

THE  
SCOURGE

A Novel

R. TILDEN SMITH

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my daughter Lauren, a supremely gifted writer, who inspired and challenged me to pick up a pen and endeavor to do the thing I had previously bragged that I could easily do but never did: write an original work of fiction and publish it. Well Lauren, it wasn't easy, but I did it.

Now it's your turn!



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# 1

“Where to Miss?” the taxi driver asked.

“Fifteen hundred Hermann Park Place, please,” Moji answered, her voice barely a whisper above the sound of the rain drumming on the roof of the car.

“Ok Miss.”

She rubbed her temples and exhaled slowly. *I will not have an episode*, she thought, *not after all this time. Not after all I've been through. Lord, please let this feeling pass.*

Her prayer went unanswered.

*It's your fault he doesn't love you!* The voice ripped through her mind like a bird of prey, its talons slicing at the thin veil between her subconscious and her sanity. She huddled in the backseat of the taxi, trying her best to stay clear of the driver's curious gaze.

The driver coaxed the taxi slowly down the maze of flooded streets that crisscrossed the neighborhood, their twists and turns designed purposefully to discourage the curious, but creating the unintentional side effect of trapping the runoff from miles of connected driveways. Moji peeked over the driver's shoulder at the display of the GPS receiver affixed to the dashboard. It blinked with angry reds and yellows, indicating the late afternoon deluge had denied the driver the most direct route to their destination.

“Many of the streets are flooded Miss,” the driver said, “I will have to take a much longer route. You will have to pay a little more. Is that ok?”

“Yes, that's fine,” Moji said, keeping her head low so as to avoid the driver's eyes as they darted back and forth, searching for her in the rear view mirror.

“Very good Miss, I'll have you home soon.”

*Yes, please get me home. I'll be safe there.* The pounding rain thrummed the metal roof of the taxi, producing an audible hum that was loud, but no match for the cacophony of voices in her head. Fight the urge to retreat, her therapist used to say, focus on the present, not the past. *Easy for her to say, she doesn't have to contend with a trifling man.* She closed her eyes and laid her head between the headrest and the rear passenger side window. The rain and the swish-swish of the windshield wipers lulled her into a fitful sleep, unlocking her tenuous hold on her subconscious.

*Lara! Lara, where are you? Where is my beautiful Lara?* her father's voice called to her. She longed to see him, to feel his scruffy five o'clock shadow against her face when he swept her up into his arms and hugged her tight to his chest. Her bedroom was mostly dark, the light from the streetlamp outside beaten to a sparse glow by the yellowed shade and tattered curtains standing guard at her second story window. She crouched at the far side of her bed, the tag on the back of her onesie pajamas tickling her neck.

*Daddy! Daddy!* she said. *Come and find me!*

*Lara, is that you?* the voice of her father asked. *Where is my beautiful Lara? I do very much want to see you!*

Her bedroom door creaked open and her father's shadow spilled in through the crack.

*Daddy!* she said, the timbre in her voice betraying her excitement.

*Ah, yes! There you are!* Moji heard her father say. *My beautiful little girl!*

*LEAVE HIM ALONE!* a child's voice shrieked from a vantage point directly behind Moji's ear. The voice was so close that she felt hot breath on the back of her neck.

Moji awoke with a start and sat straight up in the taxi's backseat, gulping air from a stifled scream.

"Miss! Miss! Are you ok?" the driver asked. He slowed and then brought the taxi to a stop in the middle of a narrow two way street. He placed the car's gearshift in park then turned to stare at Moji, pressing his nose against the thick plexiglass that separated them.

"I-I-I'm sorry," Moji said. She struggled to control her panic, inhaling deeply to calm her labored breathing and to slow her racing heart. She

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touched her face, it was wet with tears. “I’ll be fine,” she mumbled to the driver as she hid her face in her bag, searching frantically for a tissue, “I just had a bad dream, please keep driving.”

The rain continued to come down in torrential sheets, blanketing the taxi’s windows with a distorting film. The driver didn’t move, he just stared at Moji for several seconds while the howling wind and rain gently rocked the car from side to side.

“No more sleep!” he said, his eyes protruding so far out of their sockets that Moji feared they would escape from his skull.

“Yes yes, of course,” she said, “I didn’t mean to frighten or startle you. I was just—”

The driver did not wait to hear her excuse. He turned his back to her, eased the taxi into gear, and continued his slow careful trek down the rain soaked roadway.

*Oh Lara, Moji thought as she closed her eyes and lay her head back on the seat, you are such a little bitch.*

Lara was the nickname her father gave her when she was a child. Her full name was Mojisola Omolara Douglas. Omolara was the name given to her by her paternal grandmother. Her father often called her “Lara” in honor of her grandmother’s memory. Growing up, she loved to hear her father call for her when he came home from work. When she would hear him fumbling with his keys outside of their apartment door, she would run and hide in her bedroom. Her father would finally find the right key on his keychain, open the door, and call out in a gravelly Nigerian accent, “Where is my precious Lara? I come home from a long day of work and my precious Lara is not here to greet me?” Moji would rush out of her room, jump down the stairs, and leap from the third to last stair into her father’s arms happily squealing, “Here I am daddy!” He would catch her, spin her around, give her a big kiss on the cheek, and pronounce, “Yes, there you are! The most beautiful girl in all the Commonwealth!” Moji adored her father and never tired of that special moment they shared every day. Moji flinched when the inner voice—the child’s voice—echoed in her mind, *but you killed him with your stupid love.* Moji winced at the memory and held her breath, expecting an onslaught of

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emotional torment from her alter ego. But to her relief, the inner voice went silent.

*Thank you Jesus,* Moji thought, letting the air leave her lungs in a quick nasally rush. She was careful to avoid thinking too much about her childhood. Her therapist didn't think Moji's fragile psyche could survive the constant reminders of such a traumatic past and encouraged her to eliminate those tangible memories from her life. With the promise of a life free from the pain and guilt surrounding her father's death, Moji gladly complied. No family pictures were displayed on the walls of her home; she wore no family heirlooms or possessed any childhood mementos. Taking her therapist's advice one step further, she decided to put as much distance between herself and her old life as she could. At seventeen years old, fresh out of high school, and against her mother's wishes, she accepted a full scholarship to Rice University, endured the twenty five hundred mile bus ride from her hometown of Boston, Massachusetts to Houston, Texas, and never looked back.

*But we never really escape our past,* she thought. *It follows us, scratching at the edges of our consciousness, looking for a way in, looking for a way to be rekindled.* Moji sighed and shook her head quickly from side to side, trying to fling the dark thoughts from her mind. *No need to dwell in the depressing thoughts of the past,* she told herself, *you have enough of them in the present to keep you busy.*

True to his word, the driver had gotten her home quicker than she thought would be possible given the havoc the flooded streets played on his intended route. Even through the window's distorted view, Moji recognized the stately oak trees that lined the street separating the condominium tower where she lived from the four hundred acre public park that made her address one of the most coveted in the city. The park contained running, walking and bike trails, an outdoor theater, a golf course, several picnic areas, and even a zoo. As the park also bordered Rice University and Houston's world renowned Medical Center, Hermann Park Place, or "The Tower" as the locals chose to refer to it, attracted some of the area's most prestigious doctors and academics. Although her tenth floor unit was a small one bedroom and didn't

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have any park views, she felt blessed to be able to afford to live in such a fabulous place. It was her sanctuary.

Her face soured. *And unless I figure something out soon, I'm going to lose it too.*

The driver guided the taxi slowly through the floodwaters partially covering the street and turned onto the huge semicircular driveway that denoted the building's main entrance. The driver stopped in front of the main lobby doors, underneath the large ornate porte-cochère that ran the entire length of the building and provided cover for the middle third of the driveway.

"Here we are Miss," the driver announced, "please use the credit card machine to pay your fare."

Moji did as she was instructed, noting with a little irritation that the display reported a gratuity had already been applied to her fare. On any other day she would have challenged the driver's assertion that he could take such liberties with her, but today was not one of those days. As she stepped from the backseat of the taxi, a gust of wind blew through the canopy, producing a melancholy howl that matched her mood.

