

What We Found in Hallelujah

A Novel

VANESSA MILLER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

What We Found in Hallelujah

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[CIP TO COME]

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

HOPE REYNOLDS WAS ON HER MARK, FEET ON THE BLOCKS, knees on the ground with arms outstretched. Her long black hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She was running the 200-meter dash against six other girls. College scouts were in the bleachers, and her mother was filming this race because she was just a few seconds away from winning the state title. ®

Hope had won the state title during her sophomore year in high school, but last year, she went against a top-notch competitor and came in second. That same competitor was running this race with her again, but Hope wasn't taking another loss. Her track scholarship was riding on this.

"Get ready."

Hope lifted her stance, hips in the air.

"Set."

Head lifted, she prayed that she wouldn't let that curve slow her down today. God was with her. Pastor O'Dell had said so.

The gun popped. "Focus. . . . You got this." Hope sprinted out of the block, took the curve, which slowed her down, but once the track straightened out, she was like smoke. Her knees lifted high on each stride, arms pumping back and forth. The finish line was mere steps away. Out of her peripheral, she could see her competition.

They were neck and neck. She lost the race last year because she was too busy watching her competition ease up and then pass her.

But her coach told her that she needed to stay focused and lean forward, allowing her torso to cross the finish line first. Hope passed the finish line and kept running a few extra steps as she tried to steady herself. The race was clocked at 22.05, her fastest time yet.

“Yes!”

Hope bent over, hands on knees as she tried to steady her heart rate. She took a few deep breaths then lifted up straight and pumped her fist in the air.

“Oh my goodness, you did it! You won the race!” Her daddy, Henry Reynolds, ran over to her and swung her around.

He kissed her on her sweaty forehead. He was such a proud papa, and she loved him for his support and encouragement through the years. People in the stands stood and cheered for her as an official handed Hope a dozen roses and congratulated her.

“I did it, Daddy. You told me I could do it, and I did it!”

“Of course you did. You were born for this, baby girl. The sky is the limit for you.”

Hope’s eyes glistened from the high praise she received from her daddy. This was her day. She was the state champion, and her family was here to see it.

Hope’s mother, Ruby Reynolds, lowered the camera and walked over to them. “I got it all on film. Them college recruits are going to be knocking down the door to get you to their school.”

Donna James walked over to her and said, “I’m so proud of you. Seems like you get faster and faster with each track meet.”

“Thank you, Mrs. James.” Hope pointed to the track. “CJ is up next. He’s only in the ninth grade, but he’s outrunning everybody.”

Donna smiled as she looked ahead. CJ was Donna’s son, and he was about to get on his mark for the 100-meter dash. “That may be,

but I'm proud of you both. You and CJ are the two darkest kids in Hallelujah, but you're stirring up the most noise."

Hope's eyes widened as a gasp made its way up her throat and escaped through tight lips.

Ruby's hands went to her hips. "What does her complexion have to do with anything? You people are something else."

Her mother and her sisters were fair skinned while Hope was a few shades lighter than her daddy, who was dark as night. Ruby didn't like it when people referenced Hope's complexion. Hope didn't like it either; it tore at her heart, making her feel like she didn't belong . . . like she was the other.

"I didn't mean to offend you." Donna turned away from them with sorrowful eyes, like she wanted to take back her hurtful words.

Hope walked with her father and mother to the sideline where her sisters, Faith and Trinity, waited to congratulate her. She tried to let Donna's words slide like peas off of a plate. But looking at the fair skin of her sisters caused her to wonder for the hundredth time why she took her father's coloring rather than her mother's.

"My big sis is the state champ," Faith gloated.

Trinity said, "I knew you would win."

The three of them hugged and jumped around. The joy of winning the state championship was filling Hope's heart and mind again and shoving all thoughts of her complexion from her mind.

The 100-meter dash began, and Hope turned her focus back to the track. There were six guys on the track, but within 10.8 seconds, CJ had smoked them all. Their little town, Hallelujah, South Carolina, now had two state champions.

"Yay!" Hope and her sisters cheered for CJ.

But Ruby rolled her eyes. "Let's get out of here," she said. "Y'all standing there cheering for that boy when I told you that whole James family ain't worth a quarter put together."

Hope just shook her head. Her mother was a handful, but she

loved her dearly. She turned to her sisters. “Let’s go to the Ice House. I feel like celebrating with a triple scoop of Cherries Jubilee.”

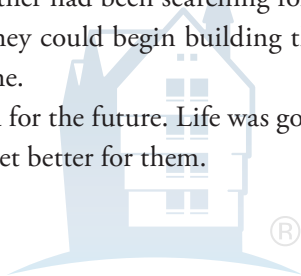
After the meet, her parents drove them home, then Hope, Faith and Trinity walked a couple blocks down the road.

Trinity said, “I’ll race you,” then took off running.

Hope screamed after her youngest sister, “You little sneak,” but she took off after her, with Faith joining in for the race as well.

This was Hope’s happy place. She loved living on the beach with her family. After college, Hope planned to come back home and work on turning their beach house into the best bed-and-breakfast this town had ever seen. Her father had been searching for a new home for the family to live in so they could begin building their empire one bed-and-breakfast at a time.

