

CHAPTER ONE

Let me go ahead and put the shit out there; men are ridiculous. Worse than that, they're dogs. They all start biting sooner or later.

All the men in my life have been dogs. My daddy, dog number one, is probably the grandfather of all hounds. He finally stopped beating my mama when I turned 15, around the time we moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, from Jackson, Mississippi.

Mama got a job as a surgical tech at Mount Sinai Hospital, but Daddy could barely hold a job that first year. Instead, he spent his days at some bar, usually the Spruce, chasing butt. Not a day went by that Mama and us kids weren't finding some strange woman's earrings or watch in the car. One time I found some lady's panties underneath the car seat. After awhile, Mama stopped letting on that she knew what was happening, even though we knew she knew. She was from that generation where marriage really was, "Till death do us part." But that meant putting up with all the nonsense in between.

I don't know how she made it through all of that. Maybe it was her faith in God. She believed that everything was possible through Him. Yeah, everything but my daddy keeping his pants zipped.

By the time I turned 16, I'd had enough. Mama kept

turning her head to what was going on, and Daddy wasn't even trying to hide the women he was laying up with.

I got so fed up, I wanted to ask Mama why she didn't leave him. At that point she was practically supporting us all by herself, so it's not like she needed him for anything. But I knew she'd say that I needed to stay in a child's place. That's one of the things I hated about my mama. She never took the time to explain anything. If she told you to do something, you couldn't ask why, because she would just say, "Because I said so, damn it!"

When my body first started changing, I don't think she even took the time to explain what I was going through, or what I could expect. The day I first got my period, I was scared. I didn't know why there was blood in my panties. When I told her, all she said was, "Oh, you're startin' to get your service once a month." Then she went into the closet and fished out a pad and said, "Here, use that."

Daddy had been getting paid under the table, working as a second-rate fix-it-man around the neighborhood, but finally got a real job unloading trucks downtown. I was just as glad because instead of him being home all day, telling me how no good I was, he'd work all day and hang out at the bar all night. But when he was liquored-up I'd hear it.

One night, I got up to get a drink of water from the kitchen. When I went downstairs I overheard Daddy telling Mama how I had all kinds of boyfriends. "Ain't you noticed anything different about your daughter?" Daddy asked, deep in the booze.

"Which daughter you talkin' about, Joshua? Cheryl or Marva?"

"I'm talkin' about Cheryl. You don't see nothin' wrong with her wearin' all that makeup?"

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“Well, she’s gettin’ to that age, Joshua. She don’t wear nothin’ but a little lip rouge,” Mama said.

“She’s gonna be a tramp. You mark my words,” Daddy said, taking another swig of whiskey.

I snuck back upstairs and went to the bathroom to run my hand under the faucet and drink some water. I got back into bed and cried myself to sleep. It was sad to live under the same roof with folks who were supposed to be family, and yet they didn’t even know me. If my parents had taken the time to ask me, they would’ve known there was only one person I cared about; dog number two.

His name was Diallo Washington. I’d seen him around the neighborhood during the summer. The first time I laid eyes on him, he’d been outside his house with his friends trying to fix an old, beat-up Buick. His mama stood knock-kneed in the doorway, plump like a Thanksgiving turkey, wearing a blue, and, purple swirled, psychedelic house-dress. She was telling him to go to the store to get her some cigarettes. He turned to see me standing on the sidewalk, watching him. That’s when the sun caught his eyes, which shimmered an amazing green. The brotha was fine. And I could tell he knew it by the way he strutted around that yard like a peacock, showing off his green eyes. Diallo was black as night, so you know that a brotha with green eyes is gonna catch some attention.

The only other black guy I’d ever seen with light-colored eyes was Smokey Robinson on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. And just like Smokey, Diallo could sing his ass off. That’s how we finally met for the first time; he was out in front of the store one day, singing doo-wop to a bunch of giggling girls. I couldn’t help but get drawn into it too. I’d

close my eyes and it was like Dennis Edwards from The Temptations was right in front of me.

