spouting. If God knows us before we're formed in our mothers' wombs, abortion is murder."

"That's not how I see it, Zee." Regina walked around the table and sat back down in the chair across from Xavari.

"Well, that's the way I see it. God says He won't forgive the shedding of innocent blood. I'm not having an abortion, Gina. That's out. Besides, Emmanuel would lose his mind if I had an abortion. I'm having my baby, and that's all there is to it." Xavari crossed her arms over her breasts and looked evenly at her sister.

"Well, you can forget school, because you're not going to make it through this year." Regina crossed her arms over her breasts, too, and rolled her eyes at Xavari.

"Yes. I will. Why do you have to be so negative?"

"I'm not being negative. I'm telling you how it's going to be. You'll do good for awhile and then you'll have to withdraw, because you forget Xavier has to be dealt with, too."

"Look. I know it's not going to be easy, but I can do this. I need you to do me a favor, though." Xavari uncrossed her arms and placed her hands on the table.

"What, little girl?" Regina looked at Xavari with an unsmiling smirk on her face.

"Don't tell Daddy, and whatever you do pleeeeeeaaase don't let Emmanuel know about it." Xavari looking pleadingly at her big sister.

Regina opened her mouth to respond, but before she could get any words out, Emmanuel appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Don't let Emmanuel know about what?" Emmanuel stood there with a blank look on his face and Xavier on his hip.



## Chapter 4

### Denise

"What's wrong with your face?" Denise walked through the front door of her apartment and Naomi was the first person she saw, as usual.

"Nothing," Naomi said hoarsely. She was wiping down the glasstop dining area table and trying to avert her face from her mother. Naomi had cried so much and so hard before and during her conversation with William earlier that day that the openings of her eyes were just slits surrounded by puffiness. She'd tried hot and cold compresses to make the swelling go down, but nothing helped. Naomi was hoping her mother would come home much later and she would be in bed before she would have to answer questions.

"Naomi. Really. It's been a long day. I know you better than you know yourself. Why have you been crying?" Denise placed her purse and keys on the table by the door and sat her briefcase in front of the table. She turned when she heard heavy feet padding into the room.

"Naomi, I apologized. Mother, I apologized. I embarrassed her. I walked in on her in the bathroom." William winked at his sister with the eye Denise couldn't see. The front of his shirt, hands and arms were wet. He was bathing Sarah, and he'd rushed out of the bathroom when he heard Denise questioning Naomi. Naomi was a horrible liar, and he was certain Denise would lose her mind if Naomi told the truth so he hurried to his sister's rescue.

"William, we've talked about this. When the bathroom door is closed, you knock." Denise put her hands on her hips and looked sternly at her son.

"Yes, Mother. I know. I wasn't thinking. I apologized to her, like, 100 times. That's one of the problems with having four people in an apartment with one bathroom," William said as he threw his hands in the air in mock frustration. Naomi wondered why he felt it necessary to talk about the size of the apartment, but she had a sneaking

suspicion William had been planning this ruse to further his own agenda. Naomi filed her feelings about his statement away in her mental Rolodex. Denise turned her attention back to Naomi.

"What did William walk in on you doing in the bathroom that would get you so upset that you'd cry so hard that your eyes are almost swollen shut?" Denise had sat in one of the chairs at the dining area table and began removing her sling-back pumps.

"I...I." Naomi couldn't think of a plausible lie. William came to her rescue again.

"She had on one of your bras and was putting toilet paper in it," William blurted. Naomi's eyes grew huge and she looked at her brother with astonishment. Her mouth agape, she couldn't even fathom how to respond to that.

"WHAT?!?!" Denise shrieked with wide-eyed amusement. She threw her head back and laughed from her belly. Naomi crossed her arms over her flat chest and pretended to be totally insulted. William joined in the laughter. Naomi's radar was working overtime now. It was rare for William to be laughing and joking with them these days.

"I tried to tell her it was nothing to be embarrassed about, but she cried and cried." William wiped his hands on the front of his shirt.

"Oh, my darling, I apologize for laughing at you," Denise said between hearty chuckles, "but it's only funny because I remember doing the same thing with my mother's bra. Come here." Denise reached out her arm and extended a hand to Naomi. Naomi came around the table and took her mother's hand. William went back into the bathroom to finish helping Sarah with her bath.

"Mother, I can't believe you were ever as flat as me when you were my age. I'm never going to have breasts and hips. All my friends are developed and I still look like a boy." Naomi sat in her mother's lap, and Denise put her arms around Naomi's thin waist.

"Sweetheart, my breasts and hips didn't start developing until I was in my second year of college. I was a late bloomer, and you take after me." Denise rested her head on Naomi's back as she talked lovingly with her daughter. For Naomi, William's fib had been a bonus. She got to sit with her mother and talk about girl stuff. Naomi knew that as soon as Sarah was bathed, dried, powdered, greased and clothed in her pajamas, she'd be competing with Naomi for Denise's attention.

No sooner had Naomi finished the thought than her naked little sister bounded out of the bathroom with William bringing up the rear.

"Come back here, you!" William was holding a towel and trying to catch Sarah as she left a trail of wet footsteps from the bathroom to the dining area.

"Mother! Mother!" Sarah reached Denise and Naomi before William could catch up to the little flash of bare flesh. Denise opened the arms she had around Naomi and hugged both girls at the same time.

"My mushy-wet, little munchkin," Denise exclaimed and flashed a dazzling smile at Sarah. Naomi was forced to smile, as well. Even though she wanted her mother to herself, she understood how much her little sister missed Denise, too. Besides, Sarah would be going to bed soon and Naomi and William would have a couple of hours before their bedtimes, and they could spend some time with Denise then, if she wasn't too tired and/or didn't have too much work. William actually demanded much less of Denise's time these days, so there was a good chance Naomi would have Denise alone again and they could finish their discussion. Naomi wanted to talk to her mother about getting a training bra.

"How was your day, Mother?" William dried Sarah's little body right in the dining area. He knew it was fruitless to try to get her back in the bathroom, plus it was nice for them to all be there in the same space. His mother was smiling, Naomi was feeling special sitting on her mother's lap, and Sarah was standing still and letting him dry her off. They all were quiet waiting for their mother to speak. Naomi didn't



look around at her. She trained her eyes on William, who purposely avoided her stare. She knew he was up to something. She couldn't forget what she'd seen in that letter on his desk.

"Oh, son, it was a busy and long day. I think I have the most challenging boss on the planet." Denise was enjoying having her children all around her. She especially liked the fact that she'd gotten home early enough for Sarah's bath night. That meant that William wouldn't be hiding in his room. It was his responsibility to make sure Sarah was bathed every other night, because Naomi was busy with the rest of the household chores.

"Mother, Naomi is too bossy," Sarah said through the towel that William had placed over her head to dry her hair.

"Why do you say so, my beloved?" Denise furrowed her brow and feigned sincere concern. She knew exactly what Sarah was going to say.