Hope was excited for the future. Life was good in Hallelujah and it was only going to get better for them.



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Chapter 1

Twenty years later
Los Angeles, California

EXPECT SOMETHING GOOD. YOU GOT THIS,” HOPE REYNOLDS told herself as she stepped out of her office and headed down the long hallway toward the executive suites. ®

It was her time. Her turn. After their upcoming board meeting, Hope was sure the promotion would be hers, and she would have an office in the executive suites. She just needed to clear up a few things with Spencer Drake before she could finalize her annual report because from what she was seeing, they had lost money on two events he brought in this year. But the spreadsheet he gave her didn't indicate the losses. Even though she had asked him to correct this information last month.

Hope was not about to turn in her report with incorrect numbers, not when her next promotion was riding on everything she did in the next few weeks. And not even for Spencer, her b/b. Boyfriend and boss was going to mess that up for her.

Stopping in front of the full-length mirror that was next to the employee's bathroom, she checked her appearance. Her Afro was lopsided. Hope patted her hair, trying to get it just right. She had

left her hair pick in her office, and it wouldn't do to be walking around with a crazy-looking Afro.

Hope was serious about her hair game. She'd stopped relaxing it about twelve years ago. Cutting her long hair to go natural had been a struggle. Hope had cried many nights because she hadn't known what to do with her TWA—teenie weenie Afro.

It had taken five years of braids and Afro puff ponytails until her hair was finally at the point where she could sport a big Angela Davis, back-in-the-seventies kind of Afro.

Hope even preferred the bellbottom pants that were most popular in the seventies. She had on a gray pair today. This was her style, and she didn't care who didn't like it. She had tried to conform to what others expected of her, but all of that changed after she graduated from Howard University.

Hope had majored in business with a minor in hotel management because it had once been her dream to help her father turn their beach house into a money-making bed-and-breakfast. Then they would open another one and another one until the Reynolds name meant something in the hotel industry. But that was before Henry Reynolds unexpectedly died after a hurricane rolled through her hometown one chilly November day.

Consequently, Hope no longer dreamed about a bed-and-breakfast empire. She was now a thirty-six-year-old woman and about to be named general manager of Hillsboro Hotel in Los Angeles, CA. Spencer Drake, her boyfriend, was the current general manager, but he was being promoted to senior vice president and general manager for all ten of the Hillsboro Hotels.

Hope continued down the hall, thinking about how she and Spencer had gone from a professional relationship to a personal/professional one. Spencer was the owner's grandson and heir apparent to the Hillsboro Hotel chain. Hope had already been promoted three times when Spencer had been assigned to her hotel.

After working with Spencer a few years, Hope discovered that she not only liked him, she respected his work ethic. One night when they were working late, he told her, “I want to ask you out, but I don’t want you to feel obligated just because my grandfather owns the company.”

Hope bit down on her bottom lip. Spencer had that rugged kind of handsome face that got a woman’s attention. That almond skin tone and his symmetrical mustache, which grew down his lower jawline and looked like an upside down horseshoe accentuated his square jaw. All the women on the job were after him, so Hope asked, “Why me?”

Spencer leaned back in his seat, loosening his tie. “You really don’t know how beautiful you are, do you?”

She had a mirror; she knew she was pretty. But too many people had added the asterisk of pretty for a dark-skinned woman for her to ever consider herself beautiful. But the fact that Spencer did gave her pause.

“Yes, okay. I’ll go out with you.”

They had been dating for a year now. Things were getting serious, and Hope didn’t know how she felt about that. She had only been serious about one other man, and he still had a piece of her heart. Spencer was patient with her, and she adored him for that.

Now standing in front of Spencer’s door, she knocked, then opened it. “Hey, do you have a minute?”

Spencer was seated behind his desk while Erica Kelly, the catering manager was leaning in to kiss him. Shocked, Hope’s breath caught in her throat.

Spencer jumped out of his seat, straightening his shirt. “Hope, hey. I didn’t know you were there.”

“Obviously.” Hope’s eyes darted from Spencer to Erica, then back to Spencer. She stepped into his office. “Is there something I need to know?”

Hope should have known better than to date her boss. But Spencer kept coming at her, kept telling her how special she was. She’d been

on a serious dating drought for the past five years. To be honest, she hadn't been booped up with anybody since Nic. But Nic had been all wrong for her, and apparently, Spencer wasn't meant-to-be either.

Spencer nudged his head toward Erica, then lifted the carrot cake from his desk. "Erica baked a cake. I was just getting ready to call to see if you'd like a slice."

Erica didn't bake cakes. She bought them from the bakery two blocks down the street, took them out of the box, plastic wrapped them, then told everyone that she baked it herself. She'd been doing that for the seven years Hope had known her. As their friendship had grown to more of a sisterhood—so Hope thought—Erica had let Hope in on a few of her tricks.

Erica walked around the desk, stood next to Spencer's Businessman of the Year award that was hanging on the wall above his file cabinet. "I have a meeting scheduled with a client, so I probably should get back to my office."

But Hope shook her head, eyes burning a hole through Erica. "I wouldn't have done this to you."

Erica averted her light green contact lens eyes, then ran her hand through her fourteen-inch sew-in. Ol' fake-and-bake with the creamy tan skin had just been pretending to be her friend.

