



LOVE *ALL ABOUT*

**SPECIAL FREE PREVIEW
THE FIRST 3 CHAPTERS**

1995

MOMMY NEVER MINCED WORDS. INSTEAD OF saying hello, she stood on my welcome mat, greeting me with an insult. “You don’t look good. You’re not getting enough sleep.”

Sleep. What was that? I’d had fifteen weeks off, but maternity leave was no vacation. I spent the entire time nursing, changing diapers, grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and running back and forth to doctors’ appointments. Not to mention dealing with Spider. If Tee-Bo wasn’t crying, Spider was calling; they tag teamed me. I opened my apartment door all the way, yawning, “I haven’t slept since March.”

Mommy waved her finger in my face. “Talk to your boyfriend. He helped make the baby. He should help take care of him.” Seeing Tee-Bo strapped to me in the harness carrier all ready to go, she asked, “Are you going out or just getting in?”

I was actually on my way to the laundromat, which is only empty on Tuesday nights. Last wash is at seven, so I looked her straight in the eye and said, “Just getting in.” Half the time she left me no choice but to lie or argue, and since I didn’t have time to argue, I urged myself: *Focus. Keep my answers short and sweet. Don’t volunteer information. Whatever I do, don’t mention anything about having keys to Dr. Snyder’s brownstone.*

Mommy breezed by me. Her hairstyle was different. Bangs stopped at a scab. The back tapered. A pixie cut. Judging by the curling iron burn, she was probably at the salon this past Saturday, but her curls were still crisp; Mommy always did know how to sleep pretty. She wore the same “red raspberry” shade on her lips and nails. A pencil skirt and pantyhose showed off those long, curvy legs. The white, tailored suit was spotless. Her snakeskin heels made quiet steps into the

living room, but the keys to the new Volvo rattled until she stuffed them inside the Louis Vuitton hanging off her arm. She then felt my chaise, rubbing the fabric as if to determine whether or not the pattern was printed on.

The upholstery was ivory Jacquard. The blue carnations, woven. "This one *is* a little busy." I then pointed to the adjacent camelback loveseat, solid ivory. "But, that one adds balance."

Mommy dusted off her hands, staring at the silver mirror covering the wall over the loveseat. The scroll and leaf detail was intricate. The antique frame was gleaming. When I bought it, it was all black. A polishing cloth couldn't get into the crevices, but I remembered how my Nana used to clean her silver in the sink with salt, baking soda, and aluminum foil, so I lugged the mirror to my bathtub. After soaking one side at a time, there wasn't a speck of tarnish. Mommy grunted and turned. The bachelor's chest wasn't a coffee table, but it was a cute substitute. On it, I had my stack of *Modern Bride* magazines all spread out, and on opposite ends, the decanter and fluted vase were both cobalt blue.

"The one closest to you is Mikasa. The taller one is Lenox. Hallmarks are etched on the bottom." Now I was beaming, not because of the brand names but because of the way I used color to draw eyes to the center of the room. I tried to find matching material for throw pillows, but the match I found was expensive silk. At Goodwill, I found curtain panels that I cut into squares and stuffed, costing me next to nothing. Beige linen paled in comparison, but it worked out better than only the crystal was this bold blue. That pop of color was actually the effect I wanted.

Mommy gravitated in that direction. Then, as if changing her mind, she drifted to my bistro table, first drumming her fingernails on its glass and then tugging on the edge so hard; the bowl of lemons on it slid around. Three wrought iron chairs with heart shaped backs surrounded my little round table. She looked down, and then back at the wall. The periwinkle paint matched the cushions perfectly. I took a swatch to Sears; they mixed the can while I waited. Watching her tip one of the chairs back, I admitted, "I covered the seats myself with a power stapler. Would you like something to drink?"

No comment. She was ignoring me. Oh well. Anyway,

there wasn't much more. To the left, the arch and twelve linoleum tiles marked off my stove, sink, refrigerator, and ten inches of counter space. It's the smallest kitchen ever. And down the hall, my bedroom was so tight that we had barely enough walk space between our king-sized bed and the dresser. This was the Bronx, not Hoboken, and my two and a half rooms on 167th Street were nothing compared to Mommy's condo. In fact, this whole apartment could probably fit in the backseat of her Volvo, but it was finally furnished, and I had done it myself, even if these were thrift store finds. Now I knew Mommy was scrutinizing, because she's a buyer for a furniture chain. She used to design showrooms so I was hoping she'd comment on the décor, but she zipped her purse by the padlock and sat it in the chair. She didn't utter a word. Her face contorted. I twisted my own face, following her favorite fragrance, Poison.

Mommy kicked off her heels. Draping her folded blazer across the chaise, she asked, "How was work?"

How was work? I couldn't help but just seal my lips and blink. I worked for a collection agency. Translation: I called people, demanded that they pay their debts, threatened to take them to court and sue for the money they didn't have, all while hoping that I annoyed them into making payments, but that's what I did...all...day...long. No matter how many times I heard, "You can't get blood from a turnip," I hassled them. Even those who were honest enough to confess, "I just don't have it," I hassled them too. I didn't exactly "harass" them, so to speak, with repeat calls minutes apart or with empty threats. No. That, I didn't do. But I did badger them. I had to. I had to demand payment, otherwise the debtors wouldn't commit. I had to make a certain number of calls per hour, and a certain percentage had to follow through with their promises, or else I'd get written up. Enough write-ups, they'd fire me. And those supervisors, they hovered over us like vultures, bloodthirsty vultures, circling, with clipboards and number two pencils, filling in circles. The ones that didn't were in the back office wearing headphones bigger than earmuffs, monitoring our phone conversations, hanging on our every word, "This is an attempt to collect a debt. Any information obtained will be used for that purpose. This call is also being monitored and recorded for quality assurance. My name is Miss Love. I'd like to start by verifying the last

four digits of your Social.” I could say that in my sleep. Day in and day out, I had to stick to the script and all the other bullet points of the collection process: identifying the original lender; stating the reference number; demanding the balance in full, even if debtors insisted they could only make partial payments; demanding payments by the preferred methods, Western Union or check by phone, when debtors could actually mail their checks in. And, of course, golden rule number one: verifying all information; making sure I got their work number, if they had one, so that we could garnish their wages if we needed to; and verifying the home addresses and phone numbers so that we could put liens on their homes. All this or I’d get written up. That’s why what made my job so awful was the fact that I was so good at it. Most debtors were already depressed or had recently experienced some personal tragedy. I performed like their sob stories didn’t affect me, when the real deal was I could relate. Even though I was a bill collector, I was one paycheck away from hardship myself.

