

**LIKE MOM**



**ALSO BY CHERYL ROBINSON**

The One

Remember Me

When I Get Where I'm Going

In Love with a Younger Man

Sweet Georgia Brown

It's Like That

If It Ain't One Thing

When I Get Free



# LIKE MOM

CHERYL ROBINSON



ROSE-COLORED BOOKS

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*“Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough.”*  
~R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*





NEVADA

PROLOGUE

## OH HAPPY DAY



*October 31, 2007*

Nothing changes if nothing changes, but today something was about to because today was my wedding day. My mind was in the clouds; I was finally getting married, and I felt as though a massive weight had been lifted off my chest. I could breathe again. And I never thought this day would come. After eleven years without any contact from my daughter's father, we were about to become husband and wife. And I was elated because I'd always wanted *The Notebook* kind of love—someone who would be with me until the end, and I had prayed that my daughter's father was the one and that I wasn't making a mistake by marrying him.

Claude and I reconnected a year earlier through Facebook; he sent me a long message that included his phone number. And I called him a week later after telling myself that people sometimes changed and hoping that he had. Besides, I knew he couldn't have been any worse than the last fool I'd been with or the one before him. And the biggest difference between those two fools and him was that he was my daughter's father.

At first, we just talked on the phone for hours but just talking didn't last long. After a few weeks, we started dating, but I didn't bring him around our daughter right away because even though he was her

biological father she had never met him. And I wasn't in any hurry to introduce them, not before I figured out whether or not what we had was going to last or if it were just some little fling. Then, out of the blue, while we were sitting in his car at Mug-n-Bun, a drive-in restaurant on the Westside of Indianapolis that was near the Speedway, he asked me to marry him. He didn't give me an engagement ring right then because he wanted me to pick out the one I wanted. I ended up picking out the one he could afford, though, and not the one I wanted, but that didn't matter because I didn't need to wear a large diamond on my wedding finger to feel loved. I just needed to know the man I was with loved me unconditionally, and I needed to hear him say that he did and prove that he did through his actions because I didn't want him to be anything like my father.

The wedding singer was belting out "Oh Happy Day" as I was floating to the front of the living room in the historic Hannah House, an Italianate-style mansion built in 1858 on Indy's Southside. As the urban legend had it, the Hannah House was one of the stop offs for the Underground Railroad for slaves moving from the south toward Canada. Many believed the house was haunted by the souls of slaves who died in a fire in the cellar at the house. I didn't choose the venue or the date for our wedding. Claude thought getting married on Halloween in a haunted house and having a masquerade wedding was unique and would be fun for our guests, and since he wasn't superstitious or real religious, either, he didn't see a problem with it. I wasn't crazy about the idea, but then I told myself that if our marriage ended it would be because of something one of us did, not because of the date we got married on or where we'd said our I Do's.

Claude was wearing a black tuxedo and a black half mask that had some gold embroidery on it. He was standing beside the minister (who wasn't wearing a mask) and in front of the fireplace. I had on a white wedding dress without a train and a white half mask that had pearls and rhinestones covering it and a pink silk flower on the side with a vintage rhinestone in the center of it. Most of our guests were wearing masks, including my mom who was wearing a red paper-mache mask with gold leaf accents, wired paper curls with bells attached and ribbon tie.

My daughter Nicole refused to wear a mask. She didn't want me to marry him, but I stood in front of the fireplace and said "I do."

When the wedding was over, we went straight to the reception that was held in the same place. During the reception, I noticed Nicole sitting in the corner of one of the smaller rooms in the house with her hands balled into fists and pressed against her fat cheeks. She had the saddest look on her face. Why was she sulking when we were a family finally? I was married to her father, and I didn't understand why she wasn't as happy as I was about that. She always wanted a dad, and now she had a real one, and he was her biological father, and not some basketball player on TV she pretended was her dad. And I had convinced myself that I loved Claude and that he had changed and that we were going to be happy and that two incomes were much better than one. I knew I didn't love him, but I didn't want to think about any of that on my wedding day, so instead of thinking I danced, and a first dance turned into a second one and then a third. My wedding day was about putting my family unit back together, and I had done that. I had finally accomplished something without putting that much work into it and with leaving my heart out of it.

Then, at close to midnight, after my mom had a few glasses of champagne, my happy day turned into one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. Seeing my mom drinking was something I'd never seen before, so I should have known whatever resulted from that wouldn't be good.