"I—I'm sorry." Erica lowered her head and rushed past Hope.

Hope turned back to Spencer, hand on hip. "Exactly how many women are you dating at this company?"

He lifted an outspread hand. "Now hold on, Hope. I'm not chasing after women like that. There's just," his hand dropped, "something about Erica. I'm sorry."

Hope knew exactly what the something was. Erica was the kind of beauty who didn't need an asterisk. She thought complexion didn't matter to Spencer, but now she knew better. Tears formed in her eyes. She turned away, not wanting Spencer to see that this was so completely destroying her. "Let me get back to my office."

Spencer reached out and grabbed her arm. “You have to believe me, Hope. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

She recoiled as if she’d been bitten. “Don’t touch me. Stay away from me.”

“That’s going to be hard to do since we work together. We have to find a way to be civil, don’t you think?”

“Civil?” Did he really just say that to her? She rubbed her arms as she walked toward the door, suddenly feeling a chill in the air.

For the first time in the fifteen years she had been employed at Hillsboro Hotel, Hope wondered if it was time to dust off her résumé and find a new job. The year had been going so well, but it was November, and bad things always seemed to happen to her in November.

Hope rubbed her temple as she walked back to her office. It felt like an elephant was stomping on her brain. Sitting down at her desk was something she did every day, but it just didn’t feel normal after what she’d just walked into.

Hope opened the bottom drawer of her desk and took out one of the adult coloring books and colored pencils that she used as a stress reliever on her lunch break or when she had downtime at home. Decisions about whether she was going to stay at Hillsboro and watch Spencer carry on with Erica or whether she would start shopping her résumé needed to be made. Right now, Hope didn’t know how she felt about working with Spencer and Erica.

She was more hurt than angry about the situation. Erica had pretended to be her friend, and Spencer had pretended that she was enough for him, when she obviously wasn’t.

Her cell phone rang. It was her mother. Hope contemplated not answering because she wasn’t in the mood for whatever Ruby Reynolds had going on . . . not today. But she knew her mother. Ruby would just keep calling until Hope answered.

“Hey, Mom. I’ve got a lot going on. Can I call you back?” She rushed the words out, hoping that her mother would just say okay.

But Ruby was hysterical. “You really need to call me back this time because if you don’t, I just might go buy a gun and end up with a cellmate that’ll stab me to death or worse.”

What was worse than death? “Mama, what is going on down there? Who do you want to shoot?”

“The good Lord knows that I’m a peaceful woman, but that Rick Thornton done got my back up. That man ain’t right.”

She massaged her temples. “Mama, can you just please spell it out for me? What happened?”

“He stole my money, and now I’m about to lose this house to the bank. That’s what happened.”

Hope opened her purse and took out a bottle of Advil. She popped two in her mouth and downed a half bottle of water. “Mom, is this true . . . or another one of your make-believe stories?”

Hope had caught her mother telling a few whoppers, so she couldn’t readily take anything Ruby said at face value.

“Why do you always think the worst of me? If you aren’t concerned for me, then what about the house? Do you want me to lose it?”

How was the beach house where she grew up—the beach house that her father spent years building—about to be lost to the bank when there was no mortgage on it? She posed that question to her mother.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Ruby said. “Slick Rick had me take out one of them . . . whatchamacallit?”

Hope heard her mother snapping her fingers as she tried to come up with the word she was looking for.

“Home equity loan?”

“Yeah, that’s what it was.” Ruby took a breath, then continued, “The bank gave me sixty thousand for the repairs I need to turn this house into a bed-and-breakfast. Slick Rick told me he needed thirty

thousand up front so he could order all the supplies and whatnot. And now he's in the wind. I haven't seen hide nor hair of that man in a month."

"You just gave this man your money?" That didn't sound like the Ruby Reynolds she knew, but her mother was getting older. Was dementia setting in?

"I messed up, I know that, but now I need you and your sister to get down here and help me turn this house into a bed-and-breakfast so I can start earning money to pay back that loan or the New Year will ring in with a new owner of our beach house. The bank will take the house if I don't start making payments within the next forty-five days."

Whoa . . . Hope hadn't been in Hallelujah in about eighteen years. She was no longer that same small-town South Carolina girl. She was a grown woman who made her own decisions and lived by her own rules. And now her mother was asking her to come back—in November. Uh-uh, she couldn't do it.

"You know I don't like being there, Mama."

"This is no time to be thinking about the past. I need you to come home," Ruby yelled into the phone.

"What do you need me to do that I can't do from right here?"

"I told you . . . I'm finally going to turn this house into a bed-and-breakfast so I can make back the money Slick Rick stole, and I need you to help me get this house in order so I can hang my shingle out front."

"Oh, Mama." She and her father had stayed up late many nights talking about things they could do to the beach house in order to turn it into a bed-and-breakfast once she graduated college, but her father died during her first year of college, and everything changed after that.

"Your daddy would turn over in his grave if I lost this house."

And there it was. Hope could not, would not let the house her daddy built with his calloused hands end up in the smooth, unblemished hands of a banker. This week was the worst time for vacation

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because they were preparing for the board meeting next week, but Hope didn't care anymore. She had over a month of vacation saved up, and she was headed back to Hallelujah.