"Good afternoon Miss Douglas," said Thomas, the building's meddlesome doorman and concierge.

"Hello Thomas," Moji replied, careful to keep her tear reddened eyes hidden from Thomas' questioning stare. *I don't need him putting my business on the building gossip grapevine*, she thought. She stepped quickly through one of the large glass doors Thomas held open for her and entered the lobby.

Roger Sims, the day shift security guard, glanced up from his desk. He stood up to greet her as she approached.

"Welcome back, Miss Douglas," he said, his smile revealing creases on his face that made him look more distinguished than elderly. "Did the rain put the kibosh on your pool party?"

"Something like that," Moji said, her face conveying a complex mix of anger, fear, and sadness.

"Is everything alright Miss Douglas?" Roger asked, "You don't look well."

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“Oh, everything’s fine,” Moji said, sure her reddened eyes and hurried demeanor gave him cause to doubt her obvious lie. She forced her best fake smile. “My sinuses are acting up and this rain and humidity are not making it any better.”

“Do you need anything? I can send Thomas to pick you up something from the drugstore.”

“No no, I’ll be fine. I have everything I need in my apartment.”

“Well, you get some rest young lady. It hurts my heart to see the most beautiful woman in this building not looking and feeling her best.”

His kind words soothed Moji’s anxiety so thoroughly that her fake smile morphed into a more genuine one. It was only decorum that stopped her from rushing over to plant a kiss of gratitude on the crown of his shiny bald head.

“Thank you, Mr. Sims. I’m going to whip me up some hot green tea with honey and lemon juice and then head straight to bed.”

“That sounds good,” Roger said as he collapsed back into his squeaky office chair. “Take my advice and add a jigger or two of Crown. It never fails to fix whatever’s ailing me.”

Moji’s smile broadened at the suggestion and she gave Mr. Sims a quick affirmative nod as she boarded a waiting elevator. *They don’t make men like that anymore, she thought. Kind, considerate, respectful, and wise. If he wasn’t twice my age, I’d be batting my big brown eyes at him instead of the losers that seem to flock to me like flies to poop.*

She sighed and pressed the button for the tenth floor. The doors closed with a soft thud, and for the first time since the events at the pool party, Moji felt absolutely alone. As the elevator began its ascent, she took stock of the reflection staring back at her from the highly polished doors. *This has been the worst day of my entire life, she thought. Me and my dog will probably be evicted from my home and now the man I love has evicted me from his life.*

Moji felt as if she was losing everything she held dear. The reflection staring back at her looked worn, beat down, and—if she allowed herself some room for truth—more than a little depressed.

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"You are a pitiful hot mess," she chided her reflection. "You should be ashamed of yourself! You allowed the childish behavior of ignorant people to reduce you to a confused emotional little girl. You're better than that!"

She stepped closer to the doors and confronted the angry image staring back at her.

"Look at you! You're a beautiful, successful, professional woman and you run home, tail between your legs, just because a man you loved, and who you thought loved you, decided that you're not worthy of respect. You are worthy! You hear me Moji! You are done compromising your ideals for the sake of companionship!"

Moji fell back against the wall of the elevator, exhausted. Fresh tears began to well up in her eyes as the elevator came to a stop. She pulled another tissue from her bag and quickly dabbed her eyes dry, lest one of the other residents see her in this state. The doors slid open and Moji was relieved to find no one was waiting to board. She hurried down the carpeted hallway, keeping her footfalls as quiet as possible so as to not attract the attention of some of her more nosy neighbors. She reached her apartment door and as quietly as she could, inserted her key into the old fashioned copper knob. Before she could turn the key and let herself in, she heard a soft whimper escape from the other side of the door.

"Hey baby!" Moji said, "Mommy's home!" She turned the knob and gently pushed the door open, knowing that the source of the noise would be in close proximity, eager to greet her. "Hi Tyson!" she said, quickly entering the apartment then closing the door behind her.

Tyson, an eighty-six pound, jet black male pit bull terrier, wagged his tail excitedly and spun his body to receive his anticipated back scratching.

"Oh, I know what you want," Moji said. She used both hands to scratch Tyson's back, starting behind his floppy ears and continuing to the base of his tail. Ecstatic to have his master's attention and eager for more, Tyson flattened his ears against his head, sat down, and slapped his tail rhythmically against the wood floor. Suddenly, he fell to the floor, turned over on his back, and spread his hind and forelegs wide.

“Oh, silly boy!” Moji said, responding to Tyson’s maneuver by vigorously scratching his belly. *Tyson always makes me feel better*, she thought as she grabbed her cell phone out of her bag then tossed the bag and her tunic on the couch. “Alright, play time’s over. Mommy’s got to wash this chlorine off her body before she can’t pass for black.” Despite her mood, she managed to chuckle at her own joke as she headed to the bathroom with Tyson following close behind. She stripped off her bathing suit and threw it in the hamper. As she turned to close the bathroom door, she caught a glimpse of her naked body in the vanity mirror. Moji quickly averted her gaze and slumped on the deck of the large jacuzzi tub.

*You’re old and ugly and no one is ever going to love you*, her small inner voice reminded her. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath, pushing the thoughts of that scared little girl back into the well of her subconscious. *No Lara, you’re wrong and I will not let your lack of self-esteem affect mine*, she thought.

*But it’s too late for that ain’t it*, the little girl in Moji’s head said, collapsing Moji’s carefully built wall of self-confidence.

She exhaled and then inhaled deeply, calming herself using a technique she had honed since childhood. The voice finally retreated and Moji felt safe again. *I am not listening to you anymore Lara, I am a grown woman now*. She opened her eyes. Tyson had gotten comfortable in one corner of the bathroom in what Moji called the “Superman” position—lying down with hind legs outstretched and his head on the floor between his forelegs—like he was flying.

“Tyson, I could’ve used a super dog today,” she said in the direction of her most faithful companion. At the sound of his name Tyson wagged his tail but otherwise remained motionless. Moji turned on the bath water and added her favorite bubble bath. The tub filled slowly with hot, steamy water, converting the soap into a quickly growing mountain of suds. Satisfied with the amount of lather that was rapidly covering the water’s surface, Moji placed her phone on the bathtub deck and stepped into the bath. Tyson wagged his tail a few times in response to her movement and then went still, watching her intensely as she slid into the frothy, lavender scented water. She

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breathed deep, dipping low enough in the tub that the hot water flowed over her shoulders and the bubbles tickled her chin. She closed her eyes and let the water's heat and lavender scent soak in, washing her body free of the acrid stench of chlorine and cleansing her mind of the emotional trauma of the morning's events. After a few minutes of peaceful silence, she picked up her phone and pressed "2" on the speed dial menu. A high school picture of a seventeen year old Moji hugging her best friend and confidant, Crystal LaMont, smiled at her from the phone's display.

*Crystal, please answer your phone,* she thought as the phone began its dialing sequence, *I really need to talk to someone who can help me think straight.*

Crystal and Moji had known each other since elementary school. She was the yin to Moji's yang. When Moji's father died, Crystal provided a shoulder to cry on. When Moji's mother succumbed to the demon of alcohol, Crystal gave Moji the strength to walk away despite her mother's crocodile tears. And when Crystal's life fell on hard times and she needed a fresh start and a place to stay, Moji gladly offered to help, paying for a ticket to Houston and letting Crystal stay with her until she got back on her feet. She and Crystal were closer than friends, they were true "sisters from another mister." Moji put the phone on speaker and placed it on the tub deck next to her head. The phone blared well past three rings, breaking the silence of the bathroom for much longer than Moji anticipated. A small panic began to well up in her psyche as she contemplated the thought that Crystal might not answer the phone.

*Please God, let her answer the phone,* she prayed, *I really need to talk to her right now!* Finally, the audible click of a connection being completed echoed through the room.

"What's up girl? How was the pool party with your boo?" Crystal's annoyingly high, Rosie Perez-like voice burst forth from the cell phone's speaker, piercing the hollow acoustics of the tiny bathroom. A small whine of recognition escaped from Tyson's throat and he lifted his head off the floor and pivoted his ears toward the source of the familiar voice.