Mom walked up to me after I finished dancing with Claude and as he was walking toward his family, who had stayed separated from my family and me all day. Some wounds would never heal and the fact that Claude's family thought of me as the high-school slut who'd gotten pregnant to trap their son and that my daughter wasn't his daughter still felt like a fresh cut—a deep one.

"I started not to come," My mom said. "Who thinks of getting married at midnight on Halloween? Black people don't do that."

"I'm black, and I'm doing it."

"But why are you doing it? Why are you having your wedding in

a house haunted with dead slaves?" She shook her head. "But then again nothing you ever do makes sense to me." She took a sip from her champagne glass. Her bloodshot eyes were staring me down. "What's wrong with my children? Why are y'all so damn *stupid*?" she asked, spitting out the last word. "After the way he treated you, how could you marry him?" When I didn't respond quickly enough, she shouted, "How could you?" I tried to walk away, but she grabbed my arm. "Are you that hard up for a husband that you have to recycle your garbage?"

"Mom, stop, it's her wedding day," Theo, my younger sister said, tugging at my mom's arm. "What's wrong with you?"

"Me?" Mom jerked away from Theo's grip. "Nothing's wrong with me. She stared at my sister, starting from her taper fade haircut to her slim-fit suit right down to her wing tip lace ups. "I hope that's a costume you're wearing since it's Halloween. I hope you're not coming here dressed like a man and acting like one, too, with a woman on your arm because you're that way for real. And you want to know what's wrong with *me*. What in the hell is wrong with you? I had one son, not two. And your name is *Theona*, not Theo. As if I haven't already had enough things go wrong in my life, you had to go gay. But I will say this you're more of a man than Mimi's man is because at least you work and take care of your woman. Mimi over there taking care of her man; I guess she's going to start dressing like a man soon, too."

"Mom, please don't," I said, begging. "This is my wedding day." I knew my mom couldn't stand Claude the same way she couldn't stand my sister Mimi's freeloading man, but at least my husband had a job. Mimi's man didn't even work; he sat on the sofa twiddling his ugly toes while he flipped through TV channels with the remote and ate up all the food. And why bring Theo into this. Theo had been gay almost her whole life and didn't try to hide it. If Mom didn't know, it's because she didn't want to know or have the time or energy to notice. Just like she never noticed that I was pregnant way back when.

Mom continued sipping on champagne and talking nonsense; I couldn't get her to stop. "Meanwhile, my pushover son came here with his daughters but not his wife. If I have to be here for this mess, Dr. Brenda can put on a mask and be here, too. I thought doctors

didn't work on Wednesdays...oh, *real* doctors probably don't. Somebody needs to tell that woman she's a pharmacist, not a damn doctor."

"You're drunk, and you're ruining my wedding, but I already know you don't care; you're miserable, and you want everyone else to be."

Mom took another sip of champagne, more like a gulp, and stopped talking, but not for long. "At least Mimi had enough sense not to marry her no good nothin' man. I'll give your marriage five years, and that's me being generous." Luckily, the music that was playing drowned out most of what my mom had said so I didn't think many of the guests heard. But I'd heard and so had my sisters and a few others who'd been on the dance floor and Nicole had, too. She was no longer sitting in the corner, sulking; she was standing beside my mom, and she had a smirk on her face. She didn't like her father and didn't pretend to. But I was officially Mrs. Nevada Pearson-Little—only I was keeping my last name and wasn't going with a hyphenated name. Things would be simpler that way. Claude had never been on Nicole's birth certificate, and if I wanted to get her last name changed, there'd be legal proceedings to go through. Besides, Nicole wanted to keep her last name the way it was, and I wanted to keep mine the way it was, too.

As the reception was winding down, I started having second thoughts about my changed day. Maybe nothing changes even when something did change—that might be possible. I thought about what my mom had said and wondered if Claude and I would last. Mom was giving us five years, but that seemed like an eternity for a man to stay in love with me. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't make it to our one-year anniversary. But I was still freezing the top layer of the wedding cake just in case.



THREE YEARS LATER...





PART ONE

FRAGILE HANDLE WITH CARE  
*Fall/Winter 2010*



NICOLE

## RECYCLED GARBAGE



I stared across the booth at my mom with a blank expression on my face and told her what I felt she needed to hear, what I'd never heard her husband say. "You look pretty." And she did—prettier than I'd seen her look in a long time. She looked like she'd lost a few pounds. Either that or bought a better girdle. And I had an instant vision of my mom losing half her size, like the people on *The Biggest Loser*.