She was going back to the place where her heart had been snatched out of her chest, thrown into the ocean, then dragged out of the water as a stampede of thoughtlessness ground it into that sandy beach of a place she'd once called home.



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Chapter 2

FAITH PHILLIPS WAS OVER IT AND WANTED A DIVORCE. IF looking at the Facebook post of her husband standing way too close to some random woman, who was making kissy faces into the camera wasn't enough, then the fact that Chris hadn't made payments on the home equity loan he took out on their house was definitely strike two.

Standing in front of the bank teller as the stranger broke the news that her business account was now twenty thousand dollars lighter, Faith crooked her neck, staring at the woman like something was wrong with her.

"You're lying."

The clerk shook her head. "No, ma'am. The money was taken out last week. I can give you a printout of your transactions if you'd like."

"Please do."

Faith took the printout from the clerk, looked at it, then took her cell phone out of her purse. Like her mother says, three strikes is out no matter who is doing the counting.

Nostrils flaring like a bull seeing red, Faith didn't make it out

of the bank before calling Chris. He answered on the first ring, like he was waiting on her to call and check him for his trifling behavior.

"I'm at the bank," she exploded. "Where's my money?"

A few customers turned to stare as she pushed open the door and headed to her car.

"Now, baby, calm down."

"Don't call me baby. Where is my money?" She pulled out her key fob, unlocked the door to her three-year-old white-on-white BMW and got in.

"I got behind on the flip project I'm working on, but we just sold the house, so I'll be putting the money back this week. Just trust me, okay? I did it for us," he told her.

She poked her forehead with her index finger once, twice, thrice. How could she have been so stupid as to put his name on her bank account? In hindsight, she felt like a fool, allowing her husband access like that, but when she started her interior design business, no bank would give her the loan she needed, so Chris gave her ten thousand dollars. It just seemed right to attach his name to her bank account. But she was over being grateful now.

"There is no *us*, Chris. I want you to pack your stuff and get out."

"Waaaaait a minute, babe. We promised we would never threaten each other with those *get out* words. I know things haven't been great between us lately, but maybe we need to talk to Pastor Green about counseling."

"Maybe you need counseling to learn how to keep your hands off things that don't belong to you, but you can leave me out of that because I'm done."

"What about Crystal? You can't just make rash decisions like this without thinking about our daughter. She needs both of us, Faith."

"Were you thinking about Crystal when you were taking selfies with some woman on Facebook?" Faith didn't wait for his response. She hung up the phone and threw it in the passenger seat. Her hands

covered her face, and she cried angry tears. She wanted out of this marriage, but their daughter was very much a daddy's girl.

The sad truth of the matter was that Crystal just might want to live with her father. Faith didn't know what that said about her as a mother. But in these last few years, she and Crystal had not seen eye to eye about anything. Not the clothes she wore, not the grades she brought home, not the text messages Faith read on her daughter's phone.

A text message popped up on her phone from Chris: **Baby, please don't do this. I messed up, but I know we can work this out.**

Rolling her eyes heavenward, Faith started the car and drove away from the bank where her account now had just seven hundred fifty-two dollars and thirteen cents.

She and Chris met during her sophomore year in college. His wavy black hair, honey skin tone and those light brown eyes of his trapped her in a vortex of what she thought was love. When he looked at her with those sexy eyes, she felt all the love he promised to give. Thought he would be the one to unbreak her heart, so she married him. Only to discover that she was still broken.

She dropped out of college and moved to Atlanta with her new husband and all his pipe dreams. She had truly thought he loved her, but how could love hurt this much?

Faith's phone rang again. The number on the display unit in her dashboard was unfamiliar. She had been waiting on a call from a potential client, so she tapped the accept button on her phone as fast as her finger could reach it.

"Designs by Faith, can I help you?"

"Ah, hello. This is Gladys Milner. You met with me and my husband about redesigning our kitchen."

"Yes, of course, Gladys. I remember you."

Faith silently prayed that Gladys was ready to begin the project. She had been referred to her by one of her celebrity clients. A celebrity

client who still hadn't paid her bill, but that was the entrepreneur lifestyle, constantly working to get clients and constantly chasing coins.

"My husband and I were discussing your designs, and we love everything you're proposing. I can't wait to get my double ovens, get rid of that awful countertop and move the island where it should be, but I must be honest with you," Gladys said. "That sixty-thousand-dollar price tag is a bit steep."

Faith did not like to haggle over money. Her prices were what they were. *I mean, come on, I have to eat too.* "There is quite a bit of construction to lay out your kitchen the way you want it. I have to bring in contractors, and they will have to tear out a wall, add a beam to hold up the ceiling and then we will need to reconfigure the placement of your cabinets and many other little details that aren't noticed, but must happen to complete the project in the manner you've requested."

Faith had another call coming in. She glanced at the dashboard, saw that it was her mother and ignored it.

"It's just that . . . things always come up during construction and then more money is needed, so my husband and I feel more comfortable at a fifty thousand spend."

The phone beeped again. Her mother was going to keep calling; Faith knew how Ruby Reynolds rolled, but she was on a business call. She couldn't just hang up. Her mother would have to wait.