Mommy unfastened her gold clip-ons and dropped them in her pocket. She then stood upright, massaging her earlobes. “Ah! My goodness! That feels good. Beauty has its price.” She looked at me. “Well?” she said.

“Seventy-two degrees and sunny, that’s great weather for the end of June, right? Don’t you just love sweater weather? By the way, you look *good* in white.”

“Mmhmm. Now, how was work?”

“Can we talk about something else? I hate that place.”

“Be grateful. That’s a good job, and you have no degree,” she said.

“Mommy!” I took a deep breath to calm myself. And I counted backwards. Didn’t work. “Today was only my second day back, and my supervisor caught me nodding off. Did I make quota? Yes, actually I doubled it. Did he take into consideration that I have a baby that isn’t sleeping through the night yet? Nope. He wrote me up! Then, he wrote me up again for lateness when I made it in this morning and signed the time sheet at exactly seven fifty-two. I logged in, not realizing my computer froze. I logged back in, but the clock said two minutes after.” That reminded me. Time check. Six twenty-two. My elevator was broken. I had to use the stairs with Tee-Bo *and* the shopping cart. If I was going to make it to the laundromat on the other side of the Concourse, I

needed to leave in no less than eight minutes. I looked. Mommy was walking up the hall. When the bathroom door closed, I called her. She didn't answer. So, to save time, I went to the linen closet, and stuffed the detergent, bleach, fabric softener, and everything else I needed into the top of the laundry bag. Now, all I had to do was drop that into my shopping cart. I glanced down. Flats were on my feet, but climbing four flights of cracked steps, they'd feel like stilts. I changed into Reeboks.

Mommy was still in the bathroom. I pressed my ear to the door. Hearing only my pulse, I was about to knock, but then, the toilet flushed. Mommy yelled, "Why didn't you tell him to check the sheet?"

Tee-Bo twitched, but the noise didn't wake him. His legs flopped like a rag doll's on my way back to the living room, where I called out, "I did. He said time sheets don't matter. If that's the case, why is there a time sheet?" With the second hand still spinning, I stopped watching it, but anxiety had me counting in my head. The faucet ran, but I couldn't think of one single solitary thing to say or do in order to rush out of here in the next few minutes without her tagging along.

The door opened. She came out smiling, crumpling a paper towel. "It happens." She tossed it in the wastebasket and then approached, extending her arms. "I came to see the baby. Hand him over."

"He's asleep."

"Hand the baby over."

"His name is Tobiah." At this point, I didn't even put up a fight. I just took Tee-Bo out of his harness and passed him to her. She sat, looking him over. Then she looked at me tight lipped. I knew what she was thinking. Before she could say it, I told her, "I *am* using the cream."

"No one in our family has eczema."

"No one in Spider's family either."

"What could it be? You're hand washing, I hope."

Mommy grew up scrubbing laundry with her knuckles at five in the morning. So, of course she had stressed the importance of hand washing Tee-Bo's clothes since he was born. But, between catering to Spider and taking care of Tee-Bo, especially now that I'd returned to work and had to express enough breast milk to fill eight bottles, how could she expect me to still have time and energy? I shrugged and

shook my head.

“You are washing this newborn baby’s clothes in those nasty machines?”

“He’s not a newborn anymore.”

She raised her voice and repeated herself. “In those nasty machines?”

“He’s three months old now.”

“I know how old the baby is. Stop washing his clothes at the laundromat!” Now, here she was hollering at me, and I was almost twenty-six years old.

I hollered back, “I’m saving for a washing machine!”

Mommy squeezed her left eye. When we were kids, we knew: once she squinted, duck. “Did you just lose your mind?”

I nodded and spoke like I had some sense. “Sorry, I’m saving for a machine.”

Her face relaxed. “What are you going to do in the meantime?”

So much for the laundromat. “I guess I’ll have to use Dr. Snyder’s.”

“You shouldn’t get too comfortable in that woman’s home.”

“I’ll be there, anyway. I have to sign for a package on Friday, and I have to run an errand for her next week.” I smacked my forehead almost as soon as those words slipped out.

Mommy didn’t even hesitate, “Why doesn’t her out-of-work son run her errands?”

“Spider is not out of work. He’s an intern.”

“That’s no job. You two should have a mutual exchange.”

“We do.”

“Sexual favors don’t count!”

“Don’t bad mouth Spider in front of my baby.” I reached, grabbing Tee-Bo at his waist.

Still, Mommy would not let him go. She tightened her grip and cut her eye at me. “He’s asleep, Mia.”

“Can he sleep in the room while we have this conversation?” I asked, but she pulled him even closer. “Mommy, *please*,” I begged. After a few seconds, she laid him in my arms.

As soon as I reached the cradle, I laid Tee-Bo on his back. Tiny, red bumps covered half his face. I knew the stages. In a few days, the redness would fade, but not the bumps. His hair—jet-black like Spider’s—swirled in the sweat on his

scalp. He looked like a Kewpie doll, even if his skin did look like tapioca pudding. I reached for his cream, applied a dab to the side of his face, and then kissed his forehead. His skin cream smelled like bleach, but I was getting used to it.

I'd been dealing with this for over a month. I looked all through Dr. Snyder's medical journal. None of the rashes in the pictures had pointed tips like Tee-Bo's, but after looking in that big book, everywhere I went, I saw hives, prickly heat, bug bites.

On my way into Manhattan this morning, the man nodding off next to me was wearing a short sleeve shirt and had what looked like psoriasis. Not only was it red, it was covered with white ash. Seeing that man this morning hit so close to home, I almost broke down on the D train. This rash was spreading. I should've known that would set her off. I kissed Tee-Bo again and wiped off some of his sweat.

