



PROLOGUE

The rain soaked my body, and I let it. My tears fell with the raindrops that pricked my face. I turned my face toward the rain, closed my eyes, and wanted it to rain harder.

The concrete steps made the back of my legs itch, and the water rolling between my thighs felt like urine. I wanted to be cleansed of knowing all of these damn secrets that clouded my mind during the last few weeks.

How I got to Valerie's house felt almost like a dream. I heard Valerie's voice, "Get the hell off of my property!"

I didn't say nothing.

"If you don't leave, I'm going to call the police."

I rocked back and forth until I stood. With the help of the rain, my dress hugged my large thighs, but I didn't care. I walked back toward Valerie's door and stood with my face close to her screen door. I swallowed and felt snot roll down the back of my throat, just as my heart fell to my knees. I finally spoke.

"You are such a mean, hateful bitch."

"I don't have to listen to this," Valerie said.

I snapped the screen door open, breaking the lock. I felt her warm breath on my chin. I wanted her to feel bad, but she didn't.

You have sex with my granddaddy, then, you sell me to my grandmamma for \$2,000. You carried me in your womb! What kind of heifer are you?"

"I gave you all the money. It's all I got."

I reached in my bra and pulled out the check for two million dollars; slowly, I ripped it to pieces. My pride combined with pain gave me courage to do it. I know I will regret it. But, today it seemed that I would have sold my soul—my life to the devil.

“All these years, you could have told me I had sisters and brothers, that you were my mama! You never cared for nothing but yourself. I hate you.”

The pieces of paper fell to her floor. I felt Ben’s hands on my shoulders from behind, guiding me to the car.

“Come on baby,” he said.

I couldn’t get in the car; I just couldn’t. Instead, I held onto Ben’s waist, crying like I was a child in the pouring down rain.

“It’s raining Cherylie, let’s go.”

“Did you hear, Ben? Did you hear?”

“I know.”

“I miss my grandmamma.”

Chapter 1

Cheryl

Six weeks before my life changed, it seemed that nothing would have ever changed in my life: my dead-end job, me and Ben's life without a son, and my body growing larger every day made me eat more until the fullness in my belly would temporarily replace the pain in my heart.

Me and my boss sat in his office talking. Bottom line, I wanted a promotion and a raise, and he didn't want me to have neither. I took my time to say what I had to say, just like my Ben told me. He said, "Cherylie, don't go up in that place demanding nothing. You make sure you have all your facts in hand why you should get a raise and even a job promotion."

The sun highlighted the dust all over the Captain's office. I moved my face to look around the rays of the sun, and said, "Captain, I've been here for twenty-five years, and I know I have done a good job."

He said, "Ms. Yarborough, you have done a fine job. The fellows can trust you will have all of their police reports submitted and filed correctly. You handle those phones better than any of those new phone computers.

"Thank you, Sir. I appreciate that. So, um, I am hoping to get a raise this year. It's-it's been about three years since my last one, and I am hoping that we could talk about moving me off the phones."

"And where are you interested in moving to?"

"Well, I am really interested in the investigative side of things. I think, well, I know I would do well in Joann Mancini's old job."

The captain's stare penetrated me before he answered. With my sweaty palms and the line of sweat rolling down my back, I tried to move in that damn metal chair, but my thighs remained pressed against the side railings.

He cleared his throat, "Ms. Yarborough, I'm sure you think you can do that job, but it requires a substantial amount of knowledge, skills, and education to do it, and—

"Captain, I'm skilled, and I have knowledge. Who was the one that put the new computer system in place to handle all of the police reports electronically? Me. Who was the one that pointed out that the department wasn't following all of the government rules on inspecting and shipping all that sensitive packaging? I did. As a matter of fact, I trained those kids on the right way to do it. Captain, I can do that investigative assistant job. How do you think I found out that the packaging wasn't done correctly? I investigated it."

"Ms. Yarborough, that position has been filled already."

"And the raise?"

