

Chapter Two

Deacon

Byron's verbal jab yanked me out of my attempt to leave the past in the past. I slowed my strut and let him catch up with me as we trailed Candy toward his corner office. "Grow up, Byron," I said, just loud enough for him to hear. My stomach warming with anger, I nodded pleasantly at his secretary, convincing myself Byron would back off now. *Feel the flow*, I pleaded as we stepped into Byron's office, *feel the flow*. This was about Dejuan, not about my history with his principal.

Byron was a star offensive lineman at Kenwood, and the dude had the offensive mouth to match. There were days he seemed obsessed with ridiculing my stutter. In truth, he was the last person to define me as a stutterer, a walking punch line for his latest joke.

For the past twelve years I had successfully passed myself off as a normal speaker, to the point that I'd thought the shame and frustration of my youth had been banished to the rear-view mirror of my life. With that in doubt after my Fox News meltdown and my forced resignation, I had little patience for Byron's antics.

Dejuan sat perched in a low wooden chair opposite Byron's desk, his posture slumped and irritated. With his newly braided cornrows and wire-rimmed glasses, I barely recognized the child from my last visit a few weeks earlier. Lanky and lean, he had Candy's build but his broad nose and long eyelashes marked him as a Davis. As he coolly nodded our way, showing minimal respect while protecting his teenage pride, I realized that with his deep ebony complexion, my son resembles my father even more than I do.

Byron shut the door behind us, motioned toward the empty wooden chairs, and stepped over to the window behind his desk. Dark and overcast, the sky churned, ready to unleash a late spring thundershower.

“Now, let me just get this straight,” Byron said, turning toward us and flipping open a file on his desk. “Dejuan, this is your father? This man, Broderick Deacon Davis himself? The former all-American defensive back, the former Pittsburgh Steeler, the son of Frederick Douglass Davis himself?”

“That’s really beside the point,” Candy said, her voice just above a whisper. “We’re here to discuss ways to correct Dejuan’s behavior.”

Byron shrugged as if he had barely heard Candy and trained his eyes on me. “Still can’t believe this boy’s yours. What’re you doing in Atlanta again?”

“I’m executive director of the American Dream party, the same party my father used for his ’96 presidential campaign,” I said, acting like I hadn’t just written my own pink slip. “Before that, I ran the education reform programs for Communities in Action, at the headquarters office here in town.” I chose and phrased each word as if my life depended on it. I wasn’t losing control of my speech again. As a long-distance father, I knew I wasn’t a model parent to Dejuan, but the last thing I wanted was to sound like a stuttering mess in front of him. He didn’t need that humiliation any more than I did, least of all from Byron Collins.

Silence filled the room as Byron took a seat and tented his fingers. His brow wrinkling, he sized up my little makeshift family. The situation had to be killing him, because it was driving me nuts. “Well,” he said, snapping his suit coat more tightly around his broad shoulders, “we need to deal with Dejuan’s disrespectful treatment of his female classmates. I called you in, Ms. DeWitt, because based on Dejuan’s overall record at Jackson—his solid attendance, his slowly

improving grades, and his generally positive reputation among most teachers—I believe you’re doing some good work with him.”

“He didn’t learn any harassing language from me,” Candy shot back. “I’ve told him,” she said, placing a firm hand on Dejuan’s shoulder, “that if he gets written up again for saying something that *I* would smack a guy for saying to me, I’m smacking *him*.”

“Understood.” Byron looked at his desk before smirking at me suddenly. A new glint lit his eyes, one I recognized from our childhood. “Mr. Davis, is it possible Dejuan’s disrespect of women is based on your relationships with the opposite sex?”

He got me with that one, he got me good. Syllables tumbled over themselves trying to escape my lips. “What? Where d-did you get that from?”

Byron’s eyes were smiling, nearly winking though his lips formed a straight line. “We commonly see in these situations that boys act out in response to things they’re seeing in the home, Mr. Davis. I know you don’t live here, but I assume you spend regular time with Dejuan?” He trailed off, happy to leave an uneasy silence in the room.

My stomach cramped as I answered. “I haven’t seen much of Dejuan since I moved to Atlanta,” I said, my forehead dampening. “I’ve been working through some things on my own. B-but before I left, Dejuan stayed with me at least once each week.”

“Didn’t I hear that Dejuan lived with you for a time, back when you were with the Steelers?”

Now he’d really done it. I leaned forward in my seat, staring past Candy and making eye contact with my son, who quickly looked the other way. Abandoned, I stared back at Byron.

“Dejuan lived with me and my wife for a couple of years, yes.”

Byron folded his hands, looking at me as if searching my soul. “Was Dejuan exposed to a happy or unhappy marriage while living with you? You’re no longer with your wife, are you?”

“We’re d-divorced,” I said, sighing, “but Dejuan moved back with Candy for different reasons. Mercedes and I were happily married when he left.”

“I didn’t leave,” Dejuan said, his voice squeaking with annoyance. “You all sent me away.”

“D-Dejuan,” I replied, my cheeks warming, “you know you weren’t the problem.” I wasn’t going to take a walk down memory lane in front of Byron, but Dejuan’s attack caught me by surprise. I’d tried to protect him from all the drama that had split me from Mercedes, but I thought I’d made it clear he was not to blame.

“Mr. Collins, this isn’t helpful.” Candy glanced at our son like she wanted to touch him, comfort him, but knew she couldn’t. “I know this man,” she said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “He may not be perfect, but he’s a responsible father. Dejuan didn’t learn this behavior from Deacon.”