I know once my mind is set on something, it's almost impossible to convince me otherwise, but I was glad I had an excuse not to bump my shopping cart down four flights, especially now that my surge of adrenaline had fizzled out. I was exhausted all over again. I wasn't going anywhere. I yawned and stretched my body. This harness carrier was pointless. I took it off and laid it across the diaper bag.

At my knees, lace hung past the hemline of my black skirt. There was no elastic left in my half-slip, and the knot at my waist untied. I should've pinned it, but my only safety pin was keeping my skirt's zipper from sliding down. Stepping out of the slip, the ankle strap from my high-top caught onto the lace. When I separated them, the Velcro tore the slip all the way across the bottom. I held up the slip and examined it. Besides the rip and not having any elastic, it had more runs zipping through it than an old stocking, but a raggedy slip is not the same as a raggedy pair of stockings. Slips are functional. This slip served a purpose. Some of my skirts didn't have a lining. Debating whether or not to remove the lace trim from it entirely, I carefully folded it and placed it in my night table drawer. From behind me, I heard, "Well, now I've seen it all." I turned and caught a glimpse of Mommy leaving the doorway.

I expected her to get started on Spider all over again as soon as I walked into the living room, but she was seated, leaning on the arm of my loveseat. She straightened up and I

looked into her face. She wasn't squinting, tightening her lips, or drawing up her nose. Her forehead was crinkled. That meant she was worrying, but I knew what I was doing. I had to at least try to convince her. I thought for a moment. Then, I made my voice as sweet as possible. "Mommy, you've always taught me I've got to give a little to get a little, right?"

"What's your point?"

"My point *is* I give my all to Spider."

"Don't you realize giving your *all* to your boyfriend leaves you with nothing?"

"Spider's all I want. I can't live without him."

Mommy jumped up, grabbed me by the shoulders, and shook me hard. "I told you before. Don't say that! Mia, Mia, Mia." She pulled me over to the mirror. I wondered why. I didn't see any streaks. But then again, seeing the light from the window bounce off, I did notice some fingerprints. I pulled my sleeve and reached to wipe them with my cuff but she pulled me back, pointing me into the mirror. Punishment. I already knew that the pocket of my white Oxford shirt had a milk circle. When my supervisor handed me my write-ups, I sucked my teeth, and my breasts leaked. I scratched away the crusty stuff, but this was a protein stain. I needed to soak it in cold water. The second button from the top was reattached with grey thread, only because I ran out of white, and with two top buttons open, I felt naked. My collar was wearing thin, because bleach was eating away at the fabric. This blouse may have been worn out, but at least it wasn't dingy.

She brought her cheek to mine. This was torture. Bad enough she tanned bronze, and my brown skin was turning blue from the neck up since I didn't have a coupon for sunscreen, but she was standing here in all this black mascara, eye shadow, and liquid liner, when she never needed any of that. Mommy's eyes were beautiful all by themselves. Even if mine weren't bloodshot and didn't have the dark circles underneath or the bags from lack of sleep, she would still be Nefertiti, and I would still look like a locust, standing next to her with my big, bug eyes. I've tried squinting and batting them, practiced smiling and half-smiling, bleached my skin with Ambi, baked it back with cocoa butter, and when none of that helped, I mailed dollar bills and coins to P.O. boxes for all kinds of goop, believing

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testimonials, but nobody ever asked me for mine: *If it's in the back of a magazine, it doesn't work.* \$12.95 plus \$2.00 shipping and handling never made me love what I saw in the mirror. Mommy was almost twenty years older than me, and I still would've traded faces. Why didn't she just spit me out the way she did Dawn? All our other features were somewhat similar. Why wasn't I a clone, too? Why did Donald Jackson's genes have to be this strong? I would've loved to look like her. She pinched one of my hairs and stuck it into my bun. Then, finger-combing, she blended more fly away strands. In the mirror, we made eye contact. She squeezed my arms and said, "You can have any man you want. Don't waste your time."

I didn't know how to respond to that, but looking in her eyes, I had to sound confident. "We *will* get married, Mommy. Spider gave me his word."

"Mia, for heaven's sake! Should I go shopping for a blue dress? Should I buy a ten-pound bag of Uncle Ben's?" I didn't answer, at least not right away. I never knew how to respond to her rhetorical questions, so I just folded my arms and stared down. Determined to make her point, she twisted me around and tilted my face toward hers. "Should I call Reverend Earl?"

"You know Spider's an atheist, Mommy."

"That's not the point! The point is no one's going to be throwing any rice at you anytime soon."

"Maybe not, but—"

"No buts! That man should already be married to you! It's been ten years, and he's reaping all the benefits. You pay his bills. You just gave him a baby. You dropped out of college twice for him!"

"I transferred."

"For once, will you *please* be honest with yourself? Instead of knocking yourself out trying to pay for your pretty boyfriend's master's, let his mother, "the doctor," pay for it. You best believe if his mother's a surgeon, that boy ain't broke. He has some money stashed somewhere. The only question is how much. So take that which is rightfully yours, and get your *own* degree! I worked three jobs to get us out of those projects! And I didn't keep you in private school all your life for you to be anybody's fool!"

"I'm nobody's fool!"

“Then I must be! I paid college tuition for four, no, five years and then went out and spent a hundred and twenty-seven dollars on a frame for that diploma!”

I screamed, “I know! Enough already! Gee whiz! So what, I don’t have a degree for you to show off to all your friends! That was three years ago, Mommy! Get over it!”

The next thing I knew, I was holding my stinging face. I didn’t see the swing. I didn’t even see her squint. I was dazed for a minute, trying to figure out what triggered the slap. The last time she did that was ten years ago because I was “smelling myself.” But I wasn’t a sixteen-year-old sneaking out in the middle of the night with roller-skates anymore. I was a grown woman. “I can’t believe you just did that. I can’t! I can’t believe you just slapped me!”

“Shut up, and stop overreacting,” Mommy said. No remorse whatsoever, but she was calmer. “I don’t care what folks think. My concern, Mia, is you and the baby.”

“His name’s Tobiah.”

“I know! Tobiah Osbert Love!”

“No! His last name is Snyder, Mommy!”