"The budget has been cut this year, and it's been cut every year for the last five years. So—

"So, no raise either."

Ain't this some shit? Every time I ask for a raise, I got to hear some bullshit as to why I ain't eligible to get more money. If I quit, then what will his ass say? What am I suppose to do? At my age, who's going to hire me? Damn him.

"Ms. Yarborough?"

"So, who did you hire?" I asked.

The captain said, "I can't give out that information at this time."

I bet you can't with your lying ass.

“Why a secret?”

“It’s not a secret, Ms. Yarborough. I’m just not ready to disclose that information.”

His cold green eyes sparkled in the sun like the stones my grandmamma made me promise to keep forever.

I stood as fast as I could, accidentally lifting the metal chair off the floor with my thighs. Pushing the chair away from my thighs with both hands, I slammed the chair on the tile floor, making a loud sound.

“Excuse me. Thank you for your time.”

“Thank you, Ms. Yarborough, for all your hard work. The entire department appreciates your dedication to doing a marvelous job.”

Kiss my fat ass, bastard!

The phone rang, and I didn’t bother to answer it; it was time for a Snickers bar. The gray metal desk became my prison, just like the bars that kept the criminals off the street. I had no freedom in this place. I used both hands to yank open the top drawer; I didn’t care about the noise it made this time.

After eating my second Snickers bar, I answered the phone.

“Pittsburgh Police Department, how can I direct your call?”

“Cheryl, it’s me, Olivia.”

“Hello.”

“How are you? Can you talk right now?”

“Not really, but go ahead, anyway.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Olivia said.

“It’s hard to talk about it right now. I’ll tell you later.”

Olivia said, “Well, I’m finally doing it. I’m going to plan a family reunion.”

“Really?” I said.

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What do you want me to say?”

She said, “I want you to be happy and say that you will do whatever it takes to help me pull this thing off.”

“Olivia—

“Cheryl, before you begin telling me about how it’s a waste of my time. I want to let you know something.”

“What.”

“I know you think that I am naïve, and maybe so. But, I feel that if I don’t try to do something, I will go to my grave wishing that I had. I knew my sister, Debbie, growing up, but I didn’t know my other sisters and brothers. And yes, that bothers me.”

I don’t have any brothers and sisters. I listened to Olivia’s plea for me to accept her decision and thought about how I would want to know my siblings, if I had any. Knowing them and getting close to them are two different things, especially if they are crazy as hell, like Olivia’s family.

“Olivia, you go and do what you need to do. All I can say is that I hope you don’t get hurt. You go digging, as you always do, and then when you get hurt, I’ve got to hear about it over and over again.”

She said, “All you need to do is come to the meeting I’m planning in two weeks, that’s it.”

“OK.”

“Thank you Cherylie.”

“Don’t go getting all mushy on me. I have to go.”

“I will call you later,” Olivia said.

I heard a click, and I sat thinking how I wish I had passion about something other than this damn job, wishing for a son, and spending nights in front of the television eating peanut butter cookies.

The clock read 4:00 pm, quitting time. Opening my desk drawer again, I grabbed my third candy bar to eat on the way home.

The bus stop is crowded as usual. Pittsburgh residents don’t drive to work when Pat Transit ran buses every hour on the hour because it is understood that cars are for enjoyment purposes on the weekends. Plus, taking the bus became my daily attempt to get exercise. I only wish it had worked. Nothing I did seemed to help me to lose the weight I had packed on for years.

The Pittsburgh Police Department was surrounded by buildings with old, light-colored bricks, which had faded because of the historic floods that swept through downtown Pittsburgh during the 1970’s. I can still see the flood line on a few of the old buildings, marking its territory. I can’t believe the government officials decided to leave the markings of the flood. It’s a stupid way to be reminded of how many people lost everything they had worked for all their lives. *People are so damn stupid.*

“Hi Cheryl, how are you doing today?”

I looked over my shoulder and saw Carol Jefferson standing near me with several bags in each of her hands.

“Hi Carol, I’m fine.”