We were at Red Barrel, celebrating their three-year wedding anniversary on Halloween with a bunch of people dressed up in costumes. *Who gets married on Halloween?* Better question: *Why did they get married at all?*

Mom was wearing a long-sleeved purple and black dress that she got from Macy's. I remembered when she got it last year, because as soon as she came home, she tried it on and asked me a bunch of times if I liked it. Each time I told her I did, but she didn't believe me, so she took it off, put it back in the bag, drove to the store, and returned it. The next week she saw it on sale online and ordered it, but this was her first time wearing it. I wanted a more glamorous mom, one who looked like she could be my sister. Someone who could teach me how to put on my makeup and do my hair and had a sense of style I admired—someone like Beyoncé. But my mom wasn't like Mrs. Carter. And the only makeup my mom wore was lip gloss that was too shiny for her full lips and cashew beige face powder that was a shade too light. She wore dark sweats mostly. I wished she'd start caring about how she

looked more than I cared about how she looked. All of those “you got it from your mama” jokes some of the kids chanted in the mornings after my mom dropped me off made me resent her more than the kids saying them. But it wasn’t just the way she looked that bothered me. I hated that she always tried to tell me what to do. Making me show her my bloody Kotex wasn’t right. She wanted to control me just because she was my mom, and I was young.

“Thank you, baby,” my mom said as she put on a wide smile. Her teeth weren’t yellow, but they were dull and crowded. And looking at them felt like a peek into my own teeth’s future and instantly depressed me. Even though she had dental insurance and could have gotten her teeth fixed if she wanted to, she didn’t because she was too afraid to go to the dentist.

“This is *soooo* nice,” Mom told her husband as she wiggled her wide behind in her seat and looked around the restaurant like she’d never *ever* been there before. Red Barrel was right down the street from our house, and we ate there at least once a week. But that was Mom: always trying to feed some undeserving man’s ego. I’d seen her do the same thing with the last man that was in her life and the one before him. She leaned over and kissed her husband, and he grinned and nodded like he’d done something. Excuse my frustration, but Red Barrel Buffet wasn’t shit. The dinner special was just \$7.99 per person before seven p.m., and anybody with a TV, which my mom definitely had, knew that because Red Barrel ran commercials every two and half minutes on channel thirteen. The spacious booths were the nicest thing in the place. But who the hell goes to a restaurant because of the damn booths. People go to a restaurant because of the food, and the food here was fucked up. I didn’t like buffet-style restaurants. It was nasty seeing pieces of one dish floating inside another dish or watching someone cough or sneeze as they pushed their tray around. My mom was worth way more than a fuckin’ buffet. He should have taken us to a restaurant where a person greeted us at the door with menus and took us to our table, where a waiter would take our orders. Instead of a place we pushed a tray around. Someplace with white tablecloths instead of water stains streaking a barely clean table. Someplace

with a chef instead of a bunch of cooks reheating food they probably bought at Sam's Club. Someplace in downtown Indy like St. Elmo that had been around forever, especially since Mom and I have never been there. Mom loved steak, and St. Elmo is supposed to have the best, and the best shrimp cocktail, and Mom loved shrimp, too. Uncle Tommy took his family there once a year, and he wasn't rich. True, Aunt Dr. Brenda did have a good job and made a little money, but she made it clear that her money was her money, and his money was his money. But hell, he didn't have that much money, but he wasn't cheap with what he did have. My uncle was the type of man who'd work two jobs if he needed to. He used to drive an armored truck, but a freak accident caused the heavy steel door in the back of the truck to hit him in his back, and he'd been on disability for the past five years. But I bet one thing, even on disability, he wouldn't take his family to some damn Red Barrel on his wedding anniversary. *Where was her gift?* She'd bought him tickets to a Pacers game. He lived or died by the Pacers, always talking about Reggie Miller like he was still on the team. My mom's anniversary gift was probably the same place as her Valentine's, birthday, and Christmas gifts were—still at the store.

I grabbed my throat because I felt like gagging. I was getting sick to my stomach watching my mom pretend to be happy. I had to put an end to that shit. "Mom, can you ask your husband to pass the salt?"

"Her husband?" her husband asked with a twisted face as he looked at my mom and then at me. "I'm your father. You do know that, right?" *Wrong.* KG had been in my life way longer than her husband had.

"Yes, I know you are," I said with a fake smile. He stared at me the same way the kids at school did, like I was weird and looked crazy like the kids said I did. The only difference: I didn't want the kids at school to think I was off, but I *did* want her husband to think I was.