"She makes me do homework and put away my toys and eat yucky vegetables. Right, William?" Sarah wiggled her head out of the towel and looked at her big brother.

"The vegetables were good tonight," William said flatly, obviously thinking about something else. Naomi was sure she knew what had him distracted.

"See, Mother. William thinks she's too bossy, too," Sarah asserted as she put her hands on what would be hips one day. Denise stifled a laugh, and put on her most serious face.

"Sarah, it's unfortunate you think Naomi's too bossy. She's only telling you to do what I want done. Are you doing what Naomi tells you to do?" Denise watched Sarah nod her head up and down.

"Mother, Sarah always does what I ask her to do. She's a very good girl," Naomi chimed in, leaving off the fact that Sarah complained every step of the way. Naomi knew her mother already knew that part.

When Naomi had brought this complaint to Denise before, she had asked Naomi to be extremely patient with Sarah. Denise explained to Naomi that Sarah had a different personality than Naomi and William. Denise didn't want Naomi to try to break Sarah's spirit, but she did want Naomi to find a way to get Sarah to comply. Her children had to work together. They had to help Denise raise them. That was all there was to it. She didn't like leaving Naomi in charge and responsible for the household, but someone had to make up the income that their father just wasn't able to provide.

As her children's father, Emmanuel gave all he could and all the time. Even as generous as he was with his money and time, he was spread thin with taking care of all his other children. Denise couldn't fault him for his career choice either. He'd taken a lower-paying job with his company that not only allowed him to meet his financial obligations to all his children, but it also afforded him the ability to make his own hours so he could attend his children's activities and bear some of the carpooling responsibilities.

"It's bedtime, munchkin." Denise kissed Sarah, who pouted and whined, but obeyed and followed William out of the dining area to the back of the apartment.

"Mother, Sarah is becoming more and more difficult." Naomi got up from her mother's lap and sat in the chair next to her.

"I know, my darling, I know. I just need you to continue to be patient with her. I know it isn't easy, especially when even William does what you say, but Sarah's a..."

"...different personality. Yes, Mother, I know." Naomi finished Denise's sentence but not in a disrespectful way. They both smiled.

"You're going to have to deal with all types of people, Naomi. It doesn't hurt to start practicing how to get along with all those different personalities now. Look at it this way. If you can keep Sarah in line, you should be able to keep anyone else in line. It's the people who know you well who give you the hardest time when you're in

charge. Remember that part in the Bible where Jesus goes back to preach in His hometown? I mean, He was Jesus, the Son of God, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords..."

"Yes, Mother," Naomi said with a giggle, "I get your point." Naomi and Denise exchanged more warm smiles. They both turned to look at him when William came back in the room.

"Mi-Mi, Sarah wants you to read her a story," William said to his sister without meeting her eyes. Naomi didn't move. She was absolutely certain William had convinced Sarah that she wanted Naomi to read to her, because Sarah always insisted that Denise read to her if she was home before Sarah's bedtime.

"I'm talking with Mother. Can you read her a story?" Naomi didn't want William to talk with Denise. William still wouldn't look at Naomi. Instead, he looked at Denise.

"Mother, I'd like to run something by you that I want to talk with Dad about. I'd like to have your opinion first, if you don't mind." William again purposely avoided Naomi's stare. Naomi's heartbeat quickened as she realized how he'd used her to set up this talk with their mother.

"Go on, Naomi. Read to the munchkin for me while I talk to *the man* here." Denise was happy to be included in her son's life about anything these days. In recent months he'd grown distant and withdrawn. The fact that he was asking her advice on anything made her want to give him her full attention.

Naomi stood up and walked toward William who walked toward her. As they met to exchange places, Naomi bumped him hard with her shoulder. William didn't even break stride, nor did he once look at Naomi. When Naomi got to her bedroom door, where she knew Sarah would be waiting, she looked over her shoulder and saw William sitting in the seat that she'd just vacated. Their mother was still smiling.

"Tell me something good, my prince." Denise touched her son's knee and smiled lovingly at him.

As Naomi closed the door to her room, she heard William clearing his throat.

"I'd like to..." William was saying as the door clicked shut.



## Chapter 5

### Denise & William

"...share an idea with you, Mother. I would appreciate it if you'd let me say everything I need to say before you comment. This isn't easy for me." William sat stiffly in his seat looking down at his hands crossed over his abdomen. He knew he had to remain calm like he'd seen his father do when he had to tell Denise something she didn't want to hear.

"Yes, son. I can agree to that." Denise removed her fingers from William's knee and sat back in her seat.

On the outside, it seemed that nothing had changed in her demeanor. Inside, Denise's mind and heart immediately began to race. What news was William bringing to her? He'd been withdrawn and moody for about three months. When she'd mentioned this to Emmanuel, he'd laughed it off and said, *"He's probably smelling himself. You know how boys get at a certain age. He's just a jumble of raging hormones, and some little girl probably has his nose wide open. You won't let him date for another year, something I told you I don't agree with, so he's probably just unhappy about being treated like a little child."* Denise had taken Emmanuel's explanation and not pressed the issue, but she wondered now if William had been sneaking around with some girl behind her back and had an accident. *If he tells me anything other than I'm about to be a grandmother, I think I can handle it,* Denise thought to herself.

"Like I said earlier, I did feel badly about walking in on Naomi in the bathroom. I just wasn't thinking, and I opened the door before I thought." William realized he'd said "thinking" and "thought" back-to-back. He tried to ignore the redundancy, but it kept playing over and over in his head. He was hoping his mother didn't get hung up on that and stop listening to him. She was relentless about good grammar. He needed to set his mother up perfectly to drive home his points.

"William, I know you didn't walk in on your sister on purpose, but she's very self-conscious about her body right now. That's the only reason she's so upset with you about it. I was going to make her apologize for bumping you with her shoulder like that, but I think you earned it a little bit, my prince." Denise spoke to her son warmly. She tried hard to block out the redundant words he'd just spoken to her. She knew if she nit-picked his grammar right now, he'd just clam up and go to his room. She wanted to hear what he had to say, because something in the pit of her stomach told her she wasn't going to be happy when he was done talking.

"How do you think I feel, Mother? I made her cry so hard. She was so humiliated. I wish I could take it all back, but I really had to "go." Mother, we've outgrown this place." William still kept his eyes on his hands.

"I'm doing the best I can, William." Denise sensed that this conversation was going in a direction she wasn't interested in going, but she had to finish the ride.

"Yes, Mother. I know. I think you're doing a fantastic job. It's just that I feel like a burden to you." William finally looked into his mother's face. He didn't look into her eyes, though. He knew if they made eye contact, she'd see right through him. He focused on a point between her upper lip and nose.

"Excuse me? When have I ever made you feel like you are a burden to me?" *What the hell is he up to*, Denise thought to herself.

"Mother, you're out there working so hard to support the family, trying to make up where Dad isn't able to help, and I'm growing into manhood and unable to get a job and help out financially." William dropped his eyes again, feigning shame. He'd chosen the financial point to try to get his mother to say a phrase that was key to getting him to his next point. If he'd paid close enough attention to the way his father had handled Denise, and if he knew anything about his mother, the financial angle would net him the reward he was looking for.