"Crystal, I hate all men!" Moji said, surprised by the level of angst infused in her outburst.

“Mo, what happened?” Crystal asked, her tone matching the anxiety she heard in her best friend’s voice.

“Can you come over?”

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes,” Crystal said without inquiring further. Moji heard the metallic melody of keys being gathered up and her heart swelled with love for a friend who would drop everything to be by her side, no questions asked.

“Crystal, can you do me a favor on your way over here?”

“Yeah girl, what do you need?”

“Can you pick me up an eight piece fried chicken basket with a side of mashed potatoes and biscuits?”

“Ah, shit!” Crystal said, managing to coax two syllables from the swear word with her high pitched squeal, “Was it THAT bad!”

“Yeah, it was that bad. I need my comfort food.”

“Well, let me call Sam and tell him he’s gonna have to watch the kids. Sounds like it’s going to be a long night.”

“Thanks, girl.”

“No problem. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Moji pushed the phone’s end call button and lay her head down on the back of the tub, in silent contemplation. *Moji, this Darryl fiasco is just a bump in the road, she thought. You have plenty of time to achieve all the goals you’ve set for yourself. Plenty of time to find Mr. Right, get married, have children...*

Her thoughts faded as she looked at her caramel skin through the circles of cloudy water dispersed among the soapsud islands circling lazily around her bent knees. For reasons she couldn’t quite fathom, she couldn’t seem to sustain a positive outlook. *Your kind of love poisons everyone and everything around you!* the child inside Moji taunted.

“Lara, please go away!” Moji wailed.

She didn’t want to cry but the tears fought their way to the surface and streamed down her cheeks. “For Christ’s sake, what’s wrong with me!” A sob broke through her lips. She slapped the water in disgust. Tyson, startled by her outburst, walked over to the tub’s edge and placed his enormous head

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next to Moji's ear. "I'm sorry boy," she said, "mommy's in a bit of a funk right now."

As if to console her, Tyson began to whine softly and lick her ear. Moji rolled over on her side, and while using her damp hand to gently stroke the top of Tyson's head, she wept.

## 2

*Rrrring! Rrrring! Rrrring!*

She could hear it, even with the bedroom door closed and her head firmly buried beneath a pile of pillows.

*Rrrring! Rrrring! Rrrring!*

The telephone. The one hanging on the wall downstairs in the kitchen. The pearl gray one with the big black and white buttons that glowed in the dark. The one with the cord that hung suspended beneath the base like a cat-tortured ball of tangled plastic. The one with the distinctive ring that was much too loud for an apartment as small as the one the Douglas family called home.

*Rrrring! Rrrring! Rrrring!*

She willed herself out of bed and tiptoed to the door, afraid that the old floor would conspire against her like it often did, creaking its alarm, and her mother would awake, angry and full of drunken rage. *Hurry, answer it!* She opened the bedroom door and peeked into the small, unevenly lit hallway that lay beyond the threshold. *Hurry Lara, before mother wakes up!* She slipped past the closed door of her mother's bedroom, grateful to hear the soft wheeze of her liquor-induced snore. She crept down the darkened stairwell, anxious and scared, the moan of the stair treads blaring like trumpets in her ear. You're *moving too slow! Go faster! You have to save daddy!* She was halfway down the stairs, where the wall gave way to an old, ornate bannister. The once varnished

and stained handrail was worn to bare wood, a testament to a lifetime spent bearing the weight of poor and weary lives. She poked her head through a gap left by several broken balusters and peered down the wall. The phone was right below her, clinging to a layer of plaster and peeling wallpaper like a frightened cat.

*Rrrring! Rrrring! Rrrring!*

If she stretched she could almost reach it, but at twelve years old her arms weren't quite long enough. *Lara, please don't let daddy die!* Her heart was banging like a drum. Sweat pooled at the base of her scalp, gathered momentum at the back of her neck, and raced down the trough of her spine. Her damp Ren & Stimpy nightgown clung to her body like plastic wrap, making her itch, and irritating the nipples of her new, awkwardly sized breasts. Her mother said that she was a big girl now, that she had outgrown her Ren & Stimpy pajamas. But Lara refused to part with them. Not because she was particularly fond of Ren & Stimpy, but because they were a gift from her father. *Lara, please hurry up! It's almost time!* She reached the bottom of the stairs then stepped to the right, made an about-face, and there it was. The telephone. Right where it always is. Right where it's supposed to be. Poised to deliver its horrible news, to destroy her entire family with three simple tones. Maybe this time, if she could just reach it, pick it up before her mother answers it, maybe this time the message will be something benign, like a wrong number or a fast talking telemarketer. Maybe this time everything will be ok. Two steps and she could pick it up before it rang again and end the nightmare. *Pick up the phone Lara! Pick it up now!* She took two quick steps and reached for the telephone...

*Rrrring! Rrrring! Rrrring!*

And mother was there, holding the phone's handset over her head like a caveman's club, looming over her, the loathing and hate set deep in her bloodshot eyes.

*Your father's dead because of you! she screamed, peppering Lara's face with vomit-scented spittle. You had to go to your fancy private school and now he's dead! He's a pile of guts and blood lying in the street because his precious Lara had to go to a fancy, shmancy school! Now what are we going to do Lara? Who's going to take care of us now, huh?*

*No!* she screamed as she backed away. Her mother's face morphed and spun into a twisted mess, part phone, part tortured soul. She ran back upstairs and into her bedroom. *Don't run from me Lara*, she heard her mother say, *come back here right now!* She slammed the door behind her and threw herself onto her bed. *No, no, no! Daddy's not dead! He's gonna come home! He always comes home!* She grabbed two pillows and covered her head, pressing them tight against her ears. *My daddy's not dead, he's not. I'm going to close my eyes and go to sleep and when I wake up my daddy will be home, like always.* She closed her eyes tight and prayed, prayed for her daddy to come home safe. *Pastor says that God always answers prayer.*

*Rrrring! Rrrring! Rrrring!*

"No!" Moji said and awoke with a start. *Daddy's dead because of you*, the child in her head whispered as the dream faded from memory. "Oh god oh god oh god," she said through short breaths, her heart still pounding in her chest. Disoriented, she sat up and rubbed her eyes, momentarily startled by the condition of her wrinkled and waterlogged hand. After a few seconds her mind cleared and she realized where she was. *The episode in the taxi and now this. I gotta get this shit under control.* Tyson, stationed faithfully by her side as she slept, sat up when he heard her stir. He stared at her for a moment and then lay back down on the large bath mat.

"Mommy's fine," she assured him, "I just fell asleep in the damn tub like a crazy woman." *Am I going crazy?, she thought, or am I just scared? But you're a grown woman now. Then why, after twenty-two years, can't I leave the past in the past and move on with my life? Why does the nightmare keep returning again and again?* The death of her father was seared into her brain, a cauterized wound that refused to completely heal. Made worse by her mother's drunken attempt to lay the circumstances of his death at her feet, twelve year old Moji

fell into a deep depression and the doctors weren't sure she would ever climb out of it. *It wasn't my fault. It was just a tragic accident.* At least, that's what she's been telling herself for over two decades, but the pain never seems to lessen, even after so many years. The circumstances surrounding his death were sensational enough to make the local news. Her father was working too much, trying his best to make ends meet with jobs that paid next to nothing. The police said he had a heart attack and lost control of the taxi he was driving. The taxi hit the curb, flipped over, and slid into the outside patio of an all-night cafe. Her father and two innocent bystanders were killed that night. *For a long time I wished that I had died that night too.*

Her right leg and arm were numb from falling asleep in such an awkward position and the entire lower half of her body itched terribly from being immersed in the tepid water. She stood up, climbed out of the tub and grabbed a towel to dry herself. She was reaching for the lotion when she heard the intercom in the next room buzz. But before she could react, her cell phone's display flashed a picture of a young Moji and Crystal and began to play the "Best Friend" ringtone she assigned to Crystal's number: *It's your best friend hittin' you up. Pick up your cell phone and put down your cup. It's your best friend and it's time to get crunk. Pick up your celly and don't be a punk!* She glanced at the time emblazoned at the top right corner of her cell phone's display. *Oh my god, it's almost six o'clock! Crystal's going to be pissed.* She picked up the phone and pressed the answer button. "Hey, girl," Moji said, a little sheepishly.