"How's school going?" he asked me out of nowhere after he stuffed his mouth with cabbage and chewed like a horse.

I shrugged. "It's okay."

"Just okay? When we went to Parents In Touch Day, your English teacher said you were having problems—"

"It's okay," I said, stabbing my eyes in his direction. My head felt like a leaky gas line that was ready to explode. *Don't fuckin' ask me about high school, okay, buddy?* Parents In Touch Day was a long fuckin' time ago. If her husband had concerns about what any of my teachers said, he should have addressed them back then, not bring the shit up over a month later.

"You keep saying, it's okay, but I'm trying to understand what that means." He looked at my mom, "What does okay mean?" I stared across the booth at her husband. I did not like that man, and I didn't feel bad about not liking him, either.

"Are you making friends, honey?" Mom asked.

"No, Mom, I'm not making friends, and please don't ask me if I have friends again, okay?" *What's so special about friends when all they do is backstab anyway?*

"Is that all you're eating?" her husband asked me. I had a full plate of salad, and the only reason I had that was because I'd been at the salad bar when the woman with a hair bonnet and gloves brought out a fresh bowl of iceberg lettuce, and I was able to get my serving as soon as the plastic wrap was pulled off. "I paid for you to have an all-you-can-eat meal, not a plate of salad."

"You can take the seven ninety-nine out of my allowance."

"And I'll do that, too."

"No, you won't, Claude," Mom said, rolling her eyes.

"Oh yes I will since she wants to get all smart about it. I can understand why she's on a diet, but now is not the time."

*He can understand why I'm on a diet, and why in the hell can he understand that, and I'm not on a diet?* I turned and looked out the window. I hated my life. Between my hair, my weight, and the bullies at school, what was there to like?

Her husband got up from the table for another round, and that was why his stomach was hanging over his belt, which was why he needed to put himself on a damn diet instead of understanding why I was on one when I wasn't. "Would you ladies like for me to bring you any-

thing back?”

I shook my head.

“No thank you, honey,” Mom said, smiling. I shook my head again, but this time at my mom. I guessed she was just as fake as the girls at my school. “Nicole, would you like your father to bring you back anything?”

“I shook my head. Doesn’t that mean no in every language? I know it does in English.”

“Why are you talking to your mother like that?” Her husband asked.

My mom slid down the booth and used her hand to hold her husband back from hauling off and hitting me right in the middle of Red Barrel. Let him try it; I wished the hell he would. I’d call child protective services on his ass so fast.

“I’ll handle this, Claude.”

“You better, or you know I will, and you know how I will,” he said.

*Okay, so let me get this straight. This dude stayed out of my life for eleven years and came back to abuse me. Is that it? I don’t think so, and neither does my grandma or my cousin Tattoo. So like I said, let him try it.*

My mom’s husband had never hit me, but he was probably itching to.

“What’s wrong with you?” Mom whispered through gritted teeth after her husband walked away. “Do you want your father to slap you down right here, in front of all of these people?”

“Let him fuckin’ try to,” I said, my eyes dead center on hers.

“You can’t talk to me like that, using profanity. What the hell is wrong with you? If I had talked to my mother like that, I wouldn’t be alive today.”

“And then neither would I. So maybe you should’ve because I hate my fuckin’ life.”

“Why are you cussing and acting like a fool? What’s your problem?”

"They're just words. Would you rather me use drugs instead?"

"You're not doing either one."

"Well, I have to use something because I can't take it."

"Can't take what?"

"My life...I hate my life."

"If you think you hate your life now, keep it up, and I mean it. If I hear you talking like that again, I'm telling your father, and you really will hate your life because there's no telling what he'll do." I shrugged. "And I'm taking away League Pass."

*Let her fuckin' try it.*

"Why do white kids get to cuss in front of their parents? Why are black parents so da—" I stopped myself from cussing again—"strict?" My mom was shaking her head and staring at me from across the table like she wanted to leap over it and beat me down. She had never hit me before, either, or put me on a punishment, but there's a first time for everything.

"What's wrong with you? Ever since you started high school, you are so different. What is it?"

"I'm unhappy. That's what's wrong with me." My eyes bubbled with heavy tears that quickly rained down my face. I used the palms of my hands to wipe them away real fast before anybody in Red Barrel saw me crying. "The kids at school tease me every single day, so I don't care about anything anymore—except Rajon Rondo and Kevin Garnet and the Boston Celtics, so if you take League Pass away, I'll have nothing. Do you want me to have nothing?"