As soon as I came on the scene those other girls no longer mattered because he made his way toward me and finished his little ditty of a song, “The Nighttime is the Right Time” as he gazed into my eyes. Realizing they didn’t stand a chance, the other three girls walked off in a huff.

“Say, what’s your name, lil’ mama?”

“Cheryl.”

“Nice to meet you, Cheryl. I’m Diallo,” he said, taking my hand and shaking it.

“Nice to meet you, too.”

“You got a boyfriend?”

“No.”

“That’s too damn bad. You’re too pretty not to have a boyfriend. Can I walk with you after you get what you need from the store?”

I nodded my head shyly. After that day, it was a whirlwind romance. He drove me to and from school in that Buick he’d been working on. I felt supreme, being seen getting out of my boyfriend’s car instead of riding around in some rickety school bus with the other students.

Diallo was a different breed. He was five years older and didn’t have to talk a lot of nonsense like the boys my age. I felt he was someone I could tell my troubles to. When I told him all about my family drama, he not only lent me an ear, he tried putting thoughts into my head; telling me stuff like my folks were trying to control me. But I knew that wasn’t true, because Daddy was always at the bar if he wasn’t at home or at work, and Mama, true to form, just turned her head away from the things she didn’t

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want to deal with, so I don't know when anybody had time to control me.

When it came to sex, he seemed thrilled that I hadn't given up my cookie yet. I tried to resist his charms but those eyes and voice of his finally worked their magic. He literally sang my panties off; singing The Temptations' hit "I Can't Get Next to You." But my first time wasn't precious or romantic like you see in a soap opera. He just rammed it inside me.

To say it hurt ain't telling the whole truth. I felt like my insides were being mutilated, that's how bad the pain was. I begged him to stop, but all he said, in a sex-moan-kind of way was, "Naw, naw. It'll start feelin' good after awhile!"

Yeah right! He had no idea. He was after the sex, and my dumb ass gave it to him. His equipment was huge, and eventually I got into the swing of things. Again and again, that brotha knew how to pound it in. That's what he used to call it.

He was so good, that he not only owned my lower region, but my heart. At 17, I guess I could've been scared when I came up pregnant. But Diallo was my everything. I just knew he would do right by me.

What I found out instead was the quickest way to get a dog to run and hide, is to tell him you're pregnant. He stopped picking me up from school, and stopped calling altogether. He even slammed the door in my face when I went to his mother's house where he lived.

I was hurt. Every day I stood in the mirror and watched as my stomach got bigger, feeling the rejection all over again.

Mama caught on pretty soon, even though I tried to hide my stomach by wearing some of my friend Leon's

sweatshirts. She didn't yell at me or anything. She didn't have to, because she had a way of saying things with a tone that had the same effect. She kept talking about how she was gonna get me out of the house and into this place where fast-ass girls like me went to get their situations taken care of. I knew she was talking about me getting an abortion. But I remembered how painful it was for a girl I knew at school, and how raw she felt afterward. I'd be damned if I was gonna go through that myself. This was my mistake, and I wasn't afraid to feed it or clothe it.

I waited until Mama said she made arrangements to send me away. I told her that I wasn't going anywhere. I said that I knew of a girl in my situation who still went to school and worked at night. She was taking care of her business.

That's when Mama drew back, and I guess all the pain and embarrassment of my pregnancy, plus her own unhappiness with my daddy must've been packed in her hand, because she popped me dead in my mouth.

I couldn't believe that Mama, a Christian woman—could want me to abort my baby just to save her the embarrassment of us being seen as one of *those* families. And yet she cursed me, using language that would normally make her blush, calling me all kinds of bitches and whores. And while she's staring at me, I'm seeing something behind her eyes that I'd never seen before. In her eyes I was a disappointment.

Of all the days he could've come home early, Daddy picked *that* day.