She froze. Staring. She didn’t even blink. Then, she politely collected her suit jacket, hung it over her arm, and slid her pedicure into her pumps. “Goodbye.”

“Does this mean this *talk* is over?”

“Why should I stay here and talk to a wall? I got walls at home.”

“Now this is *my* fault?”

She yanked her purse from the chair and gave me that look. Her one squinted eye was now wet at the corner. “I tell you time and time again, but you don’t listen. You just don’t listen! And when you don’t listen...” Her voice quivered, “...you suffer. Mark my words. Keep doing what you’re doing, Mia, you’ll keep gettin’ what you got. Absolutely nothing.”

“Mommy,” I said, rearranging my throw pillows. After I gave them each a karate chop, I glanced back at her. “All this look like nothing to you?”

“Mia, look around! Anything in here child friendly? Once the baby starts crawling and walking, he’ll be in everything. The lamps, the vases, all that is placed low. This seating is right next to where you eat. Even if a professional comes in here with Scotchgard, in a year’s time, I’ll still see it covered in grape juice and spaghetti handprints. And that’s not even

the worst of it!” She tapped her fingernails on the bistro table’s glass. “This top isn’t tempered! And it’s a tip-over hazard! It has no suction cups, no gripping pads, nothing securing it to the base, nothing to keep it from sliding off!”

“Nothing’s wrong with that table! You’re nitpicking!”

“Am I?” Mommy pushed down on the table’s edge. The glass overturned, and the opposite end went straight up, sending the wooden bowl crashing to the floor and lemons rolling across my living room. The glass top came back down with a bang but didn’t break. She looked at me. “Need another demonstration?”

Now that my heart was in my throat, I could only manage to shake my head.

“That table can topple if someone so much as puts an elbow on it, let alone a toddler trying to pull himself to stand. And your walls...are sheetrock. That mirror has got to weigh a hundred pounds. That’s *another* accident waiting to happen.”

I turned, wiping the fingerprints off it with my cuff, “I don’t think so.”

“Of course not! You haven’t learned to think for your child yet.” She walked away. “All *you* think about is your boyfriend’s curly hair and hazel eyes.” She faced me when she reached the door. “Remember what I told you. And another thing: that’s your boyfriend’s mother and all, but don’t make yourself too comfortable in that woman’s home. You can have keys and still be an outsider.”

That said, she snatched the door open and stepped out. “Kiss the baby for me.”

2

SPIDER AND I STARTED GOING TOGETHER WHEN I was in the tenth grade. He was still in the ninth, but he was only a few weeks shy of his fifteenth birthday. His mother was hardly ever home, so we spent a whole lot of time lying in his twin-sized captain's bed, staring up at stucco as if it were stars. I'd say things like, "When we get married, I'll make you breakfast in bed every Saturday," or "I'll make you homemade ice cream just like my Nana's." Spider was never talkative, but he'd always respond, "Sounds good." Day-dreaming back then, it seemed like we were talking about some point eons into the future, but the years flew by.

We started "shackin," as Mommy would say, in 1992. At that time, we were about seven years into our relationship. Spider was in graduate school full-time, and Tee-Bo wasn't even thought of when we found this apartment in the Bronx. We started off looking for something on the Concourse near the courthouse. Cheaper rent brought us six blocks over. From the get-go, Spider wasn't too keen on the neighborhood. I had to come see it for myself. I lit up when the gypsy cab turned onto 167th Street. Everything was on 167th Street. A 99-cent store, subway station, supermarket, bodega, hardware store, laundromat, and even a check cashing place.

When the cab turned onto Sherman Avenue and stopped, I spotted the new building with the surveillance camera out front. Immediately, I bounced up and down. "That's it, Spider! That's it!" I dropped a ten-dollar bill through the chute and jumped out. Standing out front with my issue of *Bronx Apartment Listings*, I flipped the pages, searching for the circled ad with a pass code to open the gate. I found the page, but there was no code number. I looked up. A security guard was on her way down the steps; Spider had pressed the zero-button.

"Who are you here to see?" she asked.

I smiled, showing her the ad.

“Wrong building.” She pointed across the street.

Our building wasn’t only off by one digit. Spider and I looked across the street. Cardboard was duct-taped to every window on the first floor. I sucked my teeth, but we walked right in through the open gate. Spider tried to pull it closed, but the gate creaked back until its corner lodged into the sidewalk. He looked at me. What was I supposed to say? Plus, I didn’t want to open my mouth. Something somewhere was rank. I held my breath as we headed up the steps, swatting away horseflies. Three big ones. Spider stopped at the landing and turned to me, raising his brows. “Are you sure about this?”

I shrugged. “This is the best I can do for now...until you find work.”

“Whatever.” He reached over to the top button and rang for the superintendent. Nothing buzzed, beeped, or made any other kind of noise. And with this place looking the way it did, it was safe to assume the intercom was broken. Spider shook his head, so I rolled my eyes and stepped across him. Black paint and rust peeled off the door. Someone had popped the lock. A knotted rope looped through a hole where the knob should’ve been. I looked at it, thinking. *Why didn’t they just replace the knob?* But, I pulled the rope and opened the door.

After ringing almost every bell on the first floor, we found Rafael, the superintendent. Rafael was about Spider’s complexion. He had a dark Afro but his sideburns, mustache, and beard were silver. I looked down as he stepped out of his apartment. He dragged his right side, bracing himself with an orthopedic adjustable cane. Stunned, my gaze went from the rubber tip of that cane, to his ashy hand gripping the handle, up past the blurred, green tattoo on his forearm that read “Santo Domingo,” to his wrinkled, paint-streaked shirt, and to the cigarette, shaking as it dangled from his lips. With a jittery right hand, he removed it. Blowing smoke in a stream as thick as his accent, he said, “Stroke.” Now, I knew exactly why this building looked like this.

The apartment was on the fourth floor. We waited for the elevator, because Rafael couldn’t climb the stairs. When it finally came, Spider pulled the gate aside for him. We all

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piled in, but the elevator did not move. Spider looked at me. I looked at Rafael. He took a pull from his cigarette and said, "You gotta pull the gate back."

Okay, I admit. This was not the Taj Mahal. But I was willing to make a few sacrifices for cheap rent.