"I know you're frustrated, but the problem with you is that you stay locked up in your room, and that's not healthy."

"No, that's not the problem with me, that's the problem you have with me. I like being in my room. If I didn't like being in there, I wouldn't be, and it's not like I'm always in there."

"Most of the time you are, and it's not healthy."

"Is running the streets and drinking in bars healthier? That's what



your husband does. He's never at home. Do you want me to start doing that?"

Mom narrowed her eyes at me. "You didn't have to say that to me." She shook her head. "You don't know how good you have it."

I put my hand in front of her face like a stop sign. "Please don't tell me about the girls in Africa, because I don't feel like hearing about them today." My mom obsessed over poor African girls: the ones she always told me had it much worse than me and would love to trade places with me. Mom would go on and on about how badly those girls had it, and how I needed to thank God every day for the roof over my head and the food in the refrigerator, and it was too much food because I was fat. She didn't say that part, but I was saying it because I was fat. She'd say all of my problems were trivial compared to the way some African girls were living. Mom told me about how this one woman she sponsored in the Congo was married and had two kids by the time she was my age. "You're complaining about going to school? Do you know there are some girls in other countries who aren't even allowed to go to school just because they are girls?" No, I didn't know that, and I wished I could let them go in my place. That's how much I hated school. I daydreamed a lot. I tried to pretend I was someone other than myself, someone worse off, because Mom made it seem like that was the best way to feel better about myself. But that only made me feel worse. "Girls in America have problems too."

"Stop it," Mom said, banging her fist on the table. "I mean it." She spoke softly but sternly, "I'm under a lot of pressure right now, and all you're doing is adding to it."

"You're not the only one under some pressure. I'm under a lot of pressure, too. High school ain't no joke, in case you forgot."

"Being around people your age will help you. It's healthier than staying locked up in your bedroom. Join a club, get out, meet people, become active, and enjoy yourself. You're only young once."

"Ugh...I hate when people use clichés. 'You're only young once.' So, who said I wanted to be young at all? If I wasn't young, I wouldn't be in high school. If I wasn't young, I could get my own place and stay

in my bedroom all I wanted, and no one would know the difference. If I wasn't young, I could get a relaxer. I can think of a lot of advantages to not being young. Just don't talk to me, Mom, because you don't understand what it's even like being me. No one but me can possibly understand that."

"I understand, and I'm trying to help you. I want to help you. I just don't know how to help you and neither does your father."

"You don't want to help me; you just want to tell me what to do, how to act, how to feel, how to wear my hair. You just want to control my life and make me more miserable than I already am. You even have a problem with me being in my room."

"I give up. Turn your room into a living tomb if it'll make you feel better."

I started picking at my salad and staring at my mom from across the booth. Tears clouded my eyes. I wished she could understand me. I wished I could understand me.

When we got back to the house, I rushed in from the garage and beat my mom and her husband inside. The phone was ringing, and I answered. "Mr. Little or Ms. Pearson, please," a man who sounded like Mr. Smith, my gym teacher, said. I was praying it wasn't him, because I didn't want my mom to know that I'd written a letter to get out of gym class and forged her name. If she found that out, I'd spend the rest of my teenage years on punishment, but that was pretty much how my life felt anyway like a permanent punishment.

"Speaking."

"Is this Ms. Pearson?"

"Yes."

"Ms. Pearson, this is Mr. Fields from Credit National. I'm calling you today, Ma'am, about a wonderful opportunity to consolidate all of your credit cards into one convenient payment. Currently, you are carrying roughly sixty-seven thousand dollars in revolving credit lines with monthly payments close to fifteen hundred dollars. We can

lower your payments substantially by as much as five hundred dollars. Wouldn't you like that?"

"Umm...hold please." I put the phone on mute and handed the phone to my mom's husband because he was the first one to walk in from the garage. "Who is it?" her husband asked, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He was sweating in late October when it wasn't even hot outside; that's where I must get my overactive sweat glands from.

I shrugged. "Some man about debt consolidation or something like that."

"Debt consolidation?" He took the phone from my hand. "Hello...this is Mr. Little...no, that was my daughter...How can I help you?"

I walked back to the garage to ask my mom about letting me get a relaxer since she'd promised.

"I don't want to talk about that right now. Who is your father talking to?"

"Some man calling about debt consolidation...something about lowering your monthly payments."