"William, have I ever asked you to do anything other than get excellent grades and help me with your sisters? Do you really think I expect you to step up and be the man of the house?" Denise looked at the top of her son's head, because that was all he would show her. William heard bells and whistles going off in his head. She'd said the perfect phrase: man of the house.

"That's the thing, Mother. I want to be a good man, a strong man, and you can't teach me that. I need my father to teach me that."

"OUT OF THE QUESTION, WILLIAM!" Denise popped up from her chair and started pacing when she realized where he was going with the conversation. She couldn't contain herself, even though she'd given William her word that she'd hear him out. She thought she would come unglued mentally if she heard him voice the statement she knew was on his mind.

"Mother, please sit down. You agreed to hear me out before you gave your comments." William remained calm like he'd seen his father do.

"No, William, no. The answer is no." Denise kept pacing, but she lowered her voice, even though it had a hard edge.

"Mother," William said calmly, "you haven't even given me a chance to say what I want to..."

"I DON'T WANT TO HEAR WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY, WILLIAM! I KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY! PLEASE DON'T DO THIS, SON, PLEASE! If you say it, I...please, son...please don't go there." Denise continued to pace and now she was hugging herself, arms wrapped so tightly under her breasts William thought she might crack a rib.

"Mother, please. I'm not trying to hurt you. I love you. You've done such a great job raising me to this point, but..."

"No, William, please don't do this." Denise couldn't hold it together anymore. She burst into tears and William rushed to her. As angry as



she was with him, and as much as she didn't want him to touch her, she let herself sink into her oldest child's arms. He was tall and broad like his father but with a slighter build than Emmanuel. She'd dreaded this day since he was born. She knew it would come, but she never prepared herself for it.

Denise thought that right now, in this moment, it was a blessing and a curse to have children who were well-educated and who knew how to use reason and logic to communicate. It was a blessing and a curse to have fostered open communication with her children all these years and have them be comfortable enough with her objectivity that they came to her about anything and everything. Denise had several years before lost the ability to say "because I said so" to William and Naomi, because she had encouraged them to respectfully question her directives and share their points of view and expect to be taken seriously and offered substantive information. It was all back-firing on Denise right now.

"William, I'm going to let you say what you have to say, but I'm going to tell you this, so you're very clear." Denise was still leaning into her son.

"Yes, Mother. I'm listening."

"Son, this is a line you cannot cross back over. You can never take back the words you're about to speak to me in the next few seconds. Please, son, please think very hard about whether this is a line you want to cross. I'm not saying it'll change my love for you, but think about how deep a wound this is going to leave on our relationship if you must make this point." Denise backed away from William, still hugging herself, and looked up into his face. William finally looked into his mother's eyes, and he saw the pain he was causing her. He did think for about three seconds and plowed ahead.

"I'd like to go live with my father," he said in a rush of words. He didn't notice a change in his mother's face, but he saw something in her eyes raze. He felt himself panicking inside, but his face didn't betray him. He looked steadily at his mother. He had to maintain his

resolve. He braced himself for his mother's next wave of tears, but they never came.

"You may not go live with your father." Denise spoke crisply and with a sense of finality. She stepped further back from William, dropped her arms to her side and squared her shoulders. She matched her son's gaze.

"Mother," William began slowly, "you can't stop me from discussing this matter with my Dad." William watched his mother's eyes begin to blaze. His resolve was weakening by the moment.

Denise was determined not to fall apart again. She knew William was right. She couldn't stop him from going to Emmanuel with his request, and she couldn't really stop William from moving out, but she just didn't want to see her baby go. She hurt so badly, but she couldn't make her case based on emotion. She couldn't guilt him into staying. She knew he would only come to resent her and become more and more withdrawn and start taking it out on his sisters.

They stood in silence looking at one another; both determined not to flinch first. They both jumped when they heard the phone ring. Neither moved to get it. After four rings, the phone went silent. A few seconds later, the door to Naomi's room opened, and she saw her mother and brother in their face-off. Naomi almost retreated back into the room and closed the door, but the caller had been insistent. Naomi cleared her throat.

"Excuse me," Naomi said.

"Yes, Naomi," Denise responded very calmly and without taking her eyes off William. William continued to face down his mother, also.

"Mother, there's a lady on the phone who insists on talking with you. I told her you were busy, but she said she must speak with you." Naomi, standing as close to her door as possible holding the cordless phone unit, felt awkward relaying the information in the midst of this showdown; neither her mother or brother willing to concede anything to each other.

"Ask who it is, Naomi," Denise said still staring at William who was still staring at her. Denise saw that William's brow was starting to moisten.

"May I ask who's calling, please?" Naomi spoke into the receiver. After asking the question, Naomi finally realized she had been silent too long, because it prompted Denise to ask her about the caller.

"Who is it, Naomi?" Denise and William were still eyes-to-eyes.

"Mother, she says you don't know her, but she's a friend of Dad's." Naomi rocked back and forth from her heels to her toes. She had a feeling this wasn't good. This caused Denise to break her focal point.

"Excuse me. Did she give you a name?" Denise looked at Naomi.

"Za...Za...", Naomi put the phone back to her ear and mouth to ask the woman to repeat her name. "She says her name's Zavari, Mother, and she's a friend of Dad's." Naomi realized her mother was now staring at her with the same gaze she had had trained on William; almost like she couldn't believe this was her life. Without looking away from Naomi, Denise spoke.

"William, go to your room, and we'll finish this conversation when I'm done with this call. Naomi, hang up the phone when I pick up in the kitchen." Denise looked back and William hadn't moved. She gave him her best "you better do what I tell you to do and do it now" glare. After a few moments, he complied.

Once William was moving off toward his room, Denise moved toward the phone in the kitchen. She picked up the cordless phone unit and held it to her ear and mouth for a few seconds.

"Hang up the phone, Naomi." Denise heard Naomi click off the line.

"Good night, Mother," Naomi said quietly, with obvious disappointment in her voice, as she disappeared back into her room. Denise looked at the clock and realized it wasn't Naomi's bedtime yet. Her daughter knew her well enough to know that Denise wasn't

going to be in the mood for anymore talking after this phone conversation was over.

"Yes, this is Denise. Zavari, is it? How may I help you?"



## Chapter 6

### Romina

"What's this word?" Romina pointed to the word, so her 10-year-old son could tell her what it was. Romina was sitting at the square, kitchen table with her children. Quintenerra sat to Romina's left, and Quintarius sat on her right. Her children were doing homework, and she was filling out a job application.

"That word is *description*, Ma." Quintarius had been helping his mother fill out job applications and other forms since he could read and write, which seemed like from the time he was born. Without his mother noticing, Quintarius looked at Quintenerra and rolled his eyes skyward. Quintenerra mimicked her brother and they smiled at one another.