"I really want to do your kitchen for you, Gladys. It will be the kitchen that you deserve and will want to cook those fabulous family meals you told me about, but I don't pad my estimates. There are set fees that I earn and that I must pay out to others, plus the cost of material, so I can't lower my estimate at this time. However, we could try to sell all of the old appliances and cabinets from your kitchen to get some of your money back that way."

Faith held her breath . . . waited . . . waited.

"Well, let me talk this over with the hubby, and I'll get back with you."

“Great. Just let me know when you’re ready to begin that beautiful design.” Faith tried to sound upbeat and hopeful, but her tone fell flat as she ended the call.

Coming to a red light, she stopped the car and closed her eyes. “Lord, just throw me a bone, a crumb . . . something.” Her life was falling apart. Or maybe it had never been put together in the first place, and she had just been playing mind tricks on herself.

Her phone rang. Faith’s eyes popped open. It was her mother again. With everything else she was dealing with, she really didn’t want to talk to her mother right now, but she hit the button on her steering wheel to accept the call just as the light turned green. “Hey, Mama. What’s up?”

“I’m about to lose the house that your daddy wanted to keep in the family, that’s what’s up. Meanwhile, you act like you don’t know how to answer your phone.”

“I wasn’t trying to ignore you, Mama. I was on a business call.” Wait. Had she heard her mother right? Did she say she was about to lose the beach house? “Mama, what’s going on down there?”

“I need you to come home. Can you do that for me?” Ruby asked and then she filled Faith in on the sleazy contractor who ran off with some of her money.

Faith missed the turn for the Lowe’s she had planned to stop at. “Mama, you didn’t. Haven’t I told you about working with contractors before checking references?” Faith wanted to ignore this whole situation and let her mom deal with it the best she could, because she had her own problems, not to mention that the last place she wanted to be this time of year was Hallelujah, South Carolina.

Ruby started crying. “He conned me. Whispering all those sweet nothings in my ear. Rick even promised to marry me.”

“Mama! Are you telling the truth?” Faith couldn’t count the number of times her mother had lied or stretched the truth. She wasn’t in the mood to deal with any of her mother’s fantasies.

“Why do you always doubt me? I’m your mother, Faith, or does that count for anything?”

“Why didn’t you call me before throwing your money away like that? I’m an interior designer. I could have recommended some contractors.”

“He tricked me, Faith,” Ruby bellowed into the phone like her heart had been broken.

Faith’s heart went out to her mom, because she knew all too well how men could trick unsuspecting women. She hadn’t thought Chris was that kind of man. But in the last year or so, he’d been a little too shady for her. “Did you file a police report?”

“I figured I’d go buy a gun and shoot him myself.”

Shaking her head, Faith tried her best not to laugh. Her mother was a character and had no filter. “I thought you were against Black-on-Black crime. Isn’t that what you told me?”

“I’m telling you I need help!” Ruby’s voice elevated, sounding like a high-pitched soprano.

Faith had just finished her last home designing project for the year. It was the week of Thanksgiving, and she rarely had a job to do in December, because few people wanted their home in a state of disarray while putting up Christmas decorations . . . and her marriage was falling apart. So, she really had no reason to hang around Atlanta.

Crystal’s last cheerleading competition for the year was coming up, but Chris could take her to that. He took Crystal to most of her events anyway.

“What’s the weather like down there?”

“Fair to middlin’.”

“I’m serious, Mama. You know I don’t like being at the beach in November.”

“The sun is out,” Ruby told her. “There’s not a cloud in the sky. You can check the weather report yourself. You’ll see what I’m telling you is true.”

Faith took a deep breath, rolled her neck. The one thing she hated about living in a beach town was hurricane season. When she was a teen, Faith had experienced a hurricane in late November that had been worse than any in her lifetime because of the destruction it left behind. Faith still had deep wounds because of that storm.

Her mother was crying again. Faith hadn't been home in the past three years. Maybe if she had gone home more, her mother wouldn't have fallen prey to this Rick guy. "Okay. Don't do anything crazy, Mama. If you want me to come down there, then you need to go report this guy to the police."

"Why do I have to do that?" Ruby asked as if people didn't normally report robberies.

"If it's no big deal, then I'll just stay in Atlanta and take care of the hundred and one problems that I have." Faith wasn't doing this with her mother. She was going to handle this the right way or forget about receiving help from Faith.

"Alright, alright. I'll file the report." ®

"Great! I'll see you in a few hours." She hung up with her mother and then made a U-turn. Instead of going to the office, she was going home to pack.

Pulling up to her thirty-two-hundred-square-foot home, Faith noticed that the lights were on in the kitchen and family room. She could have sworn that she turned those lights off, and she had been the last one to leave the house that morning.

Faith was about to open the garage and pull her car inside, but then she remembered something Pastor Green said about not letting the left hand know what the right hand was doing. Faith had a suspicion that her wonderful husband had come back home once he thought she was out of the way for the rest of the day. Had he brought some woman to their house? Was he entertaining his side chick, fixing her breakfast and going on and on about how he knocked down the

walls that separated the kitchen from the family room so they could have the open floor plan they wanted?