Anyway, right after we moved in here, these kente wedding invitations started coming in the mail. The trend that year was Afrocentric weddings and after jumping the broom, buying a house in Atlanta, North Carolina, Maryland, or Virginia. I was in a wedding in May, in June, and another in September. My girlfriends were hightailing it south with these guys they either barely knew or had met in college. So when I turned twenty-three on December 5th, it occurred to me that by the time my mother was this age, she had already been divorced three times. I started to wonder what was up with Spider, why he and I never had a formal conversation about marriage or set any date.

The first person I thought to ask was Romell. We've been friends as long as I've been alive so I knew he'd give me his honest opinion, but he went off, "Mia! You're rushing! What the fuck you rushin' for? We're young!"

Hearing the thug come out of him caught me completely by surprise, but Romell has always been my window into the male psyche. It seemed logical to me that if Romell reacted this way, Spider would probably react the same way. I decided to take Romell's advice and give Spider time to broach the subject on his own.

Before I knew it, almost two years had passed. I was putting the finishing touches on the craft project I had been working on for I don't know how many months: my quilt. I couldn't find anything affordable. Since I loved quilts and was in the habit of recycling scrap material anyway, I decided to make one myself. I sketched out my own pattern on graph paper, cut the fabric, and, every night after work, I painstakingly hand-stitched each section until the day I flipped the quilt right side out, stuffed it, whip-stitched it closed, and snipped that last thread.

When I carried it into the room, Spider was hunched forward in the chair by the window in khaki shorts and his John Starks throwback, cleaning the threads of his wax forty-five records. Spider was so into what he was doing that I only saw the top of his head. His jet-black, shiny curls always left

me wondering whether his hair was wet or dry. I loved that, but now, I was eager to see the expression on his face, so I called to get his attention.

“Spider! Come here.” When he didn’t budge, I tried a different approach, lowering my voice and batting my eyes. Not that he noticed.

Without looking up, he said, “It’s fine.” His normal baritone sounded hoarse, as if a cold was sneaking up on him.

Perfectly measured blocks bordered my quilt in lime green. The orange and lemon yellow patches were sewn into two sets of larger blocks in a pattern of alternating triangles that rotated inward like vanes of a windmill. The only quilt I saw that was even remotely comparable was in Macy’s with a three-hundred-dollar price tag, so I said, “Spider, will you look at it?”

He stopped wiping the wax threads of his Isley Brothers record long enough to look at me. His hazel eyes were intense, especially because of his thick eyebrows, but he rolled them and twisted his pink lips to the side before feigning chills, saying, “Oooh! Silk?”

I sucked my teeth. “For your information, the green is silk. The yellow is satin, and the orange is...I don’t know, maybe...rayon or polyester.”

“Where did you get all that?”

“The white satin for the underside I got from a sample sale, but the whole top is made from all my old bridesmaid dresses.”

Spider grinned, and I now saw every perfect tooth. Then, he dropped his head, and with that goofy laugh, “Huh-ha,” he went right back to wiping his record.

“What?” I asked. I don’t know why, but I did.

Spider laughed again. “Lotta weddings,” he said.

I glanced at his end of the dresser. In a picture frame that was so old that half the seashells had fallen off, Spider and I posed beneath a blue and white balloon arch with eighties hair. Maybe because he was wearing a tuxedo or maybe because my prom dress was white, but right then, it hit me: we were no closer to being married now than we were then. I blew up.

“Lotta weddings?” I snatched the quilt off the bed, balled it up, and threw it at him. He struggled out from under it,

like it was a parachute. After he dropped it on the floor, he slid back in his seat with his legs spread, pretending to focus on the record he now spun around his index finger. So I continued, "Did it ever occur to you that maybe...just maybe...*I'd* like to get married? All my friends are getting married. I would *love* a church wedding."

His jaw grew tense. His eyes averted away from mine. No comment.

I folded my arms and stared at him. He stopped spinning the record and started tapping his foot, but otherwise remained silent. Noises from outside filled the room, though: giggles, cars passing by, thumps of a basketball bouncing high, dribbling fast, and then bouncing high, again. When I couldn't stand his silence anymore, I yelled, "Say something!"

Straightening up, Spider reached over to his night table. The forty-five slid off his finger onto the five-inch stack next to his suitcase record player. He shrugged. His response wouldn't have hurt me any more if he spat in my face. "I don't believe in marriage."

He was always an atheist, but the fact that he didn't believe in marriage, this was news to me. I marched over and snatched him up by the number three on his Knicks jersey, even though he had a body that could easily play point guard in their starting lineup. "Excuse you?"

He grabbed my wrist tight enough to loosen my grip on his chest hair. Then, glancing around the room, he said, "That piece of paper don't mean a thing." And then, all six-foot-five inches of him stood and brushed by me.

I went after him. In the living room, I ran right into his back. As soon as he turned to face me, I said, "Don't you think I'd make a good wife?"

"Can I breathe?"

"Don't you think I'd make a good wife?"

"If you say so," he said, looking everywhere else. After I folded my arms across my chest, he took a deep breath and looked into my eyes. "You'd make a great wife. Now, drop it. Okay? Drop it!" Then he took off back up the hall.

I stomped after him and felt something jab into the sole of my foot. Bare feet and old wood floors didn't mix. We didn't have a stitch of furniture in the living room then, so I hopped over to the windowsill. I didn't need tweezers. In the light coming through the window, I carefully plucked the splinter

out. And then, just sat there a moment, remembering how I used to practice signing my name—Mia Love, Mia Love-Snyder, Mia Snyder—on the cover of all my binders. Prom night Spider gave me a large, diamond initial ring. He bought this by saving his Stop-One stock boy money for weeks. Besides that, I couldn't even begin to count the number of times he'd called me his wife. So, I had always assumed that we'd someday get married.

I caught up as he was on his way to the bathroom with the bottle of rubbing alcohol tucked under his arm. I stopped him in the hall. "If that's the case, what's the problem?"

He backed into the bedroom, plopped on the mattress, and tossed up his free arm. "Problem? There's no problem! Everything's fucking peachy! Okay? Now, will you leave me alone?"

"Well, exactly how long do you expect me to wait on you?"

