

As I stood in the kitchen watching the sunrise through the tiny window, I closed my eyes and thought about the choices that I had made. I felt the tears well up in my eyes and didn't try to stop them. The sunrise was so beautiful as it chased the darkness of night away. I wiped my tears and turned from the window because the bright light began to hurt my eyes. The dim light of the kitchen comforted me more than the sunlight. Embracing the shadows and darkness made me feel better these days. I smiled to myself when Harlan's favorite saying came to mind.

"Everyone is the same in the dark."

I woke before dawn to make sure that I had enough supplies to make breakfast. The last thing that I wanted to do was anger Harlan. My body ached from his attentions, and my heart hurt from my own stupidity. I shook my head to deny myself the thoughts that began to flood my mind.

I looked back at the freshly made biscuits on the counter and thought of my Big Mama Chandra. It was her recipe. I lifted my hand to smell the flour and baking powder. I could almost see her with her apron smiling at me as she put the pan in the oven. I smiled at the image and lowered my hand. No, I told myself again. I needed to quietly clean up the kitchen and try to go back to bed. My sons would be waking soon, and I wanted to enjoy being with them. After all, they were the only men in my life that had not rejected me.

I tiptoed down the hall and into our room. I slid the door shut so as not to wake Harlan. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. His snores were so loud that I could have slammed it, and he would have remained asleep. I climbed into bed and turned on my side away from the noise of my husband. Usually, I had to lie awake afraid that Harlan's snores would wake the children, but I closed my eyes and found the comfort of the darkness.

*I walked down the aisle at my wedding. Everything was so beautiful, and all of my loved ones were there. I smiled at Aunt Charlotte and Aunt Alice standing at the altar with the preacher. They smiled at me, and through my veil, I could see the tears in their eyes. I turned my eyes to the altar and saw the man that would become my husband. The sunlight glistened in his light brown hair and blue eyes, and I fell in love all over again. I wanted to run but knew that wasn't proper, so I kept walking slowly until I stood beside him. I handed my bouquet to Aunt Charlotte and turned back to my love. He took my hands in his, and as one, we*

*turned to the preacher. When we said our vows, I felt the warmth of love coming from him and my family.*

*"You may kiss the bride," the preacher said smiling at us.*

*I raised my face for him to lift my veil, but when the silk lifted, I cried out in anguish. Billy was not there anymore. Harlan had taken his place. He gripped my chin and kissed me roughly while I cried and screamed at the loss of Billy.*

*Harlan grabbed my arms and laughed.*

*"Forever and ever, Vicky!"*

*"NO!"*

*I tried to tear myself from his grip, but he was too strong. He dragged me away, and I screamed for help from my family. No one came to help me. Then, everything went black, and I saw Aunt Mary alone in a pool of light.*

*"I cannot help you now, Victoria. You will have to wait until you can make the choice that will pull you back over the line."*

*Tears fell from her face, and she faded into the light.*

*"Please, Aunt Mary! Don't go! Help me, please!"*

*I screamed and ran to her, but she was gone.*

*As I fell to the ground sobbing my heartache, I felt a tiny hand touch my cheek. I looked up to see a baby wrapped in a pink blanket lying on the ground next to me. She smiled and waved her arms. I wanted to pick her up but each time I tried, my arms caught air. I tried and tried again but I couldn't do it. I cried more tears and felt a stinging in my face. I wiped it away, but it kept stinging until it became painful. I screamed at the pain.*

*"Wake up, you lazy cow!"*

*I woke up to see a hand raised and realized that I had been having a bad dream. Harlan had slapped my face to awaken me. I grabbed my throbbing cheek and scooted away from him on the bed.*

*"I'm tired of you waking me up crying and screaming like some kind of crazy fool! I should hit you again just so you know I'm not having it!"*

*Harlan's breath was foul in his anger, and he moved closer to me with his hand still raised to strike me.*

*"Mama, Mama!"*

*Our four-year-old son, Mark, cried out and beat at the closed door.*

*"I have field duty for the next two weeks. You better get over all your problems by the time I get back. You hear me?"*

Harlan gave me a look of disgust and turned to go into the tiny bathroom.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the door closed. I slowly got up and slid my housecoat on the way to the door. I stopped for a minute to wipe the tears from my face with my sleeve and put on a smile for my son.

“Good Morning, little one.”

I opened the door and leaned over to give Mark a hug. I clung to his little body for a second too long, and Mark stiffened in my arms.

“What’s wrong, Mama? Did Daddy hurt you again?”

I released him and smiled.

“No, honey, Mama just had a bad dream, and it scared Daddy.”

