

FORMER RAIN
Excerpt

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Prologue

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Nina Lewis had the key in the lock of Marguerite's 1990 Chevy Cavalier when she noticed the white Cadillac with tinted windows parked a few feet away. She squinted in the thick darkness of the night as she tried to read the license plate number. The street light in front of Joe's Carryout had been broken for several weeks. A sign tacked to a raggedy old fence across the street read, "Tax dollars, hard at work."

The Cadillac's door swung open. The key jammed in the lock of the Cavalier and refused to yield. She frantically searched for any sign of help. A leg stretched out of the Cadillac and touched the ground. Fear clenched Nina's heart. She dropped the grocery bag. The dozen eggs Marguerite needed to bake that sweet potato cheesecake splattered in the street. The Reese's she had been craving for a week violently connected with the ground and her heel, as she ran like the wind. Tears streamed down her face, as she thought, so this is my destiny; to die like a dog in the street.

The ringing of the telephone cheated Elizabeth out of much needed sleep. She turned over in bed and glared at it. "Somebody better be dead!" she growled, reaching for the receiver. Then again,

at one in the morning, if someone were dead, she could do nothing about it. So she turned back over in bed and as her shoulder-length hair swished across her mocha-chocolate face, she resolved to let the answering machine pick up the call.

The salutation seemed a bit long this morning, and the beep was a tad loud. But the noise that bellowed from that little box on her night table was the most annoying of all. “Hi Liz, it’s your big brother. You’ve been so heavy on my mind I couldn’t get to sleep... Where are you?”

“Lying right here listening to you, bonehead!”

“Well, call me when you get in. Let’s do lunch or something, okay kiddo?” He hung up.

“Not if I can help it,” Elizabeth grabbed Kenneth’s pillow and covered her face. Ever since Michael became a minister he was always preaching, always telling her that she was a sinner. The way he talked you’d think she was a complete heathen who never set foot in a church building a day in her life. Didn’t she take her kids to church almost every Sunday? Didn’t she sing in the choir and lead most of the songs? Hadn’t her pastor told her that he was glad she was a member of his church? As far as Elizabeth was concerned, she was all right, and there was no way she was going to lunch with Michael to have him tell her everything she was doing wrong. Hmmph, no way! Mister Holier-than-thou could just find someone else to preach to!

The phone rang again. Elizabeth sank deeper into her bed and screamed, “Why me?” The answering machine picked that one up also. “It’s one in the morning, Elizabeth,” a sultry woman’s voice announced. “Do you know where your husband is?”

As the line went dead, Elizabeth looked over at Kenneth’s side of the bed. It was empty.

“He’s out there!” Nina screamed. She ran the entire two blocks from Joe’s Carryout. A gallon of two-percent milk was on the hood of the car, which was still in the grocer’s parking lot. “I saw him! He followed me.”

Marguerite Barrow quickly opened the screen door and peeped around the corner. It was so dark she could barely see past her porch. The street was quiet and full of inactivity. That was one thing for which she could praise God. The neighborhood dope pushers must have checked in early tonight. "There's nobody out here." Marguerite grabbed Nina's shoulders and turned her around to face the emptiness of the night. "See, you're safe, baby. Nobody's following you."

Marguerite's comforting voice was not enough to reassure Nina. She fell down at Marguerite's thin ankles and wrapped her arms around her as if her life depended on the tightness of her grip. "He's gonna kill me, Marguerite. He thinks I betrayed him. He said that nobody gets away with what I did to him." His exact words were more along the lines of, *I believe in an eye for an eye, Nina. You aborted my baby – you gon' wish you were aborted.*

"You're here now Nina. You're safe -- stop worrying. Lord Jesus, give me the strength to help this child," she prayed as she lifted Nina's limp body from the ground. Marguerite had been Nina's caregiver and protector for several weeks now. "Come on in here and sit down."

Nina dragged her frail, shaken body over to the couch as Marguerite closed the door and sat down in the chair opposite her. Watching as Nina stared off into space, she asked, "Can I get something for you, honey?"

Nina jumped. *A quick death is too good for baby killers like you, Nina. When I'm done you gon' be the feature story on unsolved mysteries.* "No, nothing."

Marguerite's eyes misted over as she watched this young woman battle her demons. She clasped her hands together and asked, "So, did you have any luck finding a job today?"