"Mo, are you alright?" Crystal asked, concerned. "I've been down here in this lobby for fifteen minutes trying to get ahold of you. I've had the nice security guard—what's your name sweetheart?—Jamarco. I've had Jamarco trying to contact you on the intercom and I've been calling you on your cell over and over again. I was just about to call the fire department to come break down your door."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. I fell asleep."

"I forgive you this time," Crystal said, half-heartedly scolding her friend, "but don't let it happen again. I have half a mind to give this delicious eight piece chicken dinner to someone more deserving—she winked at Jamarco—

maybe Jamarco would like a taste of some of these sweet breasts and dark, meaty thighs.”

Moji knew from the tone in Crystal’s voice that she was making googly eyes at Jamarco, the night shift security guard, a young man at least ten years Crystal’s junior. Though happily married with two children, Crystal was the consummate flirt.

“Ok cougar momma,” Moji said, “leave the little pup alone and bring me my food. I’m feening for some fried chicken.”

“Who you calling a cougar momma?” Crystal said, blushing then lowering her voice and turning her back to Jamarco so that he couldn’t eavesdrop on their conversation. “I’m only thirty-five years old. I’ve heard that you don’t get your cougar card until you’re at least forty-five,” her smile betraying the mock indignation in her voice. “Besides, pot meet kettle. If I remember right, aren’t you six years older than that cute little football player of yours?”

“That’s not the same thing. Darryl is almost thirty.”

“Umm hmm. Oh, and that makes him a man? Is that why you’re crying yourself to sleep and I had to drive three miles out of my way to bring you this big bucket of calories?”

“Well, I don’t think Jamarco is more than twenty-three years old,” Moji said, a tinge of exasperation in her voice. “He’s not mature enough to distinguish your harmless flirting from real interest. So unless you fancy having a young Jamaican boy all up in your skirt, I suggest you leave him alone.”

“Ok, miss party pooper,” Crystal said, “I’m just having a little innocent fun.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry for being a prude. I’m just a little relationship sensitive right now. Could you tell Jamarco to call me back on the intercom so I can tell him it’s ok to let you come up?”

“Sure thing, girl. And Mo?”

“Yes?”

“I was just kidding about giving Jamarco your food. You know I would never do my sista-girl like that!”

Moji laughed. "Yeah, you'd better not! You know how I get when I can't have my fried chicken!"

Crystal laughed with her friend. "I'll be up there in one second," she said and then hung up the phone.

Crystal sauntered back towards the security desk, locking eyes with Jamarco and flashing him her most inviting smile.

"Is everything alright with Miss Douglas?" Jamarco asked.

"Yes Jamarco, she's fine," Crystal said in her most seductive voice, pushing her body as tightly as possible against the waist high desk and throwing her shoulders back to emphasize her Wonderbra-supported but still shapely breasts.

"She just fell asleep. She asked if you would call her again on your intercom thingy so she can talk to you."

"Yes Miss," Jamarco said, happy to have a reason to look away from the older woman's man-hungry gaze. He dialed Moji's number on the intercom phone.

After hanging up the phone with Crystal, Moji finished applying lotion, threw on a bra and panties, and wrapped herself in the terry cloth bathrobe hanging on the back of the bathroom door. She walked into her living room, turned on the TV, and then went to the door and waited for Jamarco to call her again on the intercom. It buzzed. She picked it up on the first ring.

"Hello Jamarco," Moji said.

"Hello Miss Douglas. I'm glad that you're ok."

"Thank you Jamarco. I'm fine. I'm sorry that my friend caused such a fuss."

"No worries Miss Douglas. You are lucky to have such a friend. My gramma used to say, good frien' betta dan packet money."

Moji laughed. She loved it when Jamarco said things that let his patois accent come through. He told her that his grandmother used to beat him whenever he slipped up and spoke with an accent. His grandmother thought they would never be accepted as real Americans as long as they carried any traces of their Jamaican heritage around with them. She thought it was a shame that he suppressed the accent because it sounded sexy. "Your grandma

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was absolutely right,” she said, “good friends are worth more than all the money in the world. Please let mine come up and see me now. I’m sure she’s down there prancing around like a bird of paradise.”

“Yes ma’am,” Jamarco said, his voice inflection letting Moji know that his answer was an affirmation of both of her statements.

“Thank you!” Moji said, laughing again.

“You’re very welcome,” Jamarco said and hung up the phone. He looked up at Crystal, who had sustained her lustful stare during the entire conversation. “Miss Douglas says it’s ok for you to go up now.”

“Thank you sweetie,” Crystal said and headed toward the elevators. Confident that Jamarco was still watching, she slowed her practiced runway model gait, her three inch heels barely audible on the granite tile floor. Her knee length pleated skirt swayed rhythmically over well-toned calves and hugged a butt kept in check by a rigorous regimen of squats and Pilates. Crystal felt a wave of giddy anticipation as she quickly snapped her head back toward the security desk, planning to cap off her performance by throwing the surely slack-jawed Jamarco a sultry wink and a smile. But she was surprised when she turned and discovered that Jamarco had missed the whole show. He was staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows that comprised the entire facade of the condo tower, presumably interested in the view of the late afternoon sun skimming the oak treetops in the park across the street.

“Hmph!” Crystal snorted as she boarded the elevator, “His loss.” She rode the elevator to the tenth floor, confused by the wave of shame, disappointment, and anger that suddenly came over her. *Girl, you need to get ahold of yourself. Don’t let Moji’s relationship psychosis affect your fun.* The elevator dinged its arrival and Crystal shook off the awkward feeling and confidently disembarked. She arrived at Moji’s apartment and took a moment to examine her splintered reflection in the polished brass number “1014” affixed to the vintage wood door. She took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

Moji flung open the door and gave Crystal a big hug. “I’m so happy you’re here!” she said.

## THE SCOURGE

"Alright, alright," Crystal said, trying to keep her balance with the bag of fast food in one hand, her purse in the other, and Moji hanging around her neck.

"Let's not give old lady Watson any more things to gossip about."

At the mention of her neighbor's name, Moji broke their embrace and Crystal saw a look of contempt wash across Moji's face. "That woman makes me want to forget all my home training and just slap her upside her blue-haired head," Moji said, loud enough to be heard if Mrs. Watson should have her ear pressed against her door, as Moji suspected she did.

"Girl, what's gotten into you!" Crystal said, "What did the lonely old bat ever do to you, other than get up all in your business?"

Moji grabbed Crystal's arm and pulled her into the apartment, slamming the door loudly behind them.

"All that woman does is try to find ways to get on my last nerve!" Moji said. "You know what that heifer has done now? She's petitioned the condo board to prohibit me from keeping Tyson in my apartment. She claims that pit bulls are a known menace and a danger to the children and other pets living in the building. Can you believe that bullshit?"

"Damn! She really doesn't like you! What are you going to do?"

"Oh Crystal, I don't know," Moji said, exasperated. There's a board meeting about it that's scheduled to happen in a couple of weeks. I'm sure I'll think of something by then." She ushered Crystal into the breakfast area adjacent to the kitchen and gestured for her to sit down opposite her at the small dining table. "Since moving here I've tried everything I could think of to win her friendship. I've made a point to speak to her and say something nice whenever I see her. I've offered to run errands for her. I even baked some cookies and took them over there so that we could, you know, maybe have a nice conversation and get to know one another better. You know what she said to me when she opened her door and saw the plate of cookies?"

"No, what she'd say?"

"She said, No thank you dear, I don't eat other people's cooking, and slammed the door in my face."

"Ouch."

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“Yeah, and one time she called 911 because she saw Darryl in the hallway and thought he was some sort of criminal.”