"Mia!" He threw the alcohol bottle down. "If I'm going to stay with you, I'm going to stay with you! What more do you want?"

"Don't be throwing shit in my house! Who do you think you are?" I grabbed the bottle from the floor and placed it next to his cologne bottles. Then, I exhaled. "Don't act dumb," I said calmly. "You know what I want."

He took a deep breath. "Yeah, it ain't happening. And a church wedding definitely ain't happening."

"Why not? Give me one reason! Just one!"

"You want a reason. You want a reason!" He flew to his side of the room and snatched his drawer open. The whole thing fell. Forty-fives slid off his night table. He got down on his knees, digging pictures out of the pile, flinging them. One hit the wall; the other, the ceiling. "There's two!" He jumped up, snapping one of the records. He then grabbed his basketball and did a three-hundred-sixty-degree spin. After looking every which way, he looked at me, and asked, "Where are my keys?"

I nodded toward the armoire.

"I'll be back." He squeezed by, trying to avoid touching me and bumping into the dresser. The mirror wobbled back and forth until it tilted to a stop.

I knew I needed to tighten those loose screws. "Almost broke my mirror, you must be crazy!" I shouted. "Don't you know a broken mirror means seven years of bad luck?"

He snatched his keys and mumbled on his way out. I was listening closely to make sure he didn't let the wrong words slip. He knew better. Now that he'd left, I dumped the stuff back into the drawer and stacked the records back on the night table. It figured that out of all the records, the one that broke was the only one that belonged to me. It cracked right down the middle. That was an old jam from 1986 that I hadn't heard on the radio since. I loved that song enough to listen to it over and over until I had all the lyrics written down on loose-leaf. There was probably no chance I'd ever hear it again. I slid the cracked record between my mattresses and went for those pictures.

Once I saw them, I had to sit down for a minute. They were his parents' wedding photos. I didn't even know these pictures existed. His parents looked as young as we did in our prom picture. In one, they were walking hand-in-hand through stone columns, maybe at the Cloisters. In the other, they were among some trees. Mr. Zach had his arms wrapped around Dr. Snyder's waist; his chin rested in her veil. She smiled so hard; her eyes were closed. Mr. Zach's smile was Ultrabrite white, but he left her seven years later, when Spider was a baby.

I stared at the pictures for a while, before returning them to the drawer. I still couldn't figure out what Spider was trying to imply. Whatever his logic, we were not his parents. I started feeling like maybe this relationship was nothing but a waste of my time and energy. I cried, but I accepted how he felt.

For the longest, Spider never acknowledged that his father existed, but they had recently begun to hash out their differences. It was Mr. Zach who gave him the pictures. He told me nothing. Sometimes Spider could be eerily quiet. Because he bottled his feelings, I usually had to run him down or corner him to get him to open up. Either that or I had to wait until he was in one of his rare talkative moods. So, at first, he wouldn't tell me a thing about what he and his father discussed, but one day, he broke down. He was so upset; I overheard him talking to himself, "I hated that man all my life, because I only heard the negative things about him. Come to find out, he's actually a decent guy." A few days after that, while crossing the street on his way to work, Mr. Zach collapsed and died of an aneurysm. He was 48

years old.

After that, Spider withdrew. For weeks, he wouldn't speak at all. The most he'd do was nod or shrug. Gradually, he came around, grunting, giving me one-word answers here and there, until finally, one day, I noticed a glint in his hazel eyes. Silly me, I thought it was my constant affection that was bringing him around, and things were finally returning to normal, but that night, as I was reaching for my diaphragm, he said, "Let's make a baby."

I froze. I wanted so badly to help him feel better, and I thought I would do anything. At that moment, I realized I did have my limits. So, as hard as it was, I grabbed my diaphragm and excused myself, until I was fully protected. That was the first night.

Spider persisted every single night, "Come on. Stop playing. Let's make a baby."

After two weeks of that nonsense, I couldn't take it anymore; I broke, "No! I don't make babies with *my* last name!" I then grabbed my quilt from the foot of the bed and rolled myself in it like a burrito, thinking that would be the end of it.

But, he kept nudging me. When he said, "All right, then. I'll marry you after our baby is born," I finally sat up.

I gave Spider this Negro-you-must-think-I'm-some-kind-of-fool look.

He didn't flinch. Instead, he pulled the covers away, planting his soft lips on me. My body sank into the pillows. Lying there, in his arms, I couldn't help but respond. We were both all over each other. I lost my head until I felt my panties slide. I clamped my knees together, sat up, and opened my mouth to object. But, he pressed his finger to my lips. I looked up and saw him squinting with tears collecting in his eyelashes. Tears, just as we were about to do the nasty. I never saw that before. I started tearing up myself. He saw my tears, and he broke out into deep, deep sobs. I held him close and rubbed his back. I loved him more than life itself, but I had to stay firm. After a while, I grabbed the quilt and tried to wrap myself in it again.

He snatched it back. "Do you love me?"

I nodded.

"Do you *really* love me?"

I nodded even harder.

He pulled me close. "I'll marry you...after," he whispered. His fingers started stroking my feminine parts. My stomach knotted up. Maybe it was butterflies, but then again, it was probably nerves because my hands were trembling. His grief was taking its toll on both of us. Part of me thought maybe a baby *was* what we needed to bring some joy back, but I didn't know if I wanted to laugh, scream, or cry. I had to admit, though, Spider settled on this apartment. And I knew for certain he didn't want to. He just went along with what I wanted. Besides that, he was clearly going through something right now. So, I made a conscious decision; I nodded. I should've gotten it straight exactly what he meant by that "after" part, but right then and there, that wasn't on my mind. Spider slipped my nightgown over my head, and I went with the flow.

Tee-Bo was born on March 13, 1995. Spider's first name is Spence. I named our baby Tobiah after his grandfather. Reluctantly, but to appease Spider's mother, I also gave Tee-Bo Spider's late great uncle's middle name. I made sure the spelling was exact, even though I was afraid saddling my child with a name like Osbert could make him the brunt of jokes. But as much as I hated that middle name, it didn't bother me as much as the fact that my last name was still Love. Now, whenever I hear anyone refer to Spider as my "baby daddy," I cringe. I had it all fixed in my head that by the time I became a mother, Spider and I would have long since been married. I swore up and down that that moniker would never apply to any man of mine.