Mom opened her eyes as wide as Buckwheat's and started blinking. She shoved me to the side, ran into the kitchen from the garage, and snatched the phone out of her husband's hand.

"Hello," she said with an attitude. "Well, you're speaking to Ms. Pearson now...or Mrs. Little...no, we're not interested in refinancing our townhouse."

"Refinancing the townhouse, but he told me it was debt consolidation," her husband said.

"We're looking into moving soon...no we don't need help with that...thank you for calling, and please remove our number from your database."

"What was that about?" her husband asked.

"Nothing but a con. They start off by saying debt consolidation,

and before the call is over, they end up telling you the real reason they're calling, which, in this case, was a refinance."

"But he said something about being sixty-seven thousand dollars in debt."

"No...no...no," Mom said. "That's not what he was saying. That was the amount we could qualify for if we refinanced the townhouse."

"We're not refinancing this place. We're moving to Take the Cake Estates."

"And that's what I told him. You heard me."

*We were moving.* I thought they just looked at houses on Sunday because they were bored. But we were actually going to move. Hmm, maybe that would be a good thing because I was ready to move, away from Indy, period. And I'd go almost anywhere. Boston would be my first choice because of the Celtics, and L.A. would be my last choice because of the Lakers. And Miami wasn't a choice of mine at all because of the Heat, and I'm not talking about the weather. I couldn't stand their copycat asses. The Celtics had their Big Three first. Now, Miami had Chris Bosh. Okay, but we had KG—The Big Ticket, and his name didn't even belong in a sentence with Chris Bosh because it wasn't even a toss-up: a blindfolded Garnett would win a game of one-on-one against Bosh. King James was no joke, but we had Paul Pierce, and he was *The Motherfuckin' Truth* if you don't believe me, you could ask Shaq. And sometimes the truth hurts, like the fact that King James didn't have a ring. Didn't all kings have a ring...at least one? They had Dwyane Wade, but we had Ray Allen. Dwyane Wade's *girlfriend* was an actress, but Ray Allen starred in his own movie as Jesus Shuttlesworth, and the name Jesus said it all. They needed to pray hard if they wanted to beat us, just like I needed to pray if I wanted to survive high school. And I mean I needed to pray real hard.

My days on this earth felt numbered, not saying I was going to kill myself, but not saying I wasn't going to, either. I was just saying I was going to do something to help me because my parents weren't doing shit.

NEVADA

IMITATION OF LIFE



*I*t was Saturday, and I was in my car in Macy's parking lot because I needed to buy a dress to wear to the holiday party that was over a month away. I didn't need to buy it today, but Macy's was having a fifty-percent-off sale, and I was pretty sure I could find an evening dress for around seventy-five dollars, but could I find seventy-five dollars?

I listened to the voice prompts and keyed in my account number and zip code.

"Please wait while we retrieve your account balance," the automated recording said. "Your current balance is \$1,233.09. You have \$16.91 available for purchase. Your next payment of \$36.82 is due on November eleventh." My next payment was due on my birthday. What was I doing with my life? Where did I go wrong? I thought for sure I had at least a hundred dollars available on one of my credit cards, so I kept dialing until I got to the very last one, and when CitiCard's automated recording said I only had three dollars and sixty-eight cents available, I broke down. Some people counted every penny, others threw them away. I didn't have pennies or nickels or dimes or quarters or dollars. I didn't have any money—just my paycheck that I would spend before it was direct deposited.

"Why is my life so fucked up?" I said, banging my fist against the horn and jumping at the sound of it. No one was in the parking lot,

just cars—and some very nice ones. “I wish I could afford to buy a Lexus,” I said as I looked at the sparkling red sedan parked right in front of me. “Hell, I wish I could afford to buy a new car, period.” It didn’t have to be a Lexus. It could be a Kia for all I cared. My car needed new tires and brakes and probably a lot more than that, but I couldn’t even afford to pay for an inspection.

I buried my face in the palms of my hands and started crying. I was crying so hard snot was plugging my nostrils. I was bawling the way I had been two nights ago while I was watching *Imitation of Life*, which was all about a lie, and that’s exactly what my life was. One big lie, and not just my credit, either. Something else wasn’t right in my life, but I didn’t know what. Maybe if I lost weight, I’d be happier. What else could it be but my weight? “I wish I could live a life beyond my wildest dreams,” I said as I looked up at the billboard of Take the Cake Estates, a new subdivision in Carmel, Indiana, where the houses had huge front porches. I wished we could afford to live there, in that beautiful corner home on Angel Food Lane that I’d fallen in love with the first time I walked through one of the model homes there. “All I can do is wish, because I can’t afford to buy shit.” I cleared my scratchy throat and shook my head as I continued to stare at the billboard. “If I had money like Oprah, I could just prance in there and buy the whole street and start giving away houses. No, wait, if I had that much money, I could buy that whole subdivision.” I continued shaking my head. “I wish I could do my life over.”