“Well, she’s just a sad old woman who grew up in a different era. She probably thought moving to this building would protect her from all the scary minorities popping up all over the place. And then your nappy ass showed up next door with a dog named Mike Tyson.”

“I’ve told you a thousand times, Tyson is not named after Mike Tyson! He’s named after Tyson Beckford because he’s black, muscular, handsome, and loyal.”

“And I call him Mike Tyson because he’s black, muscular, crazy, and bites people.”

“Tyson has never bitten anyone! You know that!”

“What about DeAndre?”

“Tyson didn’t bite DeAndre, he just tried to bite him. Anyway, DeAndre didn’t tell me he was into all that dog fighting stuff. How was I supposed to know that Tyson would sense it, smell it, or whatever, and attack him. God knows what cruel things he was doing to animals. My baby was just trying to protect me.”

“DeAndre said the dog tried to snap his nuts off. If he hadn’t jumped on top of this very table,” Crystal said, running her hands over the table’s highly varnished surface, “he probably would’ve ended up a frigging eunuch.” Crystal laughed at the thought of DeAndre on top of the table bawling like a little girl.

Moji offered Crystal a weak smile, “It wasn’t funny at the time Crystal! DeAndre could have been seriously hurt. I had a hard time getting Tyson to calm down so I could lock him in the bathroom. Anyway, DeAndre was lucky. Had I known about that dog fighting crap beforehand, I might have let Tyson finish the job.”

“Girl, remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“You ain’t got nothing to worry about. My best friend could never get on my bad side.”

They both laughed and began to unpack the chicken dinner. The noise, the constant mention of his name, and the smell of the chicken finally

compelled Tyson to leave the comfortable confines of the bathroom. On seeing the familiar face and inhaling a lungful of the powerfully enticing smell of fried chicken, Tyson galloped over to the table where Moji and Crystal were seated and positioned himself between their two chairs, his tail wagging furiously in anticipation of affection and food.

“Speak of the devil,” Crystal said.

“How’s my baby!” Moji said, bending over to cup Tyson’s head in her hands. He lovingly licked her face while she made loud kissing sounds.

“Ugh!” Crystal said, shivering in disgust, “I don’t know why you always let the dog lick you in the face! That’s nasty! The dog probably just got finished licking his ass!”

“Oh be quiet Crystal! He’s not licking me on the mouth. There’s no harm in letting Tyson kiss me on my cheeks and chin.”

“Like I said, that’s N-A-S-T-Y nasty!”

“I remember when we were little. You used to pick up those stray dogs that lived in the alley next to my house and hug them and kiss them like they was your own.”

“I was young and stupid then Moji. I have better sense now,” she said with a serious edge to her voice that made Moji frown. “Besides, you treat that dog better than you treat any man you’ve ever dated. As a matter of fact, you act as if that dog is your man!”

Moji freed Tyson from her love grip and sat up at the table. “Crystal, I don’t treat Tyson as some sort of boyfriend. I know full well that he’s just a dog.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes really,” Moji said, pouting.

“So, let’s see. We’ve already determined that you let the dog lick you wherever. Would you let a man lick your face?”

“Don’t be silly Crystal. Humans don’t show affection like that. At least not any that I know. But if I met a guy with a weird face-licking fetish, I might let him do it, if I knew him as well as I know Tyson.”

“Tyson’s a dog, sweetheart. You ain’t never gonna know him as well as you can know a man.”

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“That’s not true! Tyson and I are very close. He knows me almost as well as you do.”

“Really?” Crystal said, “What else? Ok, let’s see, you spend a ton of money on this dog, am I right? You buy him clothes, take him to the spa, and only feed him organic dog food, correct?”

“Yes, but—”

“Uh uh honey, I don’t want to hear it. Have you ever done those things for any man you have ever known?”

“Uh, no. But that’s not a fair comparison! Tyson can’t do those things for himself!”

“Yes I know honey because he’s a dog. Now, you tell Tyson all your deepest, darkest secrets, right?”

“Yes, but he’s a good listener and he doesn’t judge me.”

“Hmm, okey, dokey then. Does the dog get to see you naked?”

“Come on Crystal, that’s not fair! He’s a dog! He doesn’t care what I look like naked.”

“Uh huh. Last question. Does the dog get to sleep in the bed with you?”

“Only if it’s thunder and lightning. He gets scared.”

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I rest my case. Tyson the dog is Moji’s true love. All others are a distant second.”

Moji shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She picked up a piece of chicken and began to peel pieces from it, eating one and giving the next to Tyson, who sat obediently to her left.

“I see what you’re trying to say Crystal, I really do. But the love I have for Tyson is different than the love I have, or had, for the men in my life.”

“Ok, this is the part that I don’t understand. Why don’t you enlighten a sister.” Crystal grabbed a chicken breast out of the container and spun it slowly between both hands, searching for a place where she could bite more meat than batter.

“You should understand what I’m about to say because you’re married with two kids.” Moji finished the first piece of chicken then grabbed another. “The love I have for Tyson is a mother’s love, like the unconditional love a mother has for her child. I behave the way you describe with Tyson out of

that kind of love, just like I am sure you do with your kids. If I were to ask you the same questions you asked me but applied to your children, wouldn't you give the same answers I did?"

Crystal took a large bite of the chicken breast and chewed loudly while pondering Moji's question. "Hell no," she answered, pausing between chews, "I love my babies but they ain't never seen me naked, slept in my bed, or worn better clothes than me. They kids, damn it! They should be happy I feed them and let them sleep in my house."

"Girl, you crazy," Moji said, waving her chicken leg for emphasis, "you know you telling a lie. From the moment your babies popped out of your womb you loved them instantaneously and unconditionally because they were helpless and couldn't fend for themselves. That's a mother's or parent's love. On the other hand, you fell in love with your husband. The very term 'falling in love' implies something that happens over time and has some prerequisites."

"Yeah," Crystal said, talking between small rapid bites of chicken, "I had some conditions when I met Sam. Was he single? Was he fine? Did he smell good? Did he have a job? Did he want children? Yes to all of the above? Then, bam! I threw a net over him because he was the one."

Moji smiled. "I know you must have had more requirements than that. What about him being equally yoked, being baby momma-less, willing to commit to marriage, or not having a rap-sheet? None of those were on your list?"

"Yeah, all that stuff was on the list at first, but my search kept coming up empty so I had to make some adjustments. If Sam hadn't come along when he did, I was about to take 'he has to be black' off the list too. Let me tell you something girl, the good man market is tight so you can't afford to be too picky. You sit around waiting for Mr. Perfect, you might find yourself sitting by yourself. Think about Darryl. He ain't perfect, but doesn't he deserve some of the same love and attention you lavish on Tyson? A man likes it when a woman pays him some attention."

"So what you're saying is that I should lower my standards and just accept whatever man comes my way?"

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“No, I’m not saying that! All I’m saying is that we keep having this conversation over and over again and the only constant is your picky butt.”

“I am not being picky! I’m just being careful. I plan on getting married just once in my lifetime so he needs to be the right guy.”

“Moji,” Crystal said, with a discernible tone of annoyance in her voice, “You have dated at least ten ‘right guys’ since I moved to Houston! You have rejected all of them based on some trivial, and sometimes outright stupid reasons.”

“None of those guys were Mr. Right. I had legitimate reasons for ending all those relationships.”

“Legitimate reasons? Shit girl, you cray-cray! Let’s see, you broke up with Trevor because you thought he was immature. James lost out because he was Muslim and not willing to convert to Christianity. And poor Ervin got kicked to the curb because he had a receding hairline. Should I go on?”

“I admit that the receding hairline thing was a little petty but at the time I thought that was an indication of bad genes and I didn’t want to take the chance that our future children might be anything less than perfectly healthy.”

“Really? You concluded that you and Ervin’s potential children might be born with spina bifida because homeboy’s hairline started a few inches further back on his head?”

“No! I wasn’t thinking anything as terrible as that but, you know, I was thinking he just wasn’t a good candidate.”

“Uh huh. And what about Isaiah. What was wrong with him?”

“He was too lustful. All he thought and talked about was sex.”