"No, ma'am."

"Don't give up, Nina. I know you'll find something soon."

Nina looked up this time. A pained smile crossed her face. Her voice was whisper soft. "Yes, ma'am. Thanks for letting me use your car. I'll get it back here in the morning. I promise."

“Don’t worry about the car. I’ll go get it myself.” Marguerite rose and walked into the kitchen mumbling something about washing the dinner dishes. Just as she entered the kitchen, Nina heard her say, “I just wish that child could find some peace.”

But peace was inconceivable to Nina as she sat on the couch rocking back and forth. Scared to die, yet at the age of twenty-five she could only think of one reason to keep on living. Life is really funny, she thought. A few years ago she was just three-quarters shy of graduating from Wilberforce University, with a degree in Journalism. She was going to become a world-famous novelist. And out of nowhere, in stepped Isaac Walker.

Sweet-talking, million-dollar Isaac. He had it all, or so she thought, and he promised her the world. Only trouble was she didn’t find out until later that it was *his* world he was promising. His world, with his rules and his game board. Isaac always had the checkmate, while the rest of the players stood around as pawns, waiting to be plucked out of the game.

In the beginning, he took special care of her. Dressing her in designer clothes, expensive purses and Italian leather shoes. He even took her to nice restaurants. Not like those college bums she dated. They loved to talk about their future payday, while eating in any old greasy spoon they could find. Nina was sick to death of the “I have a dream” brothers she had been dating. That was one reason she fell so quickly for Isaac. The first time she saw him he was wearing a cream-colored Armani suit that hung on his body like it was made strictly for his frame – and what a frame. Make a sistah wanna SCREAM!

Nina and some of her friends decided to leave the college scene and check out a party on the West side. She had worn her black leather jumpsuit that fit like a second skin and accentuated the curves of her voluptuous boom-boom bootie. The two-inch heel on her black leather knee high boots added extra depth to her five-foot frame. The strobe lights moved over her olive skin as she stepped into the crowded room. The men and women turned to stare as her hazel eyes glistened in the light. Her friends headed toward the dance floor. Nina sat at the bar and ordered a Long Island Iced Tea. Cigar smoke assaulted her nostrils as King Puff seated next to her blew cancer into the air.

Mr. Armani inched his way toward her. His diamond bedecked hands glittered in the air as he sauntered. His suit jacket curved nicely over his muscles, “Mmmh, mmh, mh.” Running her French manicured fingers through her short-layered hair, she turned slightly in his direction to put out the welcome mat. His pace quickened and before long he stood looking down at her.

Honey oozed out of his chocolate-coated mouth as he asked, “Have you been waiting long?”

She looked into those deep chestnut eyes. Eyes that seemed to read her every thought and intent. *Lord, have mercy.* “Waiting for what?”

“A man. Someone to take care of you, like you deserve.”

Although a little too bold for Nina’s taste, he spoke just the right words to appease her vanity. Most guys never seemed very appreciative. She deserved better. Yeah, she thought, I have been waiting a long time. “So are you here to rescue me?”

“Why don’t we get to know each other a little better first.” He pulled up a seat next to her. “Then we’ll see if you’re worth rescuing.” He flashed a dimpled smile.

Nina thought that smile of his must have driven countless women wild. And she was no different.

“If only I had known”, she said as she sat lightly rubbing her belly, tears rolling down the side of her face. “What are we going to do? How am I going to take care of you?”

She rocked back and forth, trying to come up with an answer. When none came, she put her head in her hands. “If only I hadn’t let myself get so caught up.”

“Hush child,” Marguerite said, walking back into the room. “No since wishing yesterday back when tomorrow has enough pain of its own.”

CHAPTER 1

“Did you drop my clothes off at the cleaners?” Isaac asked as he walked through his front door. Cynda told her man what he wanted to hear as she dutifully took the hat from his head and walked into the kitchen.

Isaac sat his solid one hundred and eighty-pound frame down on his sofa. Cynda walked back into the living room with a glass of lemonade and handed it to him. She was gorgeous, with long statuesque legs. Coal-black hair flowed down her back, and that skin of hers was oh-so-buttery-sweet. Not one pimple had ever dared to disgrace Cynda’s amber face. He took a sip of lemonade and gave her one of those ‘come here’ looks. Cynda moved the newspaper off the sofa and squeezed in next to her man.

