

REDEMPTION

A Journey from Tragedy to Triumph



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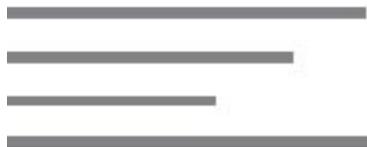
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CHAPTER



I was raised in a lovely section of South Jamaica, New York. The area was very culturally diverse. It was a community in every sense of the word; everyone looked after one another and cared about each other and the neighborhood. These were the times when you could be outside while your mom was in the house cooking or cleaning, and the neighbor would watch you. When you did something you weren't supposed to do, the neighbor could give you a smack on the behind, then bring you home, and you would get another one from your mom. I love that I grew up in that era. My earliest childhood memory is of my siblings and me riding on a sofa on the back of an old pickup truck, when we were moving into our new home. I was four years old. From the time I was born, we had lived with my maternal grandmother, so this would be our first home. It was as if I were asleep prior to this, and I was waking up and seeing the world for the very first time. The ride to the new house felt like an amazing adventure. The truck was loud and made a rumbling sound as we drove through the southeastern section of Queens.

My eyes were overcome by how enormous the sky was; I guess I never realized that before. It never ended. Every time we stopped, every turn we took, the sky just kept on coming along with us. It looked just like the ocean looks on television, clear blue and goes as far as the eyes can see.

All I could see were big white puffy clouds. It was so clear that it looked like I could just reach out and touch them.

Too young to know what I was feeling, watching my father and uncles load the truck felt the same way it felt the night before Christmas—when you

feel excited because you know something good is about to come, but you don't know exactly what it is. Even at that young age, I knew that this was something to be excited about. Pulling up to the house, my little tummy was tumbling like clothes in a washing machine, and my legs were shaking like two little worms on the end of a fishing rod, I was so ready to jump out the back of that truck.

It was a small three-bedroom house with a basement and a nice, quaint front and backyard. It seemed huge to me. The floors were bare wooden planks, and they creaked as we ran across them. There were only three little ones running around, exploring the new house, but it sounded like a stampede going through the house as we ran around, up, and down the stairs, going in and out of each room. We were having so much fun exploring the new house. The walls had faux wood paneling on them, and right along the wall of the living room was this huge steel radiator—they don't even make those anymore.

Once we got settled in and met our neighbors, I felt a great sense of comfort and even as young as four years old, I knew right then and there that this was home. Over the course of many years of hosting barbeques and parties, our house soon became the place to be for the entire family and some neighbors too. My parents were the glue that held the whole family together. It seemed like we had parties every weekend, but it didn't have to be any type of celebration. It was always just the family getting together.

My father loved music, and every Friday he would buy whatever the newest R&B or Jazz album that was out, and he would play music. Both sides of my family were very close because they all grew up in the same neighborhood. In fact, one of my father's sisters married my mother's brother, so we spent a lot of time together. My aunts and uncles and cousins would come over, and we would all hang out and have fun, laughing and dancing and spending time together. Weekends filled with music, my mother's famous fried chicken and family were among the fondest memories I have growing up in that house.

When I was pregnant with my oldest son, all my siblings were still living at home. They all pampered me, which was really nice. My mom would

cook any meal that I asked for, and my father would rub my belly and talk to it when he came home from work. My brother would go to the store for me and get whatever I wanted, and my sister would even polish my toenails for me because I couldn't reach them. Even after I had my son, they all had a hand in helping me raise him it was like a real village. That would always be home to me, even after I moved out.

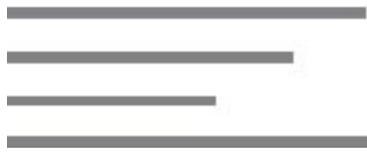
So, when my father suddenly passed away in 1995, spending more time with my mother allowed me to build an even tighter bond with her. My brother Malik would pick my son up from day care, so I would go there every day after work to pick him up, and sometimes I would stay on the weekends. I was a single mom, so it was important to me that my son had stability so even though I moved to the other side of town, I still allowed him to stay over there sometimes, and I would go pick him up in the mornings and bring him to school from there. Being there felt like putting on an old pair of pajamas—it felt cozy and comfortable. My family always made me feel supported and protected. Although I had technically lived somewhere else, that was still my home. That was my neighborhood—where I grew up, where I developed my swag, where I always felt safe. Until one night, when all of that would change, and I would never feel the same about the neighborhood again.

It was a cold night in late November 1997, one of those nights that people should enjoy their sleep and wander deep into their dream worlds. I was about to leave my mother's house to walk home. It was only about a mile and a half away. I had done it so many times that it was nothing for me to even think twice about doing.

My son was asleep, he was six years old at the time. My mother was also asleep. I just wanted to get home to check on my place. I had been at my mother's house for the entire weekend, and that night I just wanted to sleep in my own bed. As I was leaving, I walked past my brother Malik, who was lying on the couch watching TV, and he stopped me. "Where you goin'?" he asked.

"I'm goin' home," I assuredly replied.

“You gonna walk?” he continued. “Why you gonna walk, you wanna take a cab, I’ll pay for it.” It was about two-thirty in the morning. I said, “No, I’m good,” telling him I would be OK. It had always been OK. I had walked the same route at odd hours hundreds of times before. I looked back at him and walked out the door, disappearing into the early morning air.