She turned off her car, stepped out and made her way to the back of the house, using her key to enter by way of the mudroom. She would only have a few seconds worth of surprise on her side because she had set the chime on the alarm system to go off whenever a door opened. Chris hated that chime. But Faith told him that as long as they had a teenager in the house, she was going to let their alarm system *chime chime chime*.

Moving from the mudroom into the kitchen, she called out, “Chris . . . Chris. Why aren’t you at work?” *Earning back the money you stole from me*. Her eyes shifted this way and that.

Chris wasn’t in the kitchen, but the sixty-inch television in the family room was on. And it wasn’t on the sports channel where her husband would’ve had it. Some foul-mouth reality show was blaring through the house as her fourteen-year-old daughter sat on the sofa with the boy from down the street. Their heads swiveled in her direction, eyes big like they knew they had been caught.

Faith picked up the remote and turned off the television. “Kenneth Jones, what are you doing in my house in the middle of a school day? I just know y’all aren’t skipping school.”

The boy stood and started stuttering. “M-m-my m-mom said I could s-stay home today.”

“But this mom—” She pointed at herself—“Didn’t say you could hang out at my house.” Faith turned her attention to her daughter who was sitting on the sofa with her eyes bugging out like she couldn’t believe she had been caught. “Is your dad here?”

Crystal shook her head then rolled her eyes. She shifted so she was facing the wall instead of looking at her mother.

Smoke blew out of Faith’s nostrils. “Girl, don’t you know I will snap your neck, then the only person you’ll be rolling them eyes at is the undertaker.” Her mother used to say that to her when she was

younger. Faith swore she would never say anything like that to her future children. But life had a way of making a liar out of you.

She turned to Kenneth, the little boy who used to do relay races in the community pool with her daughter and hang out in the backyard. Now they were snuggled up on the sofa with no adult supervision. “You know you’re not allowed in my house unless I’m here or her daddy.” She jutted her thumb toward the front door.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Phillips.” He rushed past her and headed to the door.

Her daughter jumped off the sofa, like she was about to follow Kenneth to the door. One day, Crystal was a baby in her arms, then as she got older, she started looking more and more like Faith’s sister, Trinity—now she was chasing behind a boy . . . just like her sister.

“Get back here this instant, Crystal.”

Crystal swung around. Eyes showing all the animosity she felt for her mother. “Why do I have to stay in here with you? You don’t want me around any other time.”

“Are your eyes red?” She put her hands on Crystal’s face and swiveled the girl’s head from right to left. “Have you been smoking weed in my house?”

Scrunching her nose, Crystal backed away from her mother. “I don’t do drugs. You would know that if you were ever around.”

Now it was her turn to roll her eyes. “I work, Crystal. I can’t sit under you and your father all day long, or no bills would get paid around here.” And they would be standing in the dark having this discussion because the lights would be off.

Every time she thought about what the man who promised to love and cherish had done to her, she wanted to break down and cry, but there was no time for crying now. She had to get to Hallelujah and stop her mom from crying.

Her arm did a sweeping motion toward the spiral staircase that she loved so much and imagined her daughter walking down for her

prom. *Don't cry. Don't cry.* "Go pack your suitcase. I have to go help Grammy, and you're coming with me."

Crystal lifted an eyebrow. "What? I can't go anywhere. I have two more days of school before the Thanksgiving break and a cheer competition."

"I will contact the school and let them know you're going virtual for the next few weeks." The one thing Faith loved about Crystal's school was that they provided the option of in-person learning and virtual. "And you can forget about that cheer competition. Think about it as punishment for disobeying your parents."

"What?" Crystal crossed her arms and stomped her foot. "I'm not going. I'm calling Daddy. You can't do this to me just because I was watching TV with Kenny."

It sounded so innocent the way Crystal explained away her little excursion, but Faith wasn't buying it. She put a hand on her hip. "For somebody so worried about missing school, you sure skipped today. How many other days have you done this?" She took her cell phone out of her purse and scrolled through the missed calls. "And why didn't the school notify me?"

Crystal's eyes jutted this way and that again. "Daddy called and told them I wasn't feeling well so I would be staying home today."

Narrowing her eyes at Crystal, Faith said, "You look like you're feeling pretty good to me." She then pointed toward the stairs again. "Go pack. I don't have time for this." Faith hollered after her, "And if you're thinking about calling your father, don't. I will let him know what we're doing myself."

Crystal stomped up the stairs. Sighing deeply, Faith wished she could leave her here with her father, But she wasn't about to come back to Atlanta to discover her teenage child was pregnant. Not about to happen. Glancing around her kitchen, she saw Crystal's cell phone on the island. She picked it up and entered her daughter's code.

As the phone opened, Faith went to the text messages to see who

Crystal had been talking to this morning. The only text she saw came from Kenneth.

You home?

Yeah.

Can I come through?

For a little while.

Sighing, Faith put the phone down, climbed the stairs and went to her master suite. Her daughter was growing up too fast. Telling boys they could come over when her parents weren't home was not cool.

She entered her spacious walk-in closet, opened her suitcase and started packing. She walked from one side of the closet to the other taking pants and shirts off hangers. She stopped for a minute, hands on hips, a shirt dangling from her right hand as she looked around.