Trying to forget about the troubles with his business and Nina, Isaac pulled her closer.

“Oh, before I forget, Keith called. He said that you need to get in touch with him. It’s important.”

Isaac pushed her away and sat up.

“Wh-what did I do?”

“Nothing.” Isaac put his head in his hands and shook it. He needed to clear his mind. It didn’t work. “You can go on home tonight. I’ll call you if I need anything else, okay?”

Cynda folded her arms across her chest, shifted her position on the sofa and stared at Isaac.

“Is something wrong?”

“Well, I’ve been here all day cleaning this house for you. I would think you’d want to spend a little time with me.”

He waved a hand, dismissing her. “Not tonight, I’m bushed.”

“But I...”

“Not tonight.”

Cynda stood up, snatched her keys off the dining room table, and stomped over to the front door. She turned and glared at him as she opened the door. “I’m sick of your mess.”

“If you slam my door, don’t expect to walk back through it.”

“When will I see you again?”

“I’ll call you.”

Cynda rolled her eyes and gave the door a strong, angry tug as she stepped onto the porch. Just before the door slammed, she stopped its motion and gently closed it.

Isaac unbuttoned his shirt, propped his feet on the coffee table, and leaned back. What did Keith want now? Hadn’t he caused him enough grief with his last phone call? Keith was his boy and all, but Isaac could still hear his voice when he picked up the phone two weeks ago. “Man, I just dropped my girl off at that abortion clinic on Main Street, and guess whose car was in the lot?”

The fun wasn’t in guessing for Isaac. He was a cut-to-the-chase, kick-butt ask questions later kind of man. “Who?”

“Nina. Man, I thought y’all was gon’ have the baby. When did you decide to get rid of it?”

“We didn’t. I got to let you go.” Isaac never dressed so fast in his life. He threw on a pair of FUBU jeans and a rumpled baseball shirt, and hopped around trying to find a pair of matching socks. He gave up, and put his Nikes on without them. He didn’t take time to rein in his wavy hair. He had a baby to save, and not just any baby, his baby.

Isaac wasn’t the baddest hustler in Dayton, but he was so notorious that even the baddest didn’t mess with him. Other hustlers speculated if that fact alone didn’t make Isaac the baddest hustler on the street. Isaac didn’t much care how he was dubbed. As a matter of fact, whenever the

subject came up, he would growl, “I never laid a hand on nobody that didn’t have it coming to ‘em.” Actually, it wasn’t his hands that caused them to dub him the ‘baddest hustler on the street.’ It was all those bullets to the head he doled out like Christmas presents, that winter he was establishing himself as the HNIC (Head Nigga In Charge).

Isaac was no fool. He knew that while many kids wanted to be like Mike, some also wanted to be like Ike. But the thing those kids didn’t understand was that one day, someone smarter, faster, and more notorious than he would come. That would be the day he would be required to pay for all his transgressions. This certainty caused him to yearn for a son all the more. In Isaac’s mind, even if an executioner’s bullet did take him out of the game, he would live on – through his son. But Nina was trying to take that away from him. It wasn’t enough that she was always complaining, always unhappy about something. Now she wanted to take his child, his future, his immortality.

He made it to the clinic in twenty minutes flat. The right-to-lifers were across the street carrying picket signs. A heavy-set Black woman held a sign that read “A life is a terrible thing to waste.” Isaac didn’t know if that slogan was universally correct. He had known quite a few brothers that made the world a better place -- when they exited this life. But, for his seed, he wholeheartedly agreed with the slogan. He wanted to grab the sign from that woman, march right in this God forsaken clinic and shove it down Nina’s baby killing throat. How could she do such a thing? He knew she was mad about the weekend he spent in Chicago with Valerie, but to kill her own child because of it...

The back door opened and Nina stepped out of the clinic. She stood there for a moment; head bent, hands on her stomach. A couple months back Isaac swore that he would never lay a hand on Nina again. But when he saw her, he knew his future, his immortality had just been sucked out of her body. A rage boiled up in him the likes of which he had never known. Too late for regrets, Isaac thought, as he advanced on his prey. Nina looked up. Her eyes bucked as she saw Isaac and the murderous rage exuding from his body. She turned and tried to open the clinic door. It was locked. She banged on the glass and assaulted the buzzer, “Help! Help!”