CHAPTER



I was at a major turning point in my life. I was really struggling at that time. Nothing appeared to be going in the right direction—my life seemed as if it were falling apart. Being unemployed and not even being able to afford the basic luxury of a cell phone was really beginning to take a toll on me. I was on Section 8 and food stamps, and my mother was basically helping me to pay my bills and support my son. I did not want to become a burden in the first place, so I always felt uncomfortable about her doing so much for me.

Life has a way of humbling an individual's principles. It pushes you to one corner, and you feel as if cannot break free. You become extremely sensitive and selfless. I have always been independent, ever since I was a little girl and I never wanted to burden anyone with my troubles.

As I walked, I thought about where my life was going and what I was doing with myself, my twenty-eighth birthday was the very next week, and I was starting to get a little depressed. Long walks or rather walks, in general, have a way of allowing you to see a different perspective on things. Either they heal or compound some of your problems. It is like a self-evaluation exam.

As you walk, your legs drift into nothingness, and your mind wanders off into a state of either complexity or deep thinking. In my opinion, confusion is better than emptiness. At least you have variables to choose from; otherwise, you wouldn't be so confused.

It was cold. The old dark sky was perfectly clear, like a black piece of paper, and the air was eerily still. The tranquil, peaceful stillness of a

midwinter snowfall was nowhere to be found. Rather, it was tense and uneasy, like the moment right before the killer jumps out of the woods in a horror movie. It wasn't the kind of stillness that lulls you to sleep. It was the kind of stillness that makes you conscious and alert.

Under the cover of darkness is where some of the worst crimes occur. All I could hear were the sound of my footsteps and the sound of me breathing. I walked down 116th Avenue to Lincoln Street, and then I walked up to Linden Boulevard toward the Van Wyck Expressway service road.

As I walked past the gas station, I saw a truck drive pass me real slow. It felt a little creepy because I could tell the man looked right at me, but I didn't pay it any mind because there were one or two other cars that went by me as well going in the opposite direction. I started walking down the service road, and I got a funny feeling. I could feel something wasn't right, so I turned around to look behind me.

I saw that same truck pull over and park, again I didn't really pay it any mind, but I did start to walk a little faster.

As I got closer to Lakewood Avenue, where I would turn the corner, I felt a weird presence behind me, the kind that raises the hair on the back of your neck. I could feel my whole body getting tense. I wondered later if that's the way a deer feels right before the wolf rushes in and carries it away.

Panic quickened my heart rate, and as I pulled my coat closer, I picked up the pace. Everything felt wrong, but it looked normal. Was I being ridiculous? I'd been walking these streets alone for years at all hours, and nothing bad had ever happened. Why would tonight be any different?

Just when I was about to take a deep breath and relax, something told me to turn around again. When I did, the wolf spoke.

He was a tall, light-skinned black man. He was big too. He was at least six foot, two inches tall. And he was heavyset—not fat but chunky. He chuckled with a nervous, panicky giggle, like a man who knew he had evil intentions. His eyes were unfriendly. They were fixated on me as he looked straight into my eyes.

He said, “Oh, I didn’t mean to scare you, but I saw you walking, and I wanted to talk to you. Where you going? What’s your name?” He started to get closer to me.

“Monica,” I said, “and I’m going to my friend’s house. She lives right here.” I pointed to the house we stood in front of. I started inching closer to the house. It was dark inside, and there were no lights on at all. There were also no cars on the street; not one car passed us. It was quiet—a little too quiet.

The air was cold, but there was no breeze, no wind. It was as if time and the whole world stood still. My knees were shaking like my legs were made out of rubber bands. I felt like I was going to fall. I felt very nervous as I eyed my surroundings for an escape route.

I looked toward the other end of the street, but I knew the gas station was too far to run to, and the only thing next to us was the row of dark houses on one side and the entrance ramp onto the Van Wyck Expressway on the other. Either way, I was stuck. *This is not going to end well*, I thought to myself.

As he talked, he kept inching closer and closer to me. I kept backing up, trying to reach the stairs so I could run up and bang on the door of the house. He took a few steps closer to me. He was swaying, so I knew he was drunk. I smelled the strong stench of liquor on his breath, and I could see his eyes and his face very clearly now. That’s a face I will never forget. His large round eyes were glaring at me, partly bloodshot but fully aware. He stared at me like a bull getting ready to burst through the gate, and I was dangling the red scarf.

He had a round face, and his chin was large, with a large mass of his upper neck underneath it. He was sweating even though it was cold outside.

He kept asking, “Where you goin’? Where you goin’? Why you out so late?”

I didn’t say anything. I was too busy looking around to see how I was gonna get away from him. As he took more steps toward me, he backed me right up against the gate. It had a lock on it. I inhaled deeply; I knew I was

in trouble. I looked out to the street, but again, all I saw was the entrance ramp to the massive three lanes of the Van Wyck Expressway.

I knew I didn't have anywhere to go, and before I knew it, he grabbed me and grunted, "no, you coming with me," as he yanked and dragged me closer.

I tried to scream, but before I could get the sound "n_" out, he put his large hands around my throat, squeezing so tightly that I could hardly breathe. He told me to shut up, and while he was choking me, he lifted me straight up off the ground like a rag doll.

With his massive hand around my throat and my legs flailing around, he carried me to his truck, which was parked at the other end of the street and threw me in the passenger seat. I was paralyzed with fear. I wanted to move, but I couldn't. With tears streaming down my face, gasping for air, it hit me that I was going to be killed. I thought to myself, *Oh my God, I'm gonna die!* Panic, fear, and shock hit me like a lightning bolt to the chest.

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