“And Burt?”

“Two misdemeanors and a felony.”

“Kevin?”

“No job and not looking for one.”

“Henry?”

“Couldn’t carry a conversation.”

“Alex?”

“No ambition.”

“Donald?”

“He had mommy issues.”

“So that leaves us, let’s see,” Crystal closed her hands into fists and then began to count, extending one finger at a time, “that’s one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine perfectly acceptable brothers that you’ve run off for no good reason. Who am I forgetting? Oh yeah, I forgot about DeAndre. That makes ten. But maybe we should give Tyson credit for running off DeAndre. After all, he did try to eat his genitals.” She gave Tyson a big piece of chicken then patted him on the head. Tyson swallowed the meat whole, licked his lips, and stared at her longingly, waiting for more.

“I have faith Crystal. I’m willing to wait for the right man to share the rest of my life with.”

“Well, if you wait too much longer you won’t have much life left to share.”

“Crystal, that’s a horrible thing to say!”

“I’m sorry. But you know what I mean. You’re thirty-five years old. You ain’t getting any younger and the pool of available men is not getting any bigger. And if you want to have kids...” Crystal’s voice trailed off, leaving unspoken Moji’s fear of becoming too old to conceive.

“I still have time for children,” Moji said with confidence, “look at Halle Berry. She had her first child when she was forty-one years old and another one at forty-seven.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way because you know I love you like a sister, but you ain’t no Halle Berry. She had the resources to have children at that late age. And look at what she had to do to get a man. Homegirl practically had to stick a for rent sign in her vagina to get pregnant. I don’t think you want to go that route.”

“I know,” Moji said, her voice suddenly choked with emotion, “but I am so confused. I’m a strong, independent woman. I’m smart, I have a good education, I’m healthy, I have a great career, and people say I have a great personality.”

Crystal put Moji’s hand in hers. “Honey, you’re all that and more. I tell my baby Shannon all the time, look up to your Auntie Moji because she’s the kind of woman I want you to grow up to be.”

"Then why can't I find a man to love me for who I am? I try to be open-minded, you know? I want to accept people for who they are and not judge them based on some high moral standard. But it seems that the more accepting I am of them, the more critical they are of me, and the more they want me to compromise who I am for their sake. I'm not willing to do that Crystal, I'm just not!" Moji lay her head down on the table and began to sob.

"Moji honey," she said, speaking softly into Moji's ear while running her hand through the twists in Moji's hair. "Everything is going to be alright. You hold on to your high standards. When the time is right God will present you with a man that fits your criteria like a key fits a lock. You just have to be patient and not try to get ahead of God's plan."

"How long do I have to wait?" Moji said, her words barely intelligible through shortened sobs. "God has to know that I don't have too much time left before I'm too old to start a family."

"None of us can know God's plan for our lives. We just have to trust that He knows what's best for us." Crystal felt a sudden pang of guilt for giving Moji advice that she didn't believe herself, but she knew it would make her friend feel better.

"Well, I guess you're right," Moji said, dabbing the tears from her face with the sleeve of her bathrobe, "I am wonderfully made by God and I have to have faith that He will bring someone into my life that can see that."

"That's my girl. You'll see, everything will work out for the best."

"I hope so."

"No Moji, a woman of faith *knows* it will work out for the best."

"You're right again," Moji said, "I know it will work out."

"You bet your ass it will," Crystal said. She stood up and gathered the remaining biscuits and the container of mashed potatoes and placed them in the microwave. She pressed the keys for a quick reheat and pressed start. "Now tell me what happened today with Darryl. I thought you guys had a pretty solid relationship."

"I thought so too," Moji said, "but today he made it painfully obvious that our relationship was not what I thought it was."

## THE SCOURGE

The microwave beeped. Crystal removed the biscuits and mashed potatoes and arranged them on the table equidistant between herself and Moji. She retrieved two spoons from the utensil drawer. She gave one to Moji and used the other to stir the steaming mashed potatoes. “So basically, he showed his ass,” she said, plopping down in the chair and shoveling a heaping tablespoon of mashed potatoes into her mouth.

“Basically.”

“Well, run it down for me so I can decide whether or not to have him killed for messing with my best friend.”

Moji stared at Crystal in silence for several seconds. *Sometimes she says things with such seriousness that I can't tell whether she's joking or not.* Moji let Crystal’s comment pass, chalking it up to her friend’s weird and often morbid sense of humor. Bracing herself for the emotions she knew would follow, Moji swallowed a large helping of mashed potatoes, took a deep breath, and allowed the memories to tumble from her brain to her lips.

## 9

The radio barked for his attention, an insidious, two-tone warble that grated on Jack's nerves.

"Skip, come back," Rose said, "Come on Jack, answer the radio. I know you're listening."

It was a little after ten pm and Jack "Skippy" Flanagan sat quietly on the driver's side of Tex-Can Energy's bucket truck number twenty-seven eating his "lunch"—a jalapeno cheese burger with triple meat—from his favorite restaurant in the whole world, Whataburger. Still chewing his third bite of the sandwich, he wiped the grease off his chin with the sleeve of his shirt and tapped the talk button on the radio.

"Rose, I'm on my union-mandated lunch break. You know I don't have to report for at least another thirty minutes."

"I know you don't sweetie but we got trouble at Hermann Park and Cambridge and I wanted to catch you before you got out of the area."

"I'm not in that area," Jack said, hoping the lie would buy him more time with his sandwich, "I'm halfway across town."

"Not according to my computer. You're at Holcombe and Greenbriar. As a matter of fact, you've been there for some time, probably hiding out in the parking lot of the Whataburger."

Jack was a little miffed at being called out over the public channel where other people, especially management types, might be listening in. He hunched over the radio and barked into the microphone. "Like I said Rose, I'm eating my lunch, and I have the right to sit wherever I damn well please while I eat it." He let go of the talk button. There was no response. "Rose, did you hear me?" he said, "Dispatch, come back." Again, no response. The soft hiss of radio silence barely filled the cherry picker's cabin, but it made

more than enough noise to piss Jack off. Jack stabbed the talk button again, ready to unleash a full shift's worth of pent up frustration over the company airwaves—management be damned—when he felt the buzz of his cell phone on his backside. He shoved his hand into his back pocket and ripped the phone free. “Who the hell—Hello?”, he growled into the phone’s flat screen.

“Calm down Jack,” the voice said, “it’s me Rose.”

“Rose?” Jack said, confused, “How the hell did you get this number?”

“Karen gave it to me after she bought you that phone for Christmas. Said to call you every once and awhile so you’d learn how to use it.”

“My daughter’s a damn sneaky little brat.”

“She really cares about you Jack, and she worries.”

“Well, I don’t need anyone looking over my shoulder Rose. Karen’s my daughter not my mother so she should mind her damn business, and I damn sure don’t need dispatch preaching to me over the radio.”

There was an uncomfortable silence on the other end of the call. Jack thought he heard Rose crying, but the sound faded too quickly for him to be sure.

“I...I mean, I’m sorry Jack,” Rose said, straining to contain her emotions. “I could tell you were getting upset. I just didn’t want you to get in anymore trouble, you know. I figured you forgot that the company had put in those GPS trackers in all the bucket trucks.”

*Damn*, Jack thought. He had forgotten all about those stupid GPS trackers. And for the umpteenth time this year since his wife died and left him all alone, Jack had made a complete fool of himself. “I’m sorry Rose. I’m a damn fool.”

“No you’re not. You’ve just been through a lot. I understand. When my Albert died, I didn’t think I could go on all by myself. I felt so alone, so empty. If it wasn’t for the support of my close friends and family, I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

“Thank you Rose. Thank you for trying to be a friend to a stupid old fool like me.”

“Stop it, Jack. You’re a wonderful man who’s just going through a rough patch. Everybody understands that. Well, everybody that counts anyway. It’s

not fair that they make a man with thirty years of seniority pull third shift troubles. You deserve better than that.”