"Your fast-ass daughter here done got herself knocked-up!" Mama screamed at Daddy.

Before I had the chance to look at his face, I felt a fist

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hit the side of my head. I hit the floor. Daddy pulled me by my arms, but I was trying to turn loose, so he grabbed fistfuls of my hair. I was afraid that I wouldn't have any hair left when he was through with me.

He started kicking me; his anger was so wild that I don't think he cared where his foot stomped me. I covered my stomach, trying to avoid the wash of stomps.

I looked up; the room was blurry through my tears as I saw Mama watching me get beat. Then, she took her car keys and left for work.

"Now this is what you're gonna do," he told me at the end. "You're gonna go upstairs and pack your shit, and take your ass over to that nigga's house who did this to you. And he better not set foot in my house or I will shoot him where he stands, do you hear me?"

I was crying so hard, that all I could do was mumble. In my mind I was saying, "Yeah, Daddy," but I don't think it came out that way.

I limped upstairs to the bathroom to wash the blood off my face. My lips were busted. How in the hell could he do that to a 17-year-old girl, and a pregnant one at that?

As soon as I saw my eye was swollen shut, I sank to the floor. I must have been crying in that bathroom for hours because at some point my seven-year-old sister, Marva, came in there.

Here I was slumped on the floor, and she just steps over me to wash her hands for dinner. She didn't say anything, probably afraid my daddy would get in her ass, too.

I called my friend Rexanne. She was in a program that gave her a place to stay since she was emancipated from her parents. They threw her out when they found out she liked females. I can't believe it was such a revelation. Rex-

anne was more masculine than a lot of dudes in the neighborhood. You mean to tell me that it took her parents coming home and catching her with her face in some girl's vagina to figure that out?

"What's the matter?" she asked once she picked up and heard me crying on the phone.

"I need a favor."

"What?"

"Can I stay with you for a while? My daddy just beat the hell out of me after he found out I'm pregnant. He's kicking me out the house."

"Why you ain't called the police on him?"

"No, Rexanne. I don't need no more trouble. Can I stay with you or not?"

"Of course you can. You can stay for as long as you want."

Rexanne came to move me and my few bags to her place. Since I didn't drive, she took me to all my doctors' appointments. Here I was, seven months pregnant, hormones all out of control and depressed because I was on my own, feeling like damaged goods. I couldn't understand why Daddy not only beat me the way he did, but threw me out the house. I thought blood was supposed to be thicker than water.

I'd started to get the feeling that Rexanne was beginning to have feelings for me. I ain't gonna lie, if Rexanne had been just Rex, meaning if she were a guy, I could've seen myself with someone like her. She acted like a real man, but she was tender, too. She thought about me before she thought about herself. No man had ever treated me like that before.

One night, Rexanne brought some Courvoisier home. I

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don't know how she managed to get alcohol because she was only 18, but she was always drinking the hard stuff that could put hair on the chest of most men. Since I was feeling lower than low, I thought, "forget everything," and started drinking. As the night wore on, Rexanne started inching herself closer and closer to me. She put her arm around me and her warm breath tickled my ear. She told me that I was beautiful, even though I sure didn't feel that way. With all the drama I'd endured with the men in my life, that night, it was easy to understand why some women preferred other women. Rexanne had been so good to me and I trusted her. I knew she liked me, and I figured since she wasn't hitting me up for rent money, it was the least I could do to see if a woman could please another woman. I was a little curious and besides, Rexanne was all I had at the time. She was doing her damndest to make me forget about all of my troubles.

As we talked, I saw her licking her lips, reminding me of the way Diallo used to.

"What would you do if I were to kiss you, right now?" she asked.

"I'd say do what you gotta do." I was good and drunk.

I sat up, wondering for a short moment if I really should've been doing what I was doing. Her eyes were so kind, I didn't mind it when she leaned in, took my face in her hands and kissed me. Her lips were soft; I just closed my eyes and went with it.