"What does this sentence mean?" Romina pointed to the sentence where *description* appeared. Quintarius leaned over again and looked at the sentence. It read *Please include your job description*.

"They want to know what you did when you worked there." Quintarius tried not to show his irritation. He preferred when Romina didn't have paperwork to fill out, because he could get his homework done faster and go outside and play.

The kitchen was silent while Romina finished filling out the application. Quintarius was bracing himself for more questions. Quintenerra was working on her math homework. Romina leaned to her right to look at her daughter's worksheet.

"You're doing really good." Out of habit, Romina glanced at the top of Quintenerra's paper to see if her name was spelled correctly.

Both her children had had a hard time learning to write their names. Romina hadn't considered this when she named them. She just liked the fact the names were unique and started with "Qu." She'd decided on names beginning with "quin" while watching Sesame Street

during her pregnancy with Quintarius. She liked the spelling of the Spanish word for 15; *quince*. Romina heard *keen-say*. She was hooked and vowed all her children's name would start with "*quin*" and be pronounced like the beginning of the Spanish word for the number 15.

"Quintarius, look over this for me." Romina handed him the job application and got up from the table to start dinner.

"Ma, this isn't our apartment number. You have the numbers backwards." Quintarius erased the numbers and wrote them over in much neater penmanship than Romina. This was how Quintarius checked his mother's forms. Romina filled everything out writing lightly in pencil, and then Quintarius erased what his mother wrote and fixed her many mistakes and improved the look of her writing. Most days, Quintarius just fixed the mistakes without pointing them out to Romina, but when he was feeling especially irritated he made mention of them just to irritate his mother as much as she irritated him. Quintarius was feeling a little, extra irritated today.

"OK, just fix it, Quintarius, and get back to your homework." Romina tried not to sound annoyed. She hated having to ask her son to help her with reading, correcting her forms, writing checks and addressing envelopes. Usually Emmanuel helped her, but she wasn't sure when she'd see him again, and she wanted to try to find a better-paying job without him knowing about it. She especially didn't want to have to tell him why she was trying to find a better-paying job. He'd think she was crazy, just like her family.

"Did you mean to make yourself 82 years old?" Quintarius tried to make his question sound like an innocent inquiry.

"No, little boy. Just change the numbers around and quit picking at me." Romina turned toward her son and slammed her open hand onto her hip. Quintarius bowed his head as Romina looked hard at him.

"Sorry," Quintarius said quietly and finished erasing and rewriting the information on the job application. He knew his mother's information by memory now. He'd helped her with so many of these forms, it was just second-nature.

"Sorry?" Romina raised her eyebrows.

"I apologize, I mean," Quintarius corrected himself.

"No, I apologize, sweetie," Romina exhaled.

"Momma, can I ask you a question?" Quintarius walked over to his mother with the corrected application.

"Of course. Ask me anything." Romina accepted the application and pulled him into a close, one-arm hug as she held the application in her other hand and read the changes.

"Can you really type 50 words a minute?" Quintarius rested his head on Romina's stomach.

"Uh, no," Romina admitted.

"Can you type at all, Momma?" Quintarius knew he was treading in dangerous water, but he felt compelled to press the issue. When Romina went out on job interviews, that she was obviously not qualified for, she would come home in a bad mood, and he hated to live through the days of tears and depression.

"You see me type at the computer every day. Why would you ask me if I can type?" Romina was trying very hard not to allow her temper to rise even though her embarrassment was slowly escalating. She didn't like the questions, but she tried to keep the channels of communication open with her children. She wanted to be the first person in her children's lives to know what was going on in their minds. She didn't want to have to hear it from a teacher or even their father. She wanted to be approachable. Her parents had not been approachable.



"Momma, typing on the computer to surf the web and typing for a job ain't the same, I don't think." Quintarius put his arms around his mother and kept his head on Romina's stomach.

"What did I tell you about saying *ain't*?" Romina was hoping to get the attention off herself.

"Sorry, Momma."

"What did your dad tell you about always saying *sorry*?" Romina hated when her children used that word. It was the word her father had used to describe her when she was growing up. Emmanuel hated it also, but his reasoning was different.

"I apologize, Momma."

"That's better," Romina said and kissed Quintarius' forehead.

"Why are you trying to change jobs, anyway, Momma?" Quintenerra finished the last of her math homework and joined the conversation from her seat at the table.

"I need more money. Y'all are getting bigger and so are the bills. I need a better job. I hate being here without a phone. What if I need to call 9-1-1?" Romina still had one arm around Quintarius. She put the application down on the counter next to her and wrapped her other arm around him.

"Can't you get the money from dad or grandma?" Quintarius asked.

"I don't like asking them for money," Romina told Quintarius. What she didn't say was that she didn't want to tell them how the bill had gotten so high and so behind in the first place.

"They want you to type at this new job?" Quintenerra asked.

"It's a receptionist job, so I'll have to type." Romina was glad to change the subject.

"Momma," Quintarius began, "that application says you have to take a typing test. Are you going to be able to pass it?"

"I'm going to try."

"How are you going to be able to keep your letters straight? You know you have trouble with mixing up your letters sometimes, Momma." Quintarius looked up at Romina. Romina looked down into his face. She was silent for a long time. She gently pulled Quintarius' arms from around her and gestured for him to go back to the kitchen table. No one spoke. Romina changed the subject.

"Quintenerra, I'm coming to your school this week to volunteer, OK?" Romina smiled big, thinking this was something to which Quintenerra looked forward. She saw the quick exchange of glances between Quintarius and Quintenerra and knew she was wrong.

"Uh, I thought you were trying to get a new job," Quintenerra said while turning away from Romina. Romina could hear the alarm in her daughter's voice.

"I am," Romina started slowly, "but that doesn't mean I won't have time to get involved in your school activities. Hey. Look at me," Romina requested gently. Quintenerra reluctantly turned back to look into her mother's face.

"Yes, Mommy." Quintenerra forced herself not to look away from Romina. Romina stared at her baby girl. She knew why Quintenerra didn't want her to volunteer in her class. Romina had heard the children snickering behind her back when she couldn't help them with what seemed to be simple words and simple math problems. Romina was the only mother who volunteered but never read a story to the class.

Romina remembered the humiliation of trying to read a book to Quintarius' first-grade class a few years ago, and she let all her children's teachers' know that she'd be happy to volunteer her time but she would not be reading during storybook hour. It was a small school, and all the teachers were aware of why Romina didn't want

to read. They'd all accepted all the other help Romina offered and never pressed the issue about storybook hour.

The one thing her children's classmates and teachers did love about her visits were the goodies she brought with her. Romina may not have been able to read or do math well, but she could cook any mother in her children's school under the table. She didn't use recipes. She just had a talent for cooking the most delectable dishes. Cooking was the one class in high school in which she had excelled; that is, once she convinced the teacher to allow her to create her dishes without having to rely on recipes.

"If I can't make it this week, you promise not to be disappointed?" Romina watched Quintenerra suppress a smile.