“Well, it’s not like I didn’t bring it on myself. I’m lucky to still have a job. Anyhow, third shift ain’t so bad. I get to spend a lot of time by myself, eat at my favorite establishments, and best of all, I get to listen to the sweetest sounding dispatcher in all of Harris county.”

“Oh stop it!” Rose said.

Jack could almost hear her smile through the phone. It made him feel good that his weak attempt at making amends was somewhat successful. He didn’t need to alienate one of the few friends he had left at Tex-Can. “Well, my lunch break is officially over. You’d better start talking to me over the radio or someone gonna think I’ve died out here.”

“You got it Jack. I enjoyed our conversation. Let’s try to have more of them, ok?”

“You’ve got a deal. Bye Rose.”

“Bye Jack.”

Jack disconnected the call. He felt a pang of guilt for succumbing to Rose’s attempt at a more intimate relationship. Though his wife Denise had been dead for over a year, Jack still hadn’t mustered up the courage to let her go. The radio crackled.

“Truck two-seven come back. Over,” Rose said, her voice settling back into its official capacity as third shift dispatcher.

“This is two-seven,” Jack said, trying to match Rose’s detached corporate tone.

“Please confirm rollout to Hermann Park and Cambridge to investigate outage.”

“Confirmed and rolling. ETA is 10 minutes.”

“10-4 two-seven. Talk to you soon Skip.”

“You got it, Rose.” Jack holstered the radio’s mic and cranked up bucket truck twenty-seven. The old engine coughed a couple of times in complaint then revved up to idling speed. Jack had enough seniority to warrant one of the new, fancier cherry pickers but he preferred the old models. *Well, I may*

*have to rethink that now that they're sticking those damn GPS units in 'em, he thought.*

He put the truck in gear and swung it carefully into stop-and-go traffic. *Everybody's rubbernecking, he thought, looking up at those stupid shooting stars instead of keeping their eyes on the road. Stupid rubberneckers.*

The weatherman said that the shooting stars—meteoroids he called them—were special, we won't see them this bright again for a hundred years, he said. There was a time he might have appreciated the specialness of the shooting stars. He reckoned that if Denise were alive he would have ventured out with her into the dark to gawk at the streaks of light in the sky. *Yeah, because she would have wanted to see 'em and she would have begged me to go with her because she wouldn't want to go by herself, and I would have grumbled some stupid objection but reluctantly agreed to go with her because, I would tell her, I didn't want her to be outside in the dark by herself. But in reality, even after twenty-five years of marriage, I still enjoyed her company. I loved the smell of her hair, the way her hips swayed when she walked. I loved listening to her talk, even when she was nagging me about something stupid. I loved her...*

The road blurred and Jack had to slow down. “Damn it Denise, I miss you so much,” he said, wiping the tears from his eyes.

He pulled a napkin from his Whataburger bag and wiped his nose. “Shit. Come on Jack, get yourself together. Denise wouldn't want to see you like this.” *Nope, he thought, Denise was used to tough guy Jack. The well weathered exterior, foul-mouthed, take no prisoners Jack Flanagan. The Jack Flanagan that fought with every healthcare administrator in the medical center until his wife was under the care of the best oncologist in the country. The Jack Flanagan that hocked everything he owned to pay for his wife's treatment when he found out that his company-provided health insurance—insurance that he faithfully paid the premium for over twenty years—wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. The same Jack Flanagan that, in the middle of his wife's very solemn funeral reception, knocked the snot out of that good-for-nothing union president who negotiated away his healthcare benefits so he and his minions could drive fancy cars and wear expensive wing tipped shoes.*

"Yeah," Jack said, "Denise loved her some old Jack Flanagan." *Denise took the old Jack with her to her grave, he thought. The new Jack is just a tired old lineman, exiled to the graveyard shift, waiting on retirement and a lousy pension. That is, if the union wing tips don't spend it on a yacht or some other bullshit before I can collect.*

He eased the truck onto Cambridge Street, turning on the truck's overhead strobes to compel other drivers to move out of his way. He could see the Hermann Park Drive intersection in the distance, all the traffic signals were blinking in unison and the street lights were dark for a quarter mile in all directions. Jack picked up the radio and fingered the talk button. "Dispatch, this is two-seven, come back."

"Two-seven, this is dispatch. Over," Rose replied.

*Rose is still in corporate mode, Jack thought. Probably for the best. Never know who's listening.* "Dispatch, I have a visual on the trouble. Looks like we got power out at the public works service feed for Hermann Park Drive and Cambridge. Is the line hot? Over."

"That's affirmative two-seven. The storm blew a tree into a primary line at Braeswood and Fannin. Second shift repaired it but a surge may have blown a few fuses downline."

"Yeah, sounds like we got a few popped fuses at the kettle. I'll have them back online in a jiffy."

"10-4 two-seven. Thanks Skip."

"It's a job. Somebody's gotta do it. Two-seven out."

The strobes were doing their job, motorists were moving out of his lane, allowing Jack to weave through the awkwardly parted sea of cars and make his way through the congestion. When he arrived at the intersection, he identified the utility pole where the electricity services were located and positioned the bucket truck so he could use the cherry picker to access the power equipment. He parked the truck as close to the curb as he could get it, but realized he wasn't going to be able to avoid blocking one lane of traffic. *Ok, here we go. Everybody's gonna go apeshit,* he thought.

He set the truck's brake then got out and placed his safety cones in the company mandated locations. Horns blared as drivers became aware the truck

was blocking their progress and they would have to merge into the already congested adjacent lane. Jack heard several obscenities hurled his way as irate motorists drove past his truck a little too close, their bumpers brushing the safety cones back a few inches.

"Hey!" Jack managed to yell as a large diesel powered pickup raced by, nearly crushing his toes. He felt the urge to chase down the driver and rip him a new one, but his better sense prevailed. *Too many gun-toting hotheads out here. I'll be damned if I'm gonna end up on a cold metal slab just because some dipshit is mad I made him fifteen minutes late for dinner.*

He fished his flood lamp from the truck's toolbox and shined it up the forty foot utility pole set in a grass covered patch about eight feet back from the curb. Three distribution transformers, each the size and shape of a small trash can, were lashed to the pole, perched on a metal platform about thirty feet up. He passed the flood lamp's light over the wires above the transformers, looking for the telltale signs of a circuit break. Sure enough, one of three expulsion fuses lay open, the gate holding the melted fuse hanging down and swaying gently in the breeze. *Yep, she's popped wider than a hooker's cherry*, Jack thought. He grabbed a new fuse from the truck's parts inventory. It felt substantial in his hands but looked cheaply made. Jack spun it around to read the manufacturer's tag. Near the bottom, stamped in small bold capital letters were the words MADE IN CHINA. "Figures," jack grumbled, "goddamn wing tips don't even buy American no more. Bastards."

He strapped on his utility belt, clipped the flood lamp and new fuse to it, and plucked his lineman's hot-stick and assorted attachments from the equipment bin. He was about to climb up into the cherry picker's bucket when he realized he wasn't wearing his hard hat. He went back to the truck's cab and grabbed it off the passenger seat. *Don't need the wing tips writin' me up again*, he thought as he adjusted the hat on his head. *Bastards always looking for a way to suck the dignity from a man's soul. They feed on it like leeches.*

He went through a quick mental checklist. Satisfied that he had everything he needed, he climbed into the bucket. His hands moved across the bucket's controls like a pianist playing a familiar concerto, thirty years of muscle memory swinging the bucket smoothly into position while he kept

his eyes locked on the mass of wire and equipment assembled on the pole. He rose smoothly toward the three transformers, slowly ascending until he was looking down on them, with a clear view of the bushings protruding from each one like a spout out of a tea kettle. *Those things are old*, Jack thought, noting the rust staining the gray transformer casings.