Most women would be over the moon to have the type of space Faith had in her closet. When she designed it, Faith thought this room would be her happy place, but the house seemed more like a war zone than a sweet retreat. Maybe she had been wrong to demand that they buy this house when Chris wanted a smaller home in an up-and-coming neighborhood.

But Faith hadn't wanted to wait for her dream home. She had wanted it all—the husband, the child, the showpiece home—and now she just wanted to get away.

Chapter 3

RUBY TOOK OFF THE HOSPITAL GOWN, PUT IT IN THE RECEPTACLE her doctor's office used for discarded gowns and then put her shirt back on. She'd been on the phone with Hope and Faith while waiting in room number three for Dr. Stein to tell her why she had been summoned back to his office after her last visit just two weeks ago.

And she didn't like not one word that came out of her doctor's mouth when he finally stepped into the room. That man had given her more bad news over the years than she cared to catalog. She should have traded him in for that younger doctor who set up an office in town a few years back, but Dr. Stein knew too much of her business.

She opened the door and followed the exit sign to the checkout counter where Marline the checkout clerk asked, "How are you doing this morning, Mrs. Ruby?"

"I've been better, that's for sure," she told the woman as she set her purse on the counter. "How much do I owe for a visit I didn't ask for in the first place?"

Marline shook her head. "Your insurance is covering this visit in full since this is a follow up."

“Great.” Ruby started to turn and walk out the door, but Marline stopped her.

“Dr. Stein needs to schedule your surgery.”

No! No! No! Ruby shook her head. “I’ve got to check my schedule. I’ll get back with you.” She left the doctor’s office and headed to the police station, another place she didn’t want to go. But since Faith said she wouldn’t come if she didn’t report the theft, she drove down the main strip, enjoying the palm tree-lined street and looking at all of the eateries that had been added to the strip in the past few years.

Hallelujah hadn’t always been a tourist destination. It had been a place where families who wanted a quieter way of life settled down. Her husband had been one of those people. Henry Reynolds had come to the island to build houses for the rich folks and ended up marrying her. Then they got a piece of land for themselves. They lived just steps from the beach.

Henry had been so happy when she told him that she’d received a plot of land right on the beach from an unnamed benefactor. Actually, she knew who her benefactor was, but she would not allow that man’s name to cross her lips. He had caused her too much harm.

But the land was a beautiful thing. Henry built a home on that land and they raised their family there. And if it was the last thing she did, Ruby was going to make sure that a member of the Reynolds family stayed in the house that her husband built from the ground up.

She pulled into the police station parking lot. A deep, heavy I-don’t-want-to-do-this sigh escaped her lips as she got out of her car and walked toward the Judah Watch Police Station. The minute she swung open the door, the smell of sweat, gun oil and shoe polish assaulted her nostrils. Her stomach lurched. She hated this place.

Ruby made her way to the front desk trying her best not to think about the last time she was in this old rickety building and was told that she wasn’t going to get any help from them. She doubted anything would come of this, but she told the front desk clerk that she needed

to report a crime, just as Faith asked her to do. Even though she knew good and doggone well that these Keystone Cops couldn't find the prize in a Cracker Jack box. They hadn't helped her when she needed them most, so . . .

She was seated at a police officer's desk. He had red hair. He was skinny, bumbling and Forrest Gump goofy. She told him her story, and all he said was, "I don't think we'll be able to help much with this, Mrs. Ruby."

"But I can still file a report, right? You can handle paperwork, can't you?"

"Mrs. Ruby, I'm not trying to upset you, but you don't have a contract or anything to prove Rick Thornton took your money in exchange for the work he was supposed to do on the house."

"Well, what you think he took it for? 'Cause the sky was blue . . . 'cause the tide was coming in? Or maybe you think I just go around handing out money to men like I'm at a strip club, making it rain or something."

"I don't think you just gave him the money, Mrs. Ruby, but what I'm trying to tell you is we can't find his name in our database. He must have given you a false name."

Ruby shook her head. "You mean to tell me I been . . ." She snapped her fingers one, two, three times as she tried to come up with the word her seventy-year-old mind was looking for, "Cat-licked."

"Catfished," he corrected.

In a huff, she stood. "Cat licked, catfished. Slick Rick has got my money, and I need to file a report." Faith wasn't coming if she didn't file a report, and knowing her daughter, she would ask to see proof.

"Okay, Mrs. Ruby, let's write this up." The officer turned to his computer and began typing the information Ruby gave him.

Ruby became animated as she described the man who she claimed took her money. Her voice elevated as she tried to cover up for all the inconsistencies in the report. One minute she said the man was short,

then she said he was almost six feet tall. She told the officer that Rick had brown hair at the beginning of the report, and by the end she was talking about a man with black hair.

The police officer stopped typing. "Now, Mrs. Ruby, you know it's a crime to file a false report, right?"

Another police officer at the desk across from Forrest Gump tsk-tsked at her.

Ruby turned toward the officer. "Gracey, if you don't mind your own business, I'll tell your mama that she needs to take that switch to you like she did when you got sassy with me at your eighth grade graduation party."

"Mrs. Ruby, I'm a pay-my-own-bills full-grown woman. My mama is not bringing no switch in here."