“Just leaving work?”

“Yes, Carol. Every day you ask me the same thing.”

“How’s Ben?”

“He’s doing the same as he was yesterday, good.”

Carol came closer to me, and I wished she would just shut up, and leave me be. She don’t have no damn job; she shops during working hours every day, and I am beginning to think she does just to irritate the shit out of me.

“Macy’s had yet another sale. I got three pair of pants for my son, and two dresses for both of my girls.”

“Really.”

“Oh yes, you should go by there. I’m sure you can find something in your size. I didn’t look in the plus-size department. You know, I only wear a size ten, but I saw plenty of women your size with clothing in their hands.”

“I’m sure you did, just so you can tell me all about it,” I said.

“Joe loves for his children to look good all the time. He grew up without anything, so he can’t stand his children to look poor.”

“Who, Black, didn’t grow up poor?”

“Well, you know what I mean, Cheryl.”

I met Carol Jefferson right here at this damn bus stop. I don’t know why I don’t cuss her ass out, but if she keeps talking today, I will.

“Joe’s work calls for us to go to dinner parties with him. So, we must look our best at all times. You know, Cheryl, we must show “those” people that we have class too.”

“What does your husband do again?”

Carol stomped her foot, and said, “Cheryl, I’ve told you this a thousand times.”

“Tell me again.”

“Joe is a judge, right over there in the county clerk building.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember.”

I can never forget that her husband is a judge. It was the only thing that kept me from cussing her ass out a long time ago. With Olivia’s crazy ass family, I never know when I will need to call on him for a favor. Carol loved to announce it, and I liked acting like I don’t know.

Carol said, “I think I’m going to start driving my car down here. I use to think it was easier to just hop on the bus, but not so. Old habits are just hard to break. Isn’t it, Cheryl?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I’m just saying how difficult it is to stop doing things,” Carol explained.

“Are you talking about my weight?”

“Oh, no. Of course not, Cheryl.”

Carol bit her bottom lip and got red lipstick on her white teeth. I looked at her hair perfectly curled, and wanted to yank one of those curls out of her head.

“Well, here comes the bus,” she said.

I didn't say nothing. I wanted to get as far away from her as possible. When I stepped on the bus, I searched for a seat next to someone who would not say one damn word to me. I chose a man whose head hung low. Good, he's sleeping.

As my left cheek and thigh hung over the seat, my eyes were drawn to the black smoke that came out of the multiple pipes of one of oldest steel mills left in Pittsburgh. The black smoke make the Allegheny River look black, too. My Ben has been working there for over twenty years. I wonder if he will bring home news of another layoff. It wouldn't be the first time; the news came so often, sometimes Ben wouldn't even tell me. Three months was the longest time that Ben had been laid off. Then, the union would start getting their signs together to march in from of the Governor's office, and just like that, Ben went back to work.

I removed the candy bar from my bag and began to eat it. I looked up and saw Carol Jefferson looking at me over her shoulder. I made sure I took a big, juicy bite of my candy bar, hoping that maybe her ass will turn back around in disgust.

If it wasn't for my Ben, I would be one lonely woman. I love Olivia, and I really think of her as a sister, but ain't nothing like having your own family and your own kids to love. Grandmamma was all I had, and now, she's gone. If I had a cousin, an auntie, or even a distant relative I could call my own, we could do so many things together, like spend the Thanksgiving holiday together. Instead, I spend all of my time with Olivia's family. Since Ben and John are brothers, I am technically a part of her family. I guess supporting Olivia while she plans for a family reunion will bring some form of excitement into my life; I just wish her family wasn't so damn dysfunctional.

The bus driver said, "Northside!"

I walked sideways in the aisle, careful not to bump anyone with my hips. As the bus stopped, I shifted forward, holding on tightly so I wouldn't fall to my knees as I once did before. The three metal steps were steep. I took my time walking off that bus, and then, I heard Carol's voice, "Have a good weekend!"

I acted like I didn't hear her.