When she tried to put her tongue in my mouth, that's when I pulled away.

"Naw, naw, baby. Just relax. You need to leave them jive-turkeys alone. They can't make you feel the way I can."

I felt helpless as my body shivered. She looked at me

with those eyes that usually seemed so suspicious, but were suddenly loving and tender. When she unbuttoned my shirt, I became embarrassed of how big my stomach was. I began trying to close my shirt back up, but she brushed my hands away.

“Naw, don’t do that. You need to get off that kick of thinkin’ you’re ugly. I think you’re beautiful.”

She got down on the floor and slid my pants and panties down. I could feel my heart beating as she ran her hands between my legs. She leaned in and blew on my cookie. At first I thought, “What the hell is she doing?” but then she took her fingers and started pleasuring me. It had been so long since I’d felt good. Spasms of pleasure shot through me as I arched my back the best I could. She buried her face in my stuff and ate me out like it was her last meal.

When she raised her head up from her feast, her face was glistening . Then she tried to kiss me again, but I was like, “Oh, hell no.”

She got up from the floor and sat back down next to me. I struggled to pull my panties and pants back up, and re-buttoned my shirt. She just stared at me with this shit-kicking grin on her face.

“So, how’d you like that? Am I good or am I good?” she asked, like she’d just given the oral of a lifetime.

“It was good,” I said, not knowing what else to say. I didn’t like the smile on her face. It was like she was saying, “Yeah, I got this one.” I was doing *her* a favor.

After that night, Rexanne started acting like we were boyfriend and girlfriend; coming up behind me and wrapping her arms around my waist, kissing my neck, grabbing my booty. I had to fix that right away.

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“Listen, Rexanne, I ain’t gonna lie. I enjoyed the other night. But I’m not like you; I like guys, always have and always will.”

“You weren’t talking that smack when you were moanin’ my name,” she said.

“I may have been moaning, but I know I didn’t call out your name. Now that’s just something I wouldn’t damn do.”

“What you sayin,’ that it was just a fling?”

“I was depressed and feeling sorry for myself. It was an experiment. A lot of people experiment.”

“So what, you’re sorry you did it?” she asked me. Rexanne sounded hurt.

“No. You’re my friend. I wouldn’t have done it with just anybody. But you need to understand it was just one time.”

Rexanne smiled and said, “We’ll see.”

On November 20, 1974, I gave birth to a son. I named him Lawrence because I always liked that name, and I thought it would fit him because I was going to raise him to know how to treat women; a gentleman’s name for a future gentleman.

I called Diallo’s mother to tell her that Diallo had a son. She sighed wearily into the phone.

“Now, are you sure it’s his?”

“Yes, Ma’am. He took my virginity,” I said, embarrassed to have to explain myself to this woman I didn’t know.

“No, you probably just gave it away. Well, that’s a shame. The last girl callin’ here talkin’ ‘bout she pregnant was a damn lie.”

“Well, I’m positive; Diallo’s the father because he’s the only one I’ve been with.”

“He needs to learn to wear a rubber since he can’t trust you girls to take care of your own business! Anyway, I’ll tell him you called!” And then she hung up. I was made to feel dirty about something that really was only half my fault.

My mother came by the hospital, but I really wish she hadn’t. I couldn’t forget looking up to see her grab her keys and dip out while I was getting beat within an inch of my life. She brought a bag of clothes for Lawrence. I told her she could just put the bag on the chair. I guess I said it with an attitude because she didn’t stay too long and when she left, she took the clothes with her. Still, there was no sign of Diallo. That fool couldn’t be bothered to come by to look at the baby.

Maybe I had it coming. But I thought maybe when he saw the baby it would hit home that responsibilities awaited him. But no, he disappeared into a mob of his dog-gish friends who probably encouraged him to act like that.

I decided cutting my losses with Diallo was the best thing I could do for me and my son. For our sakes it would have to be.