"Yes, Mommy. I promise." Quintenerra wondered if the relief showed on her face.

"Well, I'll let you know. I might be really busy." Romina turned from her daughter and started pulling cans of vegetables from the cupboard. She fought back her tears by taking deep breaths. She didn't want them to know she knew they were embarrassed by her. At that moment, the doorbell rang, and Romina motioned for her children to stay seated and walked past them to the front door.

She looked through the peephole, but she didn't recognize the lady standing on the other side. She was dark-brown, very pretty and alone. Romina couldn't understand why she wasn't sure she should open the door. The woman didn't look threatening. She looked young.

"Yes, who is it?" Romina spoke into the door with her eye still set close to the peephole.

"I'm looking for Romina Morgan, please." The lovely woman on the other side of the door stepped back a bit, realizing that she was probably being watched through the peephole. She smiled into the glass eye, and Romina found herself smiling, too.

"And, you are?" Romina spoke into the door again.

"My name is Xavari. Forgive me for just showing up to your house like this, but when I called your number it was disconnected. We have a mutual friend."

"Who?" Romina asked puzzled, thinking there wasn't anyone they could know in common.

"Um. Emmanuel Portman." Xavari dropped her gaze as she said the name.

Romina stepped back from the door, unlatched the chain, disengaged the deadbolt, unhooked the backup lock, twisted the lock on the door knob and pulled opened the door. She looked at the young lady and smiled.

"Forgive me. Is this a bad time?" Xavari shifted uncomfortably but tried to pretend like it was the most natural thing for her to ring a stranger's doorbell.

"You said you know Emmanuel?" Romina was intrigued.

"Yes," Xavari said. Romina continued to smile warmly, but her next words stunned Xavari.

"Is he the father of that baby in your belly?"



## Chapter 7

### Emmanuel & Xavari

"I heard Regina leave. That must mean your hair is done."  
Emmanuel was stretched out on his stomach on Xavari's bed. Xavari couldn't see his face from the angle of his body. He felt her sit down on the bed, but he didn't turn to look at her.

"Yeah. My scalp is so sore. She pulls harder than she has to, I think."  
Xavari used the flat of her palm to pat the top of her head vigorously. She didn't want to scratch her scalp, so this was the only way to relieve the itching sensation. She felt gingerly around the edges of her hair and the tension bumps were evident to her touch. She was lost in thought, trying to figure out how she was going to sleep without putting the back of her head on her pillow, when Emmanuel's voice startled her.

"You ready to talk to me?" Emmanuel asked. He felt Xavari jump when he started talking, but he didn't turn to face her.

"Huh?" Xavari knew that he knew she'd heard him, but she was trying to get her thoughts together. She still didn't know how much he'd overheard when she was talking to Regina. She didn't want to give away too much, but she also didn't want to get caught lying. Emmanuel hated to be lied to.

"Xavari. Please. You heard me." Emmanuel rolled over onto his back to face her only to see that Xavari wasn't looking at him.

"I thought you were going to call before you stopped by." Xavari kept her back to Emmanuel and rubbed her index finger between the cornrows feeling for more bumps. She was debating whether to put alcohol on her scalp, but she couldn't stand the thought of her head being on fire. Emmanuel would usually put the alcohol on for her and blow on her scalp to cool it off as he dabbed between each braid. She wasn't sure she could ask him to do that tonight.

"Xavari. Look at me." Emmanuel waited for what seemed an eternity for Xavari to turn around on the bed and look at him. Finally, she reluctantly did so.

"What, Emmanuel?" Xavari kept feeling her scalp. She looked at Emmanuel briefly and then lowered her eyes.

"Look at me." Emmanuel touched her leg. Xavari felt the tears forming in her eyes.

"What?" She couldn't force her eyes to meet his.

"Hey," he said as he moved slowly over to her and put his head in her lap so she had to look at his face.

"What, Emmanuel?" Xavari turned her face to the other side, so she was now looking at the top of Emmanuel's scalp. A tear escaped her chin and dropped on the top of his head.

"Zee, what's wrong with you?" Emmanuel didn't have anger in his voice. His words were only laced with concern.

"Nothing. My scalp hurts." Xavari knew it was a lame excuse, but she was straw-grasping. Why didn't she want him to know about the pregnancy? She kept asking herself that. She knew he wouldn't be disappointed. She knew he would be overjoyed.

That was it!

That's why she didn't want him to know. He wouldn't see this as a problem for her. He'd see it as a blessing, pure and simple. She knew he wanted more children. She just didn't want to be the one to give him another child so soon after having Xavier. The thought of labor made her stomach churn.

Xavari was embarrassed to admit that Xavier and the new baby would only be about eleven months apart in age. Regina was right. Her body hadn't bounced back from the difficulties of birthing her first child. She'd gotten her figure back without a problem, but the delivery

had left her with a hernia and several months of incontinence. The incontinence she'd overcome with regular exercises, but the hernia flared up every now and then. Her OB/GYN had given her strict instructions to allow her body time to heal before she decided to have another baby, and Xavari had sat right in the examining room and vehemently protested that she would find herself pregnant again anytime soon. Now here she was. Pregnant again. Two times during her 19th year of life. She could kick herself for being so stupid.

"You're crying for nothing?" Emmanuel was calm. He knew she'd talk in her own time. He just rested his head in her lap and waited.

"I'm just tired and my scalp hurts and..."

"Xavari, you know I've been around a pregnant woman more than once, right?" Emmanuel spoke as evenly and gently as he could. Xavari still said nothing.

"Baby, you do realize I know you've missed two periods, right?" Emmanuel felt Xavari's body begin to shake. He didn't hear her crying, but he felt her tears falling onto the top of his head.

"This is not the worst thing that can happen to you, Zee. You act like it's the end of the world. Why didn't you want to tell me?" Emmanuel finally lifted his head out of Xavari's lap and sat beside her. He put his arm around her and leaned her head on his shoulder. She cried silently.

"Talk to me, Zee. I know you had a hard time with Xavier, but I was there for you then, and I'll be here for you this time. Children are a blessing from God. Don't you know there are women who'd kill to have a baby, and here you are about to have your second?" Emmanuel felt Xavari's body stiffen. She raised her head off his shoulder and finally looked him in the face with pink eyes.

"You think I should be happy about this? You think I should be thanking God for this?" She didn't raise her voice, but Emmanuel could hear the anger behind her words. He removed his arm from around her shoulder.



"I can't tell you how to feel about this. I'm just trying to put things in perspective for you." Emmanuel looked down at his hands which were now crossed in his lap.

"I have nothing, Emmanuel. I don't have a decent job, I don't have a decent place to live and Regina is certain I'm going to drop out of college because I can't handle having this baby and the one in the other room." Xavari fought to keep the tears from flowing again.