But now here I am. I've learned that I can't dictate where life will lead. I can only hypothetically say what I will and will not do. Dealing with emotions and urges is hard enough. Add a crisis to the mix. Do I follow my heart or listen to common sense? Despite all my lip action, I let go of reason. My "baby daddy" had his offspring, and I was left hanging on, waiting for him to decide to marry me, the whole time worrying if he would or if he wouldn't, wondering if I could keep this up, and if so, for how long. And just when I needed a reason to feel good about myself, my "baby daddy's" mama handed me a set of keys off her desk, smiled and said, "These are for you. Now, you can drop by whenever you'd like." *Hello!*

Now I know that key ring was not an engagement ring, but I needed something concrete to make me feel that I, Mia

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Love, was an exception. The “baby mama” stigma didn’t apply in my case, because I was the woman Spider’s mother would give a set of keys to. Having Dr. Snyder’s keys was something. Something was better than nothing at all. And, even though I felt like telling the world, I didn’t want it to get back to Mommy. I could trust Romell, so I told him. I only told my sister Dawn because this time, she swore she’d keep her mouth shut.

3

DAWN WAS BORN WITH A CURLING IRON IN HER HAND. The only time she burned people was when the gossip was juicy enough to whisper. I should've known the moment I spotted the forehead scab—Mommy got her do done and her update at the same time. Thanks to my sister, Mommy heard about the keys. That's why she was on a mission.

I already knew why she believed the laundromat was nasty. Once, when I was pregnant, Mommy went to the laundromat with me. There we saw the most conspicuous fixture of my neighborhood with his strawberry birthmark over his eye and matted red hair. On any given day, he could be found parked around the corner from my building, twisting locks in his beard. Everyone avoided his side of the street. On this particular Tuesday night, Red Beard dragged his overstuffed garbage bag right into the laundromat. He then commenced to load his rags into a washer. The stench was intense. I couldn't tell if it was coming from the man's laundry or him. "C'mon, Mia," Mommy said. "Let's wait outside."

Once we were under the streetlight, I could clearly see she had that look in her eyes that could bore holes through steel. I smiled to ease the tension. Mommy rolled her eyes. "This is ridiculous! Don't do your laundry here again! Get your own machines."

Times were hard and money was tight. Those machines had to wait. I didn't stop going to the laundromat, but I did get into the habit of thoroughly spraying the machines with disinfectant before I used them. Still, I knew there was no convincing her that rash was not caused by the laundromat. I tried to tell her that the rash appeared before I started going, that I sprayed the machines well, and I always washed his clothes in hot water, but that wouldn't make a difference.

difference. Really though, I questioned whether Mommy's tirade had anything to do with Tee-Bo's rash or the laundromat. My mother meant well, but I still wished she would take her advice back to South Cackalackie.

Mommy clearly loves Tee-Bo, even though she was so disconnected from him that she called him "the baby." She was obviously disconnected from Spider and his family; she always called him "your boyfriend," Jackie "your boyfriend's sister," and Spider's mother she called "that woman." I tried to avoid giving her any details about them, but conversations with Mommy were like quicksand, the harder I tried to wiggle my way out, the deeper I sank. I guess my being stingy with info only made matters worse. She'd wind up saying something that left a scar. That's why I shifted my attention by engaging in projects.

After she left, Tee-Bo was sleeping peacefully, so I broke out the shoe polish and started with my sling backs. Next, my leather espadrilles and gladiators. Before I knew it, I was surrounded by leather, pleather, and patent leather. The t-shirt I was dipping into a cup of water was old but served its purpose. I ran it over the loafer I'd just coated in black shoe wax, stopped, and inspected the shine. It was on the dull side. I could still see scuff marks. I knew how to fix that. I dipped a Q-tip in liquid dye, and dabbed them away. Once the dye dried, I placed the shoe between my knees, wrapped my rag around my hand, and buffed like the shoeshine man outside Grand Central Station, the only person I'd ever seen put a smile on a pair of shoes. Spider couldn't put his best foot forward with scuffed loafers. I buffed until my frown reflected. At least the shine was perfect. Nothing compared to a spit shine. Technically, it wasn't spit. The thought of spitting always disgusted me. Besides, I had no projectile skills. Dribble always landed on my chin. But, whether the shoes were shined with spit or not didn't make a difference to Spider; he couldn't care less. His favorite shoes were parked right in front of me.

Spider's Hush Puppies had holes in the soles, a split across the toe crease, and the Dr. Scholl's in them had shriveled from ten years of sweat and caked up foot powder. But for some reason, Spider could not part with them. Well, I was not about to waste any polish. That was it for now. I slapped the loafer in my hand down and glanced around.

Most of our shoes looked brand spanking new, but I didn't feel any better, especially since I had been inhaling fumes for the past hour, and my hands and thighs were all stained from the polish. I even had that black gunk caked up under my fingernails. They were the longest they'd ever been, because I was still taking the horse pills, better known as prenatal vitamins, so I didn't appreciate that. I decided to do something better.

I put my rag down and grabbed the phone. I could talk to Romell about anything. What I loved most about him was, unlike my sister, he didn't repeat a word I said to anybody else, not even the deep stuff. So, when he picked up, I don't think I even gave him a chance to open his mouth. I said, "Can we switch mothers?"

"Dawn told her about the keys, huh," Romell laughed.

I know he thought I was stupid for telling her. Dawn's mouth was bigger than her behind. But with all my girlfriends out of state—and me with no long distance carrier—who else would I call about girl stuff? Mommy? I sucked my teeth. "Are you a psychic friend?"

"Nah, my advice is free. Next time, save yourself the trouble. Tell your mom from the get-go like I suggested."

"Whose side are you on?"

"Chocolate, when it comes to you and your family, I blow the whistle and wear the stripes. Now, hold on. I have someone on the other line." The phone line clicked twice, but the call switched back to me. Romell's voice had turned to syrup. "Yeah, Akasma. Like I was saying, I feel real bad. I really do, because you and I have a lot of fun together. But, I've got to be honest. We don't have much in common. So, I guess—"

I cut Romell off, doing my best to imitate his voice but sounding more like Cookie Monster, "It's best that we just be friends." I got a chuckle out of him, so I kept it up. "The last thing I want to do is waste your time. I'd still like us to hang out once in a while, if that's okay with you." I closed by saying, "And the Oscar goes to...."

