

## Chapter One

### The Mirror Moment

I woke in a dusky room that smelled faintly of hibiscus and strongly of coconut oil. My head turned toward the window. I watched Marshonda toweling herself, sitting in her brown, silk boudoir chair. Her sienna skin, enhanced by the room's light, gave off a radiance of its own. Her full breasts glistened with water. While I watched, she began to comb and condition her wild hair. For as long as I had known her, she always tried to tame her mane, but I liked it best as it was when she was fresh out of the shower—as wild and free as she was. She rested her chin in her hand and smiled softly at me. I smiled back and turned to the window, watching the dust motes dance in the early morning light.

“Come sit by me,” she cooed, solicitously patting the chair beside her.

She tried to put me at ease, wanting me to feel as comfortable in my skin as she did in hers. She always seemed most comfortable in her apartment, surrounded by her pretty things—most of them pink or green. She appeared to be comfortable almost anywhere, though there was a faint difference between her inside and outdoor selves—one I had learned to recognize and appreciate. Marshonda was a thoroughly independent and modern woman, a successful educator, a lady of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. She was a vigorous, vivacious, and beautiful Black woman, and I envied her comfort, envied her equally effortless movement and stillness, envied her equanimity.

I was a fat man, a self-conscious man, and embarrassed by my size. Even in bed—especially in bed—I hid my body from my lover. I hid my flesh beneath T-shirts and pulled the

sheets high up on my chest. During sex, I insisted that the lights be turned down low or off entirely. I was convinced that if my lover took all of me in, I would quickly be shown the door.

So, beneath sheets and shirts, I hid, nevertheless seeking all of this five-foot-four, caramel-skinned, sensual southern belle.

From her prissy, high-heeled gait to her sweet perfumed scent, Marshonda's style was overwhelmingly girly. Equally overwhelming was my ravenous desire for her. I struggled to believe that I was actually with a woman of such style and beauty, as I didn't see myself as worthy. If I could've wrapped my mind around the fact that a woman like her sincerely wanted to be with me, then maybe I would have allowed myself to feel deserving of love as well.

Marshonda's green eyes both enticed me and scared me. I was weak-kneed in her gaze. She was catlike in the bedroom, quiet, unassuming but full of fire. I often called her "Maggie with the cat eyes." She never knew I was referring to the Tennessee Williams play or that I was Brick, living in mendacity.

I wanted her hands on my body. I wanted her to rub my belly and kiss my chest, but the thought of her exploring my body with her eyes, her hands, and her tongue also terrified me. The minute she discovered what was beneath the shirt or under the covers, I was convinced she would forever see me as undesirable.

And now Marshonda wanted me to come to her, to come as I was and to sit by her, both of us nude. She wanted me to lift the sheets and parade myself in front of her. "Sit by you?" I asked. "Now?" I could hear the distress in my voice.

"Yes, Julius," she said. "Come sit with me."

I wasn't prepared for this. I had counted on her leaving the room so I could reach for my pants and shirt at the foot of the bed, but she wasn't about to give me that chance. I was cornered.

"I've run a bath," she said. "I thought we could soak together."

I blinked at her. I could feel my mouth hanging open.

"Or maybe," she said, "I could bathe you."

I was flummoxed, at a loss for words. Rather than throwing off the covers and joining her, I pulled the sheets tighter around my body. I couldn't stand the thought of seeing my body in the light, heaving itself out of bed and across the room. I always avoided looking at myself in the mirror until I was fully dressed.

I wrapped myself like a mummy in the top sheet. I shook my head at her and went on the offensive: "I don't want *you* to bathe *me*," I said. "I'm a grown man. I can bathe myself."

"Lord, go ahead!" she said, raising her eyes to the ceiling. "Help me endure this sarcastic man. Yes, Lord, he knows he's an arrogant man. He knows he looks at life as a transactional affair. He gives only to get, and, of course, he gives less than he ought to and receives less than he deserves. What he doesn't know Lord is how you love him so and how I love him so. He doesn't know that there is love all around him. Lord, he doesn't know how to love himself."

"What do you mean I don't know how to love myself? Of course I do. I know my own mind, don't I? I influence young minds, don't I? I'm well educated. I have money. I—"

"Come look at yourself in the mirror," she said, cutting me off before I could finish. She stood at the foot of the bed with her arm stretched out toward me, her palm open and waiting.

When I didn't release my grasp on the sheets, she took another step toward me.

“Come on,” she said. “Show me how much you love yourself. Show me that you know what a beautiful man you are. You’re not fooling anybody hiding under that sheet. You know you’re a fat man, the Lord above knows you’re a fat man, and yes, I know you’re a fat man.”

My blood pounded in my ears. I tore back the cover and stood nose to nose with her. “How dare you—”

“No, no, love. It’s *you* that has to dare. Turn around. Look at yourself.”

Marshonda seized my shoulders and pivoted me on the spot. There I stood, naked, every inch of me reflected in her full-length cheval mirror. We were silent for a second, both of us looking at my reflection.

“Do you dare to love that man?” she asked.

I couldn’t answer as I continued staring at myself. Loving myself was something that had always been beyond my capacity. I wasn’t sure I knew how to love... Surely my father had not loved me. Was I unlovable?