“At least I have a nice place to live, and it has a two-car garage. I remember when all I wanted was a house with a two-car garage. Some people don’t have a place to stay at all,” I said, wiping away fresh tears. “Why can’t I have better? Why can’t I look better and feel better and live better?” I shouted. “Why can’t everything just be better?”

I immediately thought about Maombi, the woman from the Congo. I was her sponsor and every month I paid thirty dollars to the organization called Women’s Support. Maombi had written me a letter dated August 3, 2010, but I didn’t receive it until October 3, 2010. The original letter was stapled to the translated one, and three pictures were included. I put all three pictures on my refrigerator and carried

her letter in my purse. Sometimes, I'd pull out her letter and read it for my own encouragement, and today was one of those times.

Dearest Friend Pearson, Nevada  
Hello!

I am twenty-four with three children. The pictures I have sent are of me and my children and the hut that we live in. My youngest child was conceived through rape. I, along with three women from my village, was taken by a group of men. For two years, I was a sex slave, until one day I managed to fool my captors and escape. When I returned to my village, my husband didn't want me because I was carrying one of my captor's babies and thought to be my captor's wife. I left with my children and went to live with my mother. It is then that I heard about the organization that helped socially excluded women, and I later joined. I wish to thank you for helping me. Because of you, I have been able to receive training and have become a seller of small dried fish. I can feed my family and also save a little. The training works well for me and covers the following areas:

- Small business management: how to create a business and keep where you work clean.
- Domestic violence and rape.
- Women and civic participation.
- Value of social networks.

Because of this training, I no longer feel like a victim. I am a survivor. I am learning my rights and learning to become a leader. The money you send each month has given me hope.

Thanks!

Love,

Maombi

My tears dropped on the page and smeared a few of the translated words. Why was I crying to begin with? Because I couldn't find seventy-five dollars to buy a dress for a party that I didn't even want to go to,

and Maombi was happy about the thirty dollars a month I sent for her training. She was excited about being able to sell small dried fish. She'd been taken from her family and forced to become a sex slave. "What the hell is wrong with you, Nevada? You have every opportunity in the world...why don't you use some of them?"

If I were to write a letter to Maombi about my trials and tribulations, what would I say?

Dear Maombi,

I'm sitting in my car in the Macy's parking lot. Macy's is one of the department stores here in the U.S. that sells clothes and other things that aren't always necessary. I'm calling thirteen credit card companies on my cellphone to find money so I can buy a dress I don't need with money I don't have. I'm crying, but after reading your letter I have no idea why. I'm getting ready to go home to my three-bedroom two-and-a-half-bathroom townhouse that I complain is too small. It's easier for me to find things to complain about than actually doing something to change my life, and I'm getting tired of being this way.

I closed my eyes as tears streaked my face. On Friday, I received an e-mail from Women's Support saying that my October payment had been declined by my cardholder, and they would resubmit the payment the next business day. But it wasn't going to go through that day, either. Two years ago, I signed on to sponsor a sister because I could afford to do so. And in that time, eight sisters were provided specialized training all because of my small monthly contribution. Finding an extra thirty dollars a month wasn't a problem, especially with two incomes. But now things had changed. How could I continue to help rebuild Maombi's life if I didn't even have enough of an available balance on my credit card for the payment to go through?

P.S. You got stuck with a compulsive, shop-happy sister who has ruined her husband's credit and her own. Therefore, my payment to Women Support won't be going through this month and probably not next month, either. I hope they assign you to someone more responsible, so you can remain in the program.

"I'm sorry, Maombi."

I composed myself, wiped the tears from my eyes, started my engine, and pulled out of the parking space without ever going into the store.



Later that day, after I got home from the mall, I decided to attempt to get my life and bills more organized. I sat at the dining room table with a stack of mail new and old. The fall sun was beating through the picture window and baking the back of my neck. I was already in a bad mood because of my credit and then Claude put the dagger in my day when he called from work and said he'd be home late because he was going out drinking with his brother Will *again*. Will was Claude's oldest brother, and he was divorced, which was the keyword. And he was the one who filed, which meant I didn't like him at all, but I did like my ex-sister-in-law, and yes, Will had cheated on her.