Romell's voice was just above a whisper but it had bass—that combination could lull me right to sleep or wake me up from it. Even though I didn't sound a bit like him, I knew I had the script down cold, because he was still laughing when he said, "Trust me, Chocolate. If I ever give you something

stiff, bare naked, and about that size...it won't be an Oscar. Now, knock it off. She won't buy it, unless I'm composed."

I never bought into any of his flirting. Romell and I were just friends. Actually, Romell was my closest friend. An investment banker, big and built, bald, brown, and dimpled, but he was a mess. Not only did he collect women like he did luxury timepieces, he remained unattached and had absolutely no time for "sistahs." He even had the nerve to have very specific taste. His type was blue-eyed, with big lips, hips, boobies, and black girl booty, courtesy of Stairmaster.

Romell was back on the line with me sooner than I expected. "Okay, what's the story?"

"Do you want the whole story or the abbreviated version?"

"The truth, Chocolate! Don't add any plot twists or cliffhangers. Just tell me what happened. I know how you are."

"Well, first of all, Mommy shows up here unannounced and uninvited. She doesn't even bother to say hello, right? She just pushes past me, gruntin' and complaining. 'Hmmh, you look tired. Hmmh, this place is disgustin.' And I'm tryna be nice. I'm like, 'Hi, Mommy. You look great. Would you like something to drink?' She ignores me, walking all through here like she owns the place, turning her nose up at everything."

"Okay, that's nothing new."

"Wait, let me finish. It gets better. She snatches Tee-Bo from me and starts yelling, 'He looks horrible! What kinda mother are you? You ain't doing nothin' for his rash!' And then she starts calling Spider all kinds of broke bums, while she is holding my baby. So I try to take him to put him in the room, and Mommy is snatching him from me, and we are having a tug of war with my baby. Tee-Bo is screaming at the top of his lungs. Finally, I pry him from her *vice grip*, take him back in the room, and calm him down. I come back and Mommy starts shaking me like I'm a two year old, pointin' to the mirror, saying 'Hmmh, look at you. You're busted! Ain't no man ever gonna marry you! I don't know why I wasted my money on your education! You ain't nothin' but a fool!' And then, she hauls off and slaps me!"

"Whoa, time out!" Romell whistled. "Chocolate, come on now. That's foul!"

"What? You think I'm lying?"

Eartha Watts-Hicks

"I know you're lying! I'm just trying to find the nugget of truth in this gold mine of yours."

"I'm telling you the truth, Romell! Mommy slapped me right in my face!"

"No way! What did you say to her for real?"

"Nothing! I was going out of my way to be nice. All I said to her was that she looked good, and I asked her if she wanted something to drink. That's it! Mommy just went nutsy-cuckoo for no reason. I'm lucky she didn't bruise my face."

"Why don't you come over here, so I can kiss your boo boo?"

"I don't know where your lips been!"

"You and that mouth! Now, I know you said something to your mom."

"I'm sorry. I'm upset. Can't you tell I'm upset? She slapped me, Romell, and that's not all. When I told Mommy I gave Tee-Bo Spider's last name, she really went ballistic. She flipped my glass table over and almost broke it!"

"Why would his name upset her like that?"

"I promised Mommy that he would have our last name until Spider and I got married."

"Okay. So, why doesn't he?"

"Because of you! Does this sound familiar? I'm having a baby, and I'm naming him Tobiah Love."

"You can't buy love." Romell laughed. He stopped, and a few seconds later he repeated himself, "You can't. You can't buy love," and laughed even harder.

"Hello, I'm dyin' here!" Just as I said that, Tee-Bo stirred in his cradle, tightening his little fists and scrunching his diapered bottom. I peeked over; he didn't wake. Sad to say, but Tee-Bo was used to noise. Because I tended to get loud at times, he wasn't a light sleeper, but I now knew the volume was getting too loud for him. I took a breath, held it for a moment, and then continued, "Don't you get it, Romell? I'll be twenty-six years old. How would you feel if your mother barged in your apartment and slapped you up?" That made him burst out all over again. This time I understood. That thought was ridiculous. Mrs. Goodwin wouldn't smack a roach off the wall. But still, waiting for his laughter to die down, I was getting aggravated. "Are you done?"

"Okay, okay. Maybe your mom was extreme, but you know as well as I do that Miss Anne has the gift of gab. She

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tells it like it is. I'm sure if you think back on what she said, you'll realize she's right. Here's what you really need to do...."

I didn't hear a thing he had to say after that. I placed the receiver back in the cradle. It was the beginning of summer, but that didn't matter. I dragged the heap of boots to my side, grabbed one of my ankle boots, and slapped some polish on it. The two things in this world I never got from Romell were sex and sympathy, so I should have known better. *Gift of gab*. Mommy's gift of gab was packed with sarcasm, wrapped with an "I told you so," and tied with a string of reminders of all the shit I should've done, so I expected that from her, but Romell should've known me well enough to know this was no time to agree with her.

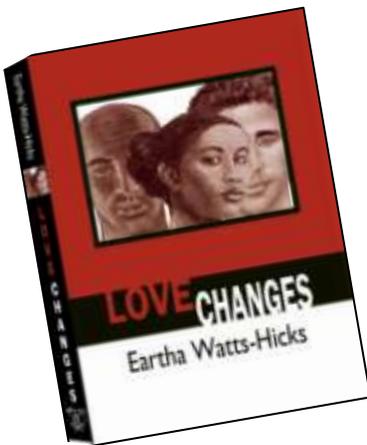
Spider said he was going to marry me, so he was going to marry me. I had held up my end of the bargain. I knew Spider was broke. I wasn't expecting him to go to any by-appointment-only jeweler. But I had to admit, by now he could have gone to any one of the jewelers on Fordham Road with the dookey ropes and crucifixes in the window. It wasn't like I was particular.

The saga continues!

LOVE**CHANGES**

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