He shined his lamp on the single bushing at the top of the nearest transformer. There was a wet sheen around the bushing gasket where it penetrated the casing and entered the transformer's interior. *Damn thing is leaking oil. Bet these babies haven't been serviced in a long time*. Jack thought about calling in a service request to dispatch, but dismissed it. *Why create more work for myself? In a couple of months I'll be retired and this shit will be someone else's problem.*

He guided the bucket up a little further until he was level with the three fuse assemblies positioned halfway between the transformers and the primary transmission lines. Jack looked up to gauge how much clearance there was between himself and the lines attached to crossarms above his head. His thirty years of experience told him that he was perfectly safe, but he always felt uneasy around hot lines. *That's the devil's blood running through those high voltage transmission lines*, he thought, *and few men survive a taste of the devil's blood.*

He swung the bucket away from the fuse assemblies so that he was a safe distance from any electrical arcing that may occur when he re-closed the connection. He put the gripper tool on the end of the hot-stick then extended the eight foot fiberglass rod toward the gate holding the burned out fuse. As he manipulated the hot-stick, trying to grab the dangling fuse in the gripper teeth, Jack's mind wandered back to Rose. *She's a sweet girl*, he thought, *a few years younger than Denise and just as talkative and brash as she was, and Karen likes her, so I guess that's a plus.*

His daughter had been nagging him in her own sweet way that he needed to get out and start meeting people again. *And by meeting people, she means taking strange women out to dinner and then trying to get them to sleep with me.* Jack smiled at the thought of his timid and shy little girl attempting to have the 'sex talk' with her dad. *She sucks at being subtile*, he thought. Although, he

did have to give her kudos for coming up with the plan to give him a cell phone for Christmas under the guise of being in better communication with her and then giving the number to Rose. That sort of subtle manipulation was pure genius and so unlike Karen, but definitely right up his wife's alley. *She would have definitely approved of the plan.* He paused and looked skyward, *Denise, I wish you were here but I know you are in a better place now.* Again, his emotional response to the thought of his wife caught Jack off guard. He wiped a tear from his eye with the sleeve of his shirt. *Enough of that, Jack!* he scolded himself. *Lack of focus can get a man killed up here, time to get back to work.* He finally was able to get the burnt fuse locked into the gripper. He gently lifted it from the holder and, using a hand-over-hand motion, pulled the hot-stick toward him until he had the old fuse in his hand. He removed the old fuse from the gripper and inserted the new one in its place. *Now for the hard part,* he thought.

Again, using the hand-over-hand maneuver, he extended the hot-stick back out to the fuse assembly. He held the hot-stick outstretched with both hands, trying to get the new fuse inserted into the holder on the gate. He was having difficulty due to the gate's constant swinging. It also didn't help that the base of the new fuse did not fit easily into the holder. "Damn foreign parts," Jack said as he struggled to get the fuse seated. The muscles in his shoulders burned and the sweat on his palms were making his hold on the fiberglass rod slippery. *Anyone who had anything to do with making this piece of shit fuse can go straight to hell,* he thought. Jack gave up and pulled the fuse back into the bucket. The effort took a toll on Jack's old body. His heart was beating fast in his chest, his wrists ached, and he could feel his sweat-soaked undershirt sticking to his back. *Damn foreign parts,* he thought.

Though he hated to do it and it was against regulations, Jack figured he was going to have to get closer to the fuse assembly if he had any hope of getting this job finished before the end of his shift. He lowered the bucket until he was parallel to the transformer bank and no more than four feet from the fuse assembly. He could just about lean over and touch it. *Definitely a safety violation,* he thought, *would be just my luck that a supervisor would roll up right about now.* He hurried and secured the fuse in the gripper and leaned

the hot-stick out over the bucket. It was much easier to do now that he only had to play out about half the rod's length before it reached the fuse gate. Getting the fuse seated in the holder was still difficult, as it was a tight fit, but he was able to use both hands on the hot-stick as leverage to force it into place. *I'd hate to be the one who has to get that fuse outta there if it ever blows again.* He pulled back the hot-stick and switched out the gripper for a hook tool which would allow him to trap the gate portion of the fuse assembly and push it upward, so that the spring loaded mechanism at the top of the fuse assembly would close and lock the fuse into place. The thought occurred to him that he should reposition himself to the minimum safe distance before attempting to close the gate. *Screw it, he thought, the worst that could happen is that I get a few burn spots on my nice company shirt from the contact sparks.*

He used the hook to grab the gate and slowly pushed it upward until the fuse was just below the spring lock. He hesitated for just a moment, then closed his eyes and lowered his head, before slamming the fuse gate as hard as he could into the spring lock. A shower of sparks flew from the point where the gate made contact with the lock. Jack heard the transformers hum as current again flowed through them. He opened his eyes just in time to see the street lights along Cambridge street flicker to life. He looked down and saw that the traffic signals had stopped flashing and were once again operating normally. *Well, he thought, another job well done and no one around to thank me for doing it. Time to pack up, call it in, and head back to Whataburger.*

Jack had secured his tools and was leaning over the bucket's edge to make sure the boom was clear for his descent, when a bright light suddenly appeared in the sky.

"What the hell?" Jack said, as the object passed silently overhead, growing brighter as it plummeted toward the horizon. Jack tried to follow its trajectory, but the object grew so bright that he had to turn away and shade his eyes. Struck by momentary night blindness, Jack would not be privy to the spectacular display of night sky revealed to him in the last ten seconds of his life. Five seconds after the light faded, the meteor's shock wave jolted Jack off his feet, nearly catapulting him out of the bucket. The entire bucket truck rocked forward, hurling him against the control console. The bucket swung

forward, throwing Jack within two feet of the nearest transformer. Still blinded, he instinctively reached out to break his fall—and touched the transformer's metal casing. A quarter mile from Jack's location, the shock wave toppled an already storm and rain weakened oak tree. It crashed onto the primary transmission lines, initiating a massive power surge. Two microseconds later, the surge arrived at Hermann Park Drive and Cambridge Street. The surge flowed through the newly installed fuse assembly, vaporizing the fuse core and rupturing the fuse tube. Had the fuse continued to work as designed, Jack would have been bruised and a little shaken up, but he probably would have lived. Unfortunately for Jack, Tex-Can Energy's management, as a cost saving move, had opted to purchase fuses from a discount supplier in China. The fuses, made to the not-so-exacting specifications of a Chinese government bent on monopolizing yet another commodity market, were not constructed to deal with a surge of this magnitude. At the instant Jack was thrown toward the transformer, the surge current, looking for a path to ground, found one through the cloud of ionized gas from the ruptured fuse, through the fillings of Jack's teeth, down his arm, and into the canister of the transformer. 50,000 volts and over 900 amps of the devil's blood filled Jack's veins. He stiffened from the shock, the current superheated the fluid in his body, causing his heart and eyeballs to boil and explode, his skin to blister, and his clothes and hair to catch fire. The surge seared Jack's hand, fusing it to the transformer casing. Due to the small leak in the bushing gasket, the transformer was only about two thirds full with the mineral oil designed to keep its internal components cool. The electricity wound through the copper coils inside the transformer, causing the coils above the oil line to glow red hot. The heat rapidly pressurized the canister and it burst, spewing highly flammable mineral oil in all directions. The cloud of mineral oil surrounded Jack's lifeless body, still being held upright by the powerful current. His burning clothes and hair ignited the oily mist, engulfing him and the entire pole assembly in a ball of smoky black and red fire. The surge finally ended in a burst of blue-green light, traveling down the service line and shorting out the electrical panel that controlled the

## THE SCOURGE

streetlights and traffic signals within a quarter mile of Hermann Park Drive and Cambridge Street.

The shock wave caused a cascade of destruction to the city's electrical grid, damaging equipment and knocking out power for fifty square miles. Save for flashing traffic signals, the entire city went dark. The shock wave blasted the late evening commute into disarray as startled commuters lost control of their vehicles, causing pileups and fender benders on every major roadway. Plunged into a deep darkness that many of them had never experienced, motorists stumbled from their cars confused and terrified. Awaiting a first response that would likely never reach them, many of the injured and dying laid on the roadside, looking up at a sky ablaze with stars. But those at the intersection of Hermann Park and Cambridge bore witness to a different spectacle, as what was left of Jack Flanagan pooled into the bottom of the cherry picker bucket—a smelly pyre of plastic, cloth, and meat—dripping flaming clumps of oily debris and scorched bone onto the street below.