"I almost forgot about jury duty," I said as I tossed my jury summons to the side and glanced down at the open envelope with the words SECOND NOTICE stamped in red letters across the front.

"I hate being summonsed. Maybe you won't get picked," the woman on the phone with the smoker's voice said as she was confirming my address, and then she said, "So tell me what you'd do if you won two million dollars?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure." Part of me didn't want to get caught up in the fantasy, but that was the only reason I'd called—because I'd already allowed myself to.

"You don't have any idea. Is there anything you've always wanted?"

*Other than thin thighs, a flat stomach, toned arms, and a husband I knew loved me, a happy child, and money to pay off my bills?*

"My dream home, I guess."

"Wouldn't that be nice?" the woman with the smoker's voice asked.

*Could it be this easy?* Could I call the toll-free number and key in the nine-digit number on the sweepstakes notice and the rest would all be a matter of waiting for the doorbell to ring and balloons to float to the sky? I'd be a millionaire, and I could pay off my debt. But of course, it wasn't that easy. She tried selling me *Town & Country*, *Soap Opera Digest*, *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Architecture Digest*... "Chose three," the woman with the smoker's voice said, "which ones would you like?" And when I kept telling

her no, she just wouldn't let it rest.

"I don't need any more magazines, but thank you." I was trying to be polite. In the past, I worked in customer service and remembered how it felt to deal with all different kinds of people over the phone. Some of whom weren't very nice. I'd been cursed out and reduced to a racial slur, so no matter how angry I became with the lady with the smoker's voice, I wasn't going to stoop to the same level of ignorance I'd been exposed to.

"Even though the magazines will only cost you a dollar and twenty-nine cents a week for all three, you still wouldn't want any, and you get two free watches, a his and hers?"

"My husband and I already have watches...Rolexes." It was more like an Olex because the R had faded away. We'd purchased them on the streets of New York for twenty dollars each, while we were there for our honeymoon, so I didn't expect much. I never thought it would still be telling time three years later.

"You can give it away to a family member. It's free and has a diamond at the twelve spot." She started telling me more about the free watches and added in a free cruise. All of this free stuff just for a magazine subscription that I only had to pay a dollar and some change a week to receive. "Which magazines do you like? If you're not sure, you can tell me your interests and we can send you out three a month based on that."

"Did you know there are women in the Congo who do a whole lot with thirty dollars a month, but one thing they're not doing is buying magazines?"

"I'm pretty sure we have women in Congo with subscriptions to our magazines."

"What? Do you even know where the Congo is?"

"Isn't it in Texas?"

"No," I shouted. "It's in Africa, and I've told you I don't know how many times that I don't want any of your magazines, and I don't need another watch, and I know you're not giving away a free trip to

anybody, so I don't need you to tell me about that anymore, either. I want what I called for, so are you going to enter me in your sweepstakes or not?"

"Please hold." And the phone quickly disconnected, so I guessed not.

I ripped the sweepstakes notice in half, tossed it to the far end of my dining room table, and continued writing out bills with tears dangling from my eyes that I wiped away as soon as they fell.

"Are you crying, Mom?" Nicole asked as she stood in the doorway between the living room and kitchen.

I jerked. I guessed she was speaking to me again. "You scared me. How long have you been standing there?"

"Just now. Are you okay?"

"I was just thinking about the movie I watched the other night, *Imitation of Life*."

"If it's that sad, I'm glad I didn't watch it with you."

"It's pretty sad."

Nicole stood at the doorway, staring hopelessly. Maybe she wanted to apologize for the way she acted at Red Barrel.

"How long will you be in there, because the game is coming on soon, and I want to watch it on the big TV?"

I should have known this was about the Celtics and not an apology.

"It's all yours," I said as I made a beeline to the kitchen for some sweets to take to my bedroom.

I woke up at two in the morning, and Claude still wasn't home. I sat up in bed and flipped through TV stations and stopped at a commercial for a diet pill that was under a clinical trial. I wondered if pills would work, but I didn't want to experiment: trying to enter sweepstakes for the first time was enough experimenting for me.

At a quarter after two, I heard the garage door open, Claude was home, and I was in bed waiting for him, and not for makeup sex. This

was the second time that he'd gone out drinking that week, and it needed to stop.