Ruby harrumphed. "We'll see about that. Just sass off at me if you want to. I'll call Lynn right now." She opened her purse and pulled out her cell phone. Kept staring at Gracey like, don't make me get your behind tore up.

"I'm going for coffee." Gracey rose from her desk. "You have a good day, Mrs. Ruby."

Ruby smiled at her as if she hadn't just threatened to have the girl beat in front of all her co-workers. "You have a good day, too, Gracey, and don't forget to swing by the house to pick up that blueberry crumb cake I made for your mama."

"Will do." Gracey waved goodbye as she headed to the breakroom.

Ruby turned back to the goofy officer she had been talking to. "Well, I guess I'll mosey on home . . . for the time that I still have a home since you are absolutely no help." She shook her head, looked perplexed as she scanned the length of him.

The officer lowered his head.

Conviction sprung up in her over her harsh words. After all, she was in here telling a bunch of bald-faced lies. She patted the officer

on the shoulder. "I'm sure you're doing a good enough job, so pay me no mind."

He looked up at her with kind eyes. "I'm going to do you a favor and not file this report, Mrs. Ruby," he said quietly.

Ruby looked away and shrugged. She'd done what Faith asked. She'd come down to the police station to report what Slick Rick or whatever his name had done to her. It was a big lie, but she didn't feel bad about it at all. Ruby was good at lying. She had been taught to lie as a young child when her mother made her lie about who her father was.

Ruby consoled herself with the knowledge that a contractor had in fact given her an estimate for work on the house. He had told her his name was Rick. Was it her fault that he had lied to her? It was a good thing that she hadn't really given that man her money.

Ruby walked to the door, wanting nothing more than to get out of this place before memories of the last visit filled her mind and tore at her heart. Ruby's hand was on the doorknob, and she was almost on her way when a voice she recognized called out to her.

"Mrs. Ruby, wait. Don't leave."

Nicolas Evans came up behind her and tapped on her shoulder. It felt like a thousand prickly ants had come out of the sand from the beach behind her house and were now marching up her back, finding a home in her once long and brown, but now short and silverish gray hair. She scratched her scalp before turning to face him.

The young man was as handsome as the devil himself. His white skin was always tanned as if he stayed in the sun. Nicolas was the lead detective at the Judah Watch Police Station. He'd come back home after working for the FBI in DC for fourteen years.

Ruby had always liked the name Judah for the police station because it was a play on the town's name, Hallelujah, since Judah meant praise. They added Watch at the end of the name to remind the

townspeople that they shouldn't just praise but also keep a watchful eye out for mischief.

She wished she had taken that "watch" part more seriously a few times in her life. "What can I do for you, Detective Evans?"

Stepping closer to her, smiling, he said, "Why so formal? I've always just been Nickel Knucklehead to you."

She laughed the first good laugh she'd had in weeks. "I haven't called you that since you and Hope were teenagers, out there running around on the beach."

A flicker of sadness danced in his eyes. "How is Hope these days?"

"She's doing fine. Lives too far away. But her career is taking off, so I fly those California skies to see her when I can."

"Tell her I said hello the next time you talk to her, okay?"

"Of course, Nicolas. I'll let her know I saw you down here at the do-nothing police station."

Truth be told, she wished Hope and Nic were still running around on the beach. Wished she could go back in time and get those days back. Because then Nic wouldn't be standing in front of her about to ask her about things she couldn't bring herself to think about—not now, not without her girls.

"Ummm, have you thought any more about giving me that DNA sample?"

She put her hand back on the doorknob, getting ready to escape. She knew it, just knew that she wouldn't get out of this station without Nicolas Evans getting in her business—without him staring at her with those confusing eyes of his. One minute they were green, the next they were gray.

"No," she said flatly, "and I don't have time to talk to you about no DNA when I can't get nobody in here to do nothing about the money that's been stolen from me." She made that statement as if it was as true as the sun rising in the morning. She then swung open the door and

got out of that station like somebody had just called in a bomb threat and she needed to be on the other side of town before it detonated.

She didn't turn back, didn't want to see Nicolas staring at her. Didn't want to see the pity on his face. No, she wasn't giving him her DNA. She just couldn't. Because then she might find an answer that would be too much to handle at this point in time, along with everything else she was dealing with.

She got in her car and drove home to wait on her girls. Hope and Faith were coming home. Ruby exhaled at that thought. Finally, something to look forward to. Her family would be back in that big old beach house that Henry built. That was at least something to praise God about. When she saw them, she might shout to the heavens with all the joy she had been missing from not having her girls on the land that was meant for them.

Her land was the legacy she planned to pass down to her girls. The beach house would stay in the Reynolds family. Scooter Evans, the town banker and real estate developer, would not get his hands on it just so he could build some grand resort.

When she arrived home, Ruby suddenly felt sick to her stomach at the thought of going inside that empty house. She didn't want to look at what twenty years of neglect had done to her once beautiful home, so she walked to the back of the house and sat in one of her lounge chairs on the wooden deck that overlooked the water.

A cool breeze drifted by. Ruby wrapped her arms around her shoulders as she shivered. Her eyes then darted toward the water. She stood and walked to the edge of the deck. The tide was rising. She could feel it in her bones, a storm was coming.