Isaac grabbed her arm and drug her down the concrete steps. “You had no right!” he yelled at her as he smacked her hard with his left hand, then connected his right fist to her jaw.

The old one-two punch knocked Nina to the ground faster than Ali or Tyson ever dealt with an opponent. She sat there stunned, shaking her head, when she saw Isaac raise his foot. She put her arms around her stomach protectively and curled up into a ball. His foot connected with her back and then the side of her stomach. Nina screamed. “No! Oh, God, please, no.”

“I’m going to kill you,” he growled. Nina saw an opening between two cars in the parking lot and hurriedly crawled in between them.

“Isaac, please wait. Listen to me...”

“You don’t have nothing to say to me.” He grabbed her hair and started dragging her from between the parked cars. Nina held on to one of the tires. “I believe in an eye for an eye Nina. You aborted my baby, you gon’ wish you were aborted.” He took his fist and jabbed it into her arms trying to make her release her hold on the tire.

The right-to-lifers put their picket signs down and ran over to the scene. A six-foot, 240-pound man grabbed Isaac. Another, who was just as big with bright red hair, put Isaac in a bear hug and moved him away from Nina. “This is not the way, man,” the red head told him.

“Get off me!” Isaac angrily struggled against them. “She’s getting what she deserves.”

The woman who had been carrying the “A life is a terrible thing to waste” sign, helped Nina up. Blood dripped from her lip, her arms were black and blue. There was already a visible bruise on her left cheek. “It’ll be alright honey. You’re safe now.” Nina put her hands to her face and sobbed, the woman hugged her. “That’s right, go ahead and cry.”

Isaac felt no sympathy. “Give me my house key,” he said between clenched teeth. “You can find yourself someplace else to live.”

Nina sobbed harder.

“I said give me my keys, tramp.” Isaac’s upper lip curled as his eyes sent piercing volts through her.

Nina brought her hands down from her face and looked around. Her purse was on the ground in front of one of the cars she had been sandwiched between. She picked it up and fumbled around for her keys. Her eyes were blurry from crying – and her right eye was closing. The woman grabbed her purse and pulled the keys out. She handed them to Isaac. “Wait,” Nina said, “I need to get my car key off the ring.”

“Oh, no you don’t. Do you think I’m gon’ let you drive out of here in the BMW I paid for? When they pulled my baby out of your belly, they must’a took part of your brain too.” Isaac pushed the two men off of him. “Don’t show your face at my house. Don’t ask me for nothing.” Nina opened her mouth. “Nothing!” Isaac repeated. He ignored the crowd that had gathered around them as he walked over to her BMW, opened the door and looked back at her. “A quick death is too good for baby killers like you, Nina. When I’m done, you gon’ be the feature story on unsolved mysteries.” He got in the car and sped off.

Nina was really stupid, Isaac thought as he rubbed his chin with his index finger and his thumb. Whenever he needed to think something through – develop a plan of action, he would rub his chin. How simple it would be to dispose of her in any way he saw fit. He could have taken care of her tonight when he saw her at that convenience store, but that would have ended the game too soon.

Isaac frowned. He would have given her anything she wanted. All he asked was that she accept his lifestyle. But no, Nina was a reformer, always trying to get him to change, see things her way. None of his other women complained about their competition. They had no reason to complain. He took good care of them all. He assigned each one of his girls certain tasks -- cleaning his house, holding and transporting his drugs, waitressing at his bootleg joints, or managing his laundromat. He even had a girl who knew how to pick pockets. Hustling wasn’t easy, but Isaac did his best.

He would have to make an example of Nina. He didn’t want his other girls thinking they could betray him without facing the consequences for their actions. That was his baby. He slammed

his fist on the coffee table. “She had no right to discard what belonged to me. Oh, she’ll pay, and she’ll pay big.”

The last time he had to make an example of someone was five years ago. When he closed his eyes he could still see the savage beating he gave Renee. She spent weeks in the hospital. Her once beautiful face was still slightly twisted when they released her.

Messing up that striking face of Nina’s, that had previously dazzled him was something Isaac almost couldn’t bear to think about. “Oh Nina, why are you forcing me to hurt you?” Isaac growled through his empty house.