"Regina doesn't know what's going to happen. Why are you letting her fill your head with negativity? I bet she tried to get you to have an abortion, didn't she?" Emmanuel waited for Xavari to tell him he was wrong, but he'd been around Regina enough to know what she thought and how she thought. It hadn't taken long to discern the negative spirit that surrounded her. He didn't exactly dislike Regina, but there was something about her that always rubbed him the wrong way. She was a pessimist about everything, and she was the big sister who became a mother to Xavari when their mother died of breast cancer, so her influence over Xavari was indelible. He was pleasant to Regina for Xavari's sake, but he didn't like Regina hanging around too much. Xavari avoided the question all together.

"It's probably going to happen just like Gina says. I'll be too tired from dealing with Xavier and then I'll just quit school, because I'll be tired from carrying around a big belly." She wanted Emmanuel to join her pity party.

"I can help you with Xavier. I can help you with school. If work becomes too much, you can quit." Emmanuel really didn't see the problem. Xavari had all the support she needed. Between him, Regina, her father and his parents, she didn't have to make this sound so horrible.

"What makes you think I want to quit my job? I can't be asking everybody for hand-outs. I have to work." Xavari knew she was simply being argumentative, but she wanted to get a rise out of Emmanuel. He was always too calm and collected.

"You can work if you want to work, Zee. I'm just saying you don't have to work. If you want to concentrate on Xavier and school, you can do that. You know I'll help you."

"Oh, yeah, you're Mr. Big Bucks. You can take care of yourself, all your other kids, mine and me, too, huh?" Xavari's tone was getting nasty.

"Uh, yeah. When you couldn't work after you had Xavier, how did your bills get paid? Who took care of Xavier when you couldn't pick him up? Who cleaned your apartment, washed your clothes, bought your groceries, cooked your food, bathed you when you hurt too badly to do it yours..."

"SHUT UP, EMMANUEL! Just shut up! Please!" Xavari clasped her hands over her ears. She couldn't stand to hear anymore. He had done all those things and more, and she felt like she'd forever be in his debt. Right now, however, she didn't want to be miserable by herself. She wanted to drag him along with her.

"I won't be so lucky like Regina. No one's going to want to marry me. **You** don't even want to marry me. You don't want to marry any of the women you have children with." Xavari was trying to draw blood. She wanted to make Emmanuel feel as badly as she was feeling right now. Emmanuel wasn't biting. He looked her square in the eyes.

"OK. Let's get married. You want to wait until the baby's born or you want to do it now?"



## Chapter 8

### Emmanuel & Xavari

"Why are you playing, Emmanuel?" Xavari felt deflated. Emmanuel was taking control of the conversation, something she hated.

"I'm not. If it will make you happy to get married, if that's what will make you know all this is going to be OK, then let's do it." Emmanuel continued to look Xavari square in the face.

"You know I don't want to get married just because I'm pregnant." Xavari dropped her eyes to her lap.

"Yeah. I know that. So why are you trying to pick a fight with me over something we both know isn't an issue?" Emmanuel crooked his fore finger and put it under her chin. He gently raised her face so he could look into her eyes.

"Stop," she said quietly and leaned back away from his hand. She didn't want him to touch her so tenderly. She didn't want to start crying. She wanted to be angry.

"You stop it," Emmanuel said just as quietly as Xavari. He pulled her to him and she didn't resist. She put her head on his shoulder and cried.

"I don't want you to hold me. I want to be mad at you." Xavari strained and stuttered out the words between her sobs.

"Tell me what you want, Xavari. You know I'll take care of you and my babies." Emmanuel rubbed her back with both hands as though he were trying to massage all the tears out of her body. He didn't like anyone to cry, especially not people he cared about. Tears made him feel helpless.

"That's just it. I don't want you taking care of me. Take care of Xavier, yes. Take care of me, no. Don't you understand? I didn't want another baby this soon. I wanted to finish college and get a decent

job and be married before I had another baby." Xavari pulled herself away from Emmanuel and looked at him. He looked back at her.

"You can finish school, Zee. You'll have plenty of help from people who care about you. I'm will..."

"UUUUUUHHHHHHH, EMMANUEL! Don't you get it?!?!" Xavari leaped from the bed and planted herself in front of him.

"What's wrong? I don't understand what the problem is." Emmanuel looked at Xavari with astonishment. He couldn't figure out why she was so upset.

"I don't want people helping me! I'm grateful that there are people in my life to help me, but I wouldn't need their kind of help if I wasn't too stupid to keep from getting pregnant again, not to mention the first time. THIS IS NOT HOW I PLANNED MY LIFE!" Xavari covered her face with both hands and cried anew. Emmanuel didn't try to comfort her this time. He realized he couldn't comfort her.

"What do you want me to do, Xavari? Do you want me to leave?" He'd come with the intention of staying the night with her. She'd asked him to come over and watch Xavier while she attended her classes. Somebody needed to be there when the air conditioning guy arrived, so she'd told him it made sense to keep Xavier home so he could spend some time with Emmanuel, since Emmanuel was going to be there to let the HVAC guy into the apartment.

"No, I don't want you to go. I just don't want you to be all excited and happy about this. I want you to see this from my perspective. I'm a 19-year-old, black female with limited education and limited possibilities. I know that children are a blessing. I know that in my heart, but my head is telling me that this is just a bad thing." Xavari sank to the floor in the spot where she was standing and looked up at Emmanuel. She could see he finally got it.

"Wow, Xavari. I guess I didn't think about what you wanted from all this. I was just happy to know I had another baby on the way. I can't help but be excited. I love my children, and I'm excited about being a

father all over again. I can't help that. It's the way I'm wired."  
Emmanuel looked down at Xavari.

"Why are you wired that way, Emmanuel? What makes you want all these children?"

Silence.

"Are you going to answer my question, Emmanuel?"

Silence.

Emmanuel looked away from Xavari for the first time, and she saw something painful in his eyes before he dropped his gaze. She hoped she hadn't gone too far. She wasn't trying to hurt him. She just wanted to know why he was the way he was. She didn't know any man like him; not even her own father who'd raised her and her sister after their mother had passed away.

Her father never remarried and never had more children. He doted on his girls, devoting all his time away from work to her and Regina. Their mother's mother had tried to take Xavari and Regina away from their father by taking him to court for custody. Xavari found out only about a year ago that her father had come close to financial ruin fighting to keep his girls with him. She realized, however, that Emmanuel's obsession with his children didn't compare with her father's love for her and Regina. She realized Emmanuel was driven by something she couldn't fathom. She sought to soften her inquiry.

"I'm not saying it's bad to want children, but why are you so happy about having another child. This baby in my belly makes how many?" Xavari continued to look at Emmanuel, who finally raised his eyes back to hers.

"Ten," Emmanuel stared behind Xavari at the window sill. He realized that he was uncomfortable about not being uncomfortable to admit he was the father of 10 children by four different women. The thought of all his children made his heart smile, but a quick look back

at Xavari made him suppress the grin that would have formed on his lips.

"Ten children, Emmanuel? Ten. My goodness, Emmanuel. Ten. Children." Xavari looked at Emmanuel and shook her head from side-to-side slowly.

"What?" Emmanuel looked at Xavari without an ounce of shame, guilt, remorse or regret.