He relaxed just a little and let me take his hand to lead him down the short hallway to his and William’s, my baby boy’s room. I smiled wider when I saw that William was standing in his crib waiting to be lifted to the floor. I walked over to the crib, kissed his smooth little chocolate cheeks, and felt to see if his cloth diaper was wet. I counted myself lucky because it was dry...this time.

I took him across the hall and stood him before the toilet. William grinned and shook his head. Mark came in behind me and crossed his arms.

“Go to potty, Willie!”

“No, Mark, let him go on his own, okay?”

“But Mama...”

Mark rolled his eyes at my light scolding. I frowned at him, and he lowered his head.

“Don’t you “but Mama me”, Mark Sams. William has to learn just like you did,” I fussed.

Mark shrugged his shoulders and left the bathroom, and I sighed at his little adult ways.

“Mama, tee, tee,” I heard William say from behind me.

I turned and saw that he went potty. Happy that he was learning, I picked him up before he finished. We both giggled, and I quickly put him back down. I grabbed a towel, cleaned him up, and made a mental note to clean the bathroom later.

The boys sat at the table playing blocks while I cooked breakfast when Harlan walked in dressed in his field clothes. I tried not to turn around because I knew that he would say something cruel.

“Hey, hey, boys! How’s Daddy’s little men, huh?”

“Dad-dee!”

William twisted to put the blocks down and hold his hands to Harlan.

“Good Morning, Daddy.”

Mark barely glanced at Harlan and greeted him in his usual solemn tone.

“Mark, why are you always such a little downer, huh? You’re just like your crazy Mama.”

I heard a chair scrape and turned around to see that Mark stood by his chair with his little fists balled.

“My Mama is not crazy. She is different just like me.”

When I saw Harlan began to frown, I walked over to Mark and grabbed his hand.

“Mark, you didn’t wash your hands this morning. Go on and wash up, okay?”

I gave him a kiss on the head and a little push toward the bathroom.

He looked at me for a moment and nodded. I breathed a sigh of relief until I heard Harlan’s voice.

“Next time that happens, I’m going to give that Mama’s boy of yours a lesson.”

I nodded and went back to the stove to get the food to the table. I placed the biscuits, the platter of bacon, eggs, and tomatoes on the table in front of Harlan. He immediately began to fix his own plate.

I decided to wait for Mark to return to the small dining area before I took my seat. He came back shuffling his feet, and I walked to him and guided him into the seat farthest from Harlan. Harlan looked up and narrowed his eyes at me because he saw what I had done. I gave him a big smile and sat down in Mark’s usual spot. Harlan reached under the table and gave my wrist a sharp twist. Water came to my eyes, but I refused to cry out at the pain.

“Your food is getting cold, husband.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter, it’ll taste like slop anyway. I thought your old mammy taught you how to cook.”

He chuckled to himself and reached for his fork.

I ignored his usual insult and picked up the half empty platter to feed the boys. Harlan took most of the food as usual, which always left me nibbling on toast. When I began placing food on Mark’s plate, he shook his head.

“No, Mama, I just want a little. You and William have to eat.”

I smiled at his earnest little expression.

“Well, I need you to grow big and strong so that you can take care of me when I’m old and wrinkled.”

He shook his head again.

“No, Mama, you won’t need me, and you’re never going to be wrinkled.”

He spoke so matter-of-fact while he stared at me in his usual adult way.

“Yeah, yeah, boy. You better eat that food. I work hard to put that food on this table, and you’re going to eat it whether you like or not.”

Harlan spat food crumbs in his anger and pointed his fork at Mark.

I saw that Mark had narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to say something, but I broke in first.

“Guess what, boys, Aunt Charlotte sent y’all a box and probably a letter. After breakfast, we can sit down on the sofa and open it all together.”

I tried to sound excited to change the mood at the table.

Mark lifted his face to mine and gave a small smile while William clapped and laughed.

“What’s this? You didn’t tell me that we got anything from that ol’ stingy aunt of yours.”

Harlan interrupted me with a sly look.

I lowered my head a bit because I knew that he liked for me to be cowered.

“It was addressed to the boys, so I didn’t think that you’d want to see it. It’s probably just toys and some candy.”

I dismissed it with a wave.

“Well, if it isn’t, I want to know first thing, you hear?” he demanded while giving my sore wrist another squeeze.

I winced but still didn’t cry out like he wanted. He looked disappointed and went back to his plate.

We ate in silence until Harlan gave a big belch, broke wind, and left the table without a word. It was like a weight lifted when he left, and I placed my hands together and lowered my head.