"Didn't you ever want to marry any of the women you have children with?"

"Um," he thought a moment and then said, "I wasn't opposed to marrying any of them, but it never really came up. It wasn't something we talked about. They just wanted to know their children would be taken care of, and I've done that."

"So why would you ask me to marry you?"

"Like I said, I'm not opposed to marriage. You're the first one to bring it up, actually, as weird as that sounds."

"Who are these women? Why wouldn't they want to be married to the father of their children?"

"Xavari? Sweetie? **You** don't want to marry me and I'm the father of **your** children."

There was silence between them for several minutes.

"Tell me about them," Xavari said.

"Who?" Emmanuel had started daydreaming about a new baby, and his mind was elsewhere when Xavari spoke.

"The other women you have children with. You know who I'm talking about."

"What do you want to know?" Emmanuel asked her.

"I want to know about them. How old are they? What do they do? Who is whose momma? How did you meet them? I want to know all that and whatever else you want to tell me."

"Why?" Emmanuel asked.

"I just want to know."

"Why?"

"Do any of them know about me?"

"Yes. All of them know about you. You all know about each other. You know I don't keep secrets."

"I know," Xavari said. She remembered that she'd been attracted to him because he was such a paternal guy. He exuded strength and protection, and she'd fallen in love with him because of the way he verbally gushed about his children. That part of him reminded her of her own father. She felt safe with Emmanuel. That's why she'd let her guard down so easily and ended up pregnant by him...twice. *What was it about a man who loved being a daddy that made women so crazy*, Xavari wondered to herself.

"Why do you all always get around to asking me this question?" Emmanuel breathed in deep and let out a long sigh.

"Inquiring minds want to know," Xavari repeated the popular tabloid slogan with a bit of sarcasm in her voice.

"Yeah. I know. Well, Denise is the mother of my oldest son, William..."





## Chapter 9

### Emmanuel & Xavari

"...and my oldest daughter, Naomi. I also have another daughter, Sarah, with her. She's five. I met Denise when I worked at the accounting firm she still works for now. Her uncle owns it, and I was interning there during the summer. You'd never know it now, but Denise comes from money. Her family has a lot of real estate holdings all over the country, but that's not how their wealth started. Anyway, that's another story."

"How old is she," Xavari wanted to know.

"She's five years older than me," Emmanuel said.

"That makes her 40," Xavari thought out loud.

"Yes. She's 40, but you wouldn't know it to look at her. Anyway, I couldn't believe it when I got a date with her. I was majoring in accounting in college, but I worked..."

"Why aren't you an accountant now?" Xavari gave Emmanuel a quizzical look.

"Do you want to hear this or not?" Emmanuel gave Xavari an annoyed look.

Silence.

"Yes, I got my degree in accounting, but I hate numbers. That, too, is another story. Anyway, I worked in the mailroom when I was interning for her uncle's firm. I was delivering a package to her office, and when I got there she was bent over trying to move a filing cabinet by herself. The second thing I saw of Denise was her beautiful, flawless dark-skinned face. The first thing I saw was her round..."

"T.M.I., Emmanuel. Keep it moving." Xavari showed him the palm of her hand and rolled her eyes. Emmanuel chuckled. He couldn't help picturing Denise's perfectly-shaped backside in the lavender slacks that hugged her rump like a surgical glove. Emmanuel cleared his throat.

"Apologies. After I moved the cabinet for her, and before I left her office, we had agreed to meet that evening for drinks."

"Dang, did she even know who you were?" Xavari wrinkled her forehead.

"I told her that right before I asked her out." Emmanuel chuckled again as more of the memories of that day unfolded in his mind.

"OK, so how did drinks turn into y'all making not one but three babies together?"

"Our relationship was really intense, and her family truly disapproved of it, especially her father. Remember I told you she comes from money? It's old money."

"Old money?" Xavari had never heard that term.

"Yeah. Old money is money that's been in a family for generations and generations. Old money means that there are generations in a family who've never had to work a day in their lives. Old money makes new money and future generations live off the new money which is actually old money again once the newer generations are dipping into it."

"How's that even possible for black people? I mean, you said she's dark-skinned, so I'm assuming both her parents are black, right?"

"Yeah, both her parents are black, but Denise was adopted so she doesn't look like them at all. They're very high-yellow; so are all her siblings. Denise told me she was, too, when she was born, which is when they adopted her. She said as she got older, she got darker."

"That must have been a shock for her parents," Xavari said, shaking her head.

"Oddly enough, they're not color-struck. Her two older brothers married dark-skinned women and all their children are dark. Denise's parents dote on them just as much as they dote on the lighter-skinned children of her younger brothers.

"How many of them are there?"

"Five total. Denise is the only girl and she's in the middle. Her parents adopted her after the first two boys. Because of complications, her mother couldn't have any more children after her second son and she wanted a daughter. The two brothers under Denise are adopted, too. Unlike Denise, though, if you look at the younger two brothers, you wouldn't know they were adopted. They're the same complexion as the older two boys, and they look like them, too. It's weird how that can happen."

"Wow. Really? That's crazy." Xavari found herself getting reeled into this story like a fish on a hook.

"Yeah, I know. No, her parents aren't color-struck. They're money-struck, if that's a term. Everything with them is about their money. At least, that's the deal with her father. He tried to convince Denise that's why I wanted to be with her. That man tried everything to get her to stop seeing me. He said I was too young. He said I was an underachiever. He told her I didn't come from the right," Emmanuel made quote signs with his fingers, "pedigree. He tried to convince her I couldn't provide for her in the manner in which she was accustomed to being kept. His badgering backfired, though. When he ran me down, Denise ran straight into my arms. The tears he created, I wiped away. The anguish he inflicted, I quieted. One thing led to another, and she found out she was pregnant with William."

"That must have been wild, knowing her parents didn't want you around, let alone a baby by you."

"Yeah, it was a trip. She thought that her family would have to accept me once they knew she was carrying my baby, but that just made everything worse. Her father tried to pay me off to get me out of her life, but I told him to go...well, I wanted to tell him to go screw himself. Instead, I just refused the money."

"Man, this sounds like some white-people mess." Xavari was hanging on Emmanuel's every word.

"Naw, that was rich-people mess. It showed me that the world is not exclusively about black and white people being at opposition with one another. That was some "have and have not" mess. That's more universal than anything else going on between any races of people."

"You should have taken his money and then just kept seeing her. I mean, she was having your baby, for goodness sake." Xavari was imagining how she would have handled the situation had she been Emmanuel.

"No, my parents didn't raise me like that. My Dad always taught me that my word was the only thing I truly had to give and could keep. Had I taken that man's money, I would have been obligated to give up Denise and my baby. I wasn't taking that chance, not with my first-born." Emmanuel stared off into space as he recalled the depression of that time in his life.

"OK, so it obviously worked itself out. I mean, William is here and y'all had two other children together. What happened? Did her family finally stop tripping?"

"No. Things got worse." Emmanuel grew silent. Xavari waited for him to speak, but the waiting was agony.

"How much worse?" she asked.

Silence.

"Hey, if you don't want to talk about it, it's cool." Xavari was so hoping he wanted to talk about it. She started sending "talk about it,

talk about it, talk about it" mental telepathy in his direction. She caught herself leaning forward and relaxed. She didn't want to appear too eager, but she was dying to hear what had happened.

"Well, her father gave her three choices." Emmanuel stopped speaking again. Xavari gave him a few moments.

"What were the choices?" she asked in a low tone, trying not to provoke him. She wasn't sure if her probing would cause him to clam up for good.

"Well, one, her father told her she could have an abortion and he would pay for it. Two, he told her she could go away, have the baby and give it up for adoption. Or three, he told her she could keep the baby, continue to see me and be disowned and written out of his will."

"WHAT?!?!" Xavari was dumbfounded.

"Yeah, that man hated me that much."

"I don't understand why he didn't like you. What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything."

"I mean, you **had** to have done something, Emmanuel. I just can't see the man hating you for no reason." Xavari could hear the skepticism in her own voice. She knew Emmanuel could hear it, too.

"No, I didn't do anything to that man but date his daughter. That's it. When he just thought I was a friend, everything was cool. I'd go to their house, have dinner, watch DVDs, play with Denise's nieces and nephews, swim in their pool, everything. He knew I was an intern at his brother's firm. Everything was going great until I decided to ask Denise to be my girlfriend. The next time we went to her home—she was living with her parents at the time—and she introduced me as her boyfriend, everything changed immediately."

"Wow," was all Xavari could say.

"Yeah, I know. Wow," Emmanuel responded in kind.

"Well, she didn't put the baby up for adoption and she didn't have the abortion, so that means she was disowned and disinherited, right?" Xavari shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Yeah, that's why I said she **used** to come from money. Her father cut her off totally."

"What about her mother? What did her mother say?"

"Her mother is just this quiet, submissive woman who does whatever her husband says. She didn't help Denise at all. When Denise and I were just friends, she was just as nice to me as her husband. When Denise and I started dating, she turned into stone towards me. She never said anything negative or nasty. She just pretended I didn't exist. It was like I was a piece of furniture when I was around her. She just didn't acknowledge me. She's actually kind of odd and creepy, now that I think about it. She always has this absent-minded smile on her face no matter what's going on." Emmanuel felt his body shiver when he thought of Denise's mother and her "Stepford Wives" smile.

"Did she lose her job at her uncle's accounting firm?" Xavari was totally drawn into the story.

"No, her uncle knew me and he liked me. He refused to fire his niece, especially with her being young and pregnant. Denise and her uncle have this major bond, because her uncle was adopted by her father's parents. When her father disowned her and kicked her out of the house..."

"WHAT?!?!"

"Yeah, he made her leave with only the clothes on her back that very day she made the decision to keep William." Emmanuel continued to look blankly at the wall.

"This is crazy. This is too crazy." Xavari was stunned that a father would kick his pregnant daughter out of the house with nothing but the clothes on her back. Xavari's own father would never have thought to do something so hateful. She tried to put herself in Denise's shoes and imagine how it must feel to go from wealthy to nothing in the matter of five or ten minutes. She then thought about the life growing in her belly right now, and she instinctively put her hand over her womb.

"Yeah, it was crazy, but she stayed with her uncle and his family until William was born, because her uncle refused to allow her to have a baby without any family around. Shortly after she rested up from having William, she moved out on her own. She refused to take any money from her uncle, and she refused to take any money from me. She asked me to only provide for William, and she would provide for herself. Her uncle tried to give her a raise, and she refused it."

"No way. What?" Xavari didn't think she could be any more stunned by this story.

"Yes way. She said she didn't want any special favors from anyone else in her family. I thought she was crazy, but I guess I can see her point. She wanted to earn everything on her own merit, so no one could take anything else away from her in the future. She didn't want her uncle holding the raise over her head later. I don't think he would have, but she said she never thought her father would throw her out of his house pregnant and penniless either. I was like, 'Good point.' What's crazy is her parents own all this real estate all over the place, and it took her forever to find a place that her family wasn't invested in. She said she wasn't going to give her father a dime in rent if she could help it. She's lived in the same two-bedroom apartment since William was born."

"Wait, William is 15 years old." Xavari realized the curve balls hadn't stopped coming yet.

"Yeah, I know. There are bigger apartments available in her building but they are on the top floors and the building has no elevator. Every



time she thinks about moving to a different building, she finds out her father either owns it or has interest in it."

"The man is banking like that?"

"Yeah, he's banking like that. I won't even tell you how much he offered me to get out of Denise's life. You'd probably pee on yourself."

"Why doesn't she just buy a house," Xavari asked.

"Uh, I've probably told you too much of her business already. She has her reasons for not buying a house." Emmanuel realized this was the first time he'd shared this much about any of the women he had children with. Something about Xavari always caused him to open up more than he'd ever intended. Denise had asked him about Angela and Romina. Angela had asked him about Denise and Romina, and Romina had asked him about Denise and Angela. He remembered all those conversations being far shorter than this conversation with Xavari, and he hadn't even gotten to talking about Angela and Romina yet.

"Dang, you've told me everything else. You might as well tell me that part, too. Who am I going to tell? No one who knows me knows Denise, so it wouldn't even come up as a topic of discussion." Xavari felt like she did when her favorite show, "24," ended with a big question mark. Her frustration manifested itself on her brow and she wrinkled her forehead.

"Naw, you've heard enough about Denise. Do you want me to tell you about Angela and Romina, or are you going to sit there and pout like a little child?" Emmanuel thought Xavari was cute when she pouted. She was just cute, period, when he thought about it. She was the last of his dark-skinned lovelies, and he suppressed a smile when he thought about the baby she carried.

"Yes, I want to know about them, too, but what I really want to know is why you're so happy about having another baby. You told me all

that about Denise. Now tell me why having all these children is so important to you."

Silence.



## About Faydra

I was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

I started my higher education at Kentucky State University in Frankfort, KY, where I was a Whitney Young Honors Scholar and became a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (Beta Zeta Chapter, 1989). I finished my time as an undergraduate at Howard University in Washington, DC, with a degree in African-American Studies (Magna

Cum, 1995).

While at Howard University, two of my most memorable internships were with the Democratic National Committee and the Anti-Defamation League.

My first job after college was with the National Captioning Institute in Vienna, VA, where I was a “live display captioner,” doing closed captioning for the hearing impaired.

I eventually moved back to Tulsa and taught 8<sup>th</sup> grade American Studies for two years before joining the Army as an Information Systems Operation Analyst.

I finished my tour with the Army in 2006. Since then, I’ve been a computer applications/web languages/social media trainer, web designer/developer, blogger, columnist for Examiner.com and author. I’m also currently an instructor at Northern Virginia Community College – Annandale Campus.

To learn more about me, please visit my site at <http://faydra.com>.