I leaned forward again, looking past Candy. “D-Dejuan, look, we’re going to talk about this later today. I know I haven’t b-been there for you lately—”

“Mr. Davis, you’re clearly flustered,” Byron said, interrupting. “It’s best in these situations to keep your wits about you and face the need for change. Dejuan does not act like someone raised to respect women. What would your father, rest his soul, think of all this?”

“What does my father have to do with this?” I nearly leaped out of my seat, sitting there poised at its edge. “You’re out of line, Byron.” Restraint peeled off me like a layer of dead skin. He had crossed the line with the reference to Frederick. In addition to being a failure at filling my father’s shoes professionally, was I really a failure as a parent too?

Before I could get another word out, Byron switched his focus to Candy. Questions flew left and right about her boyfriends, men in her life, things she might have done to cause Dejuan's behavior. Candy hung tough with him, but the fatigue in her eyes grew by the minute.

Sweat caked my underarms, and the pounding of my heart made me as good as deaf, in addition to being "dumb." Byron had to know what he was doing, needling me in a more sophisticated version of his locker-room taunts years before. *Get it out, Davis. Cat got your tongue, muthafucka? Duh-Duh-Duh Deacon, c-c-can y-you s-say your o-o-own n-name?* The taunts had flowed from the brother's mouth like Vesuvius, until I got my revenge.

It didn't take much creativity for me to sweep Byron's girl, Lajuana, off her feet. She'd always found me "fine," if the grapevine could be believed. One night after catching three interceptions that sealed our regional championship, I wrote her a letter on parchment paper professing my hidden, undying love. She'd probably bought it because we'd almost dated during sophomore year, until the news of Candy's pregnancy sidelined me.

When Lajuana read my letter, she dropped into my reach like low-hanging fruit. I left a pair of her panties and a bra nailed to Byron's locker during our next practice, and in the weeks of humiliation that followed, he wound up transferring to a school across town. I don't think he ever lived that down.

In hindsight, maybe I should have pitied the brother. My own life sat a stone's throw from disaster itself, but when I think back on how unprofessional Byron was that day, it's clear he had issues of his own. I should have let his nonsense roll off my back, walked out with dignity, and focused my attention on mending fences with my son.

I might have thought that way, if not for the rank disrespect cascading from Byron's tone. All I needed, as a newly unemployed man, one still stalked by the stuttering gremlin I'd dodged

year after year, was some basic respect. Robbed of that, I had only one way to claim it, and I took it.

Byron was still lecturing Candy when I stood and shoved my chair back. “Candy, Dejuan, excuse us. Mr. Collins and I need to speak in private.”

Candy clamped a hand onto my wrist and looked up at me with pleading eyes. Behind her, Dejuan stared at me with an intrigued smile.

“I’m alright,” I said calmly, gently removing her hand from me. I looked at my son. “Mr. Collins is your principal, Dejuan, and you will obey him. He and I need to straighten one thing out first, though.”

Byron popped out of his seat and strode to the office door. “Ms. DeWitt, Dejuan, please wait at my secretary’s desk.” He held the door open for them, a grim smile on his face, as I remained standing.

He shut the door behind them and walked right up to me, swaying back and forth. “What’s the problem,” he growled, blasting me with his musk cologne and tobacco-stained breath.

“Don’t put my son in the middle of unfinished business,” I replied, flexing my shoulders and taking a step forward.

“See, you got that sentence out nicely,” Byron said, a chuckle offsetting the threat in his eyes. “We’ll see how you handle the next one. Still haven’t licked it yet, huh Deacon?”

I wanted an answer for Byron as much as I wanted anything in my life, but I had no clue. No clue why my GrandDad stuttered worse than me for his entire life, while my father spoke with the eloquence of a Baptist preacher. No clue why I continued to struggle with the basics of

speech while my brother and sisters were some of the most articulate people I knew. I was clueless, a reality that punched me in the gut.

For some amount of time—twenty seconds, a complete minute, maybe even ninety seconds—I ignored Byron and let the past days’ events sink in. I was thinking about GrandDad.

Henry James Davis was the first person to acknowledge my stutter. “We’re different, you and me.” That was his loving warning to me at ten years old, as we stood picking fat, purple grapes in his backyard. When I looked up in confusion, he patted my head playfully, though he had a far-away look in his eyes. “Sometimes it’s hard g-getting words out, ain’t it?”

“There’s nothing wrong with b-being different, Deacon,” GrandDad continued, his eyes shutting as he squeezed my name between trembling lips. He knelt down so we were eye to eye. “Some of these Negroes out here don’t realize that, though. They think folk who talk like us are c-clowns.” He cupped my chin, raising my eyes to meet his urgent stare. “You may need a thick skin someday, little one. Just remember, you’re not normal, so don’t t-try to be. Be yourself.”

I wish I had been strong enough to absorb GrandDad’s advice, but the truth is when I started choking on words while answering teachers’ questions and butchering jokes by sounding like a broken record, I wanted nothing more than to be normal. If I were normal, I could introduce myself to my father’s famous and powerful associates without embarrassing him. If I were normal I wouldn’t have to run from the reporters who chased me with those dreaded microphones after each football game.

Determined not to be mocked for the rest of my life, I picked up a few coping tricks from my school’s speech therapist and began “passing” as a fluent speaker. In time, I developed a sixth sense for each stutter’s approach. In those moments, I adopted a new persona—the mysterious man of few words, the strong, silent type. For over twelve years it worked, but the

chase had finally ended in the hot glare of that Fox camera, and the world stood ready to judge me.

Byron interrupted my thoughts, and to this day I say he shares the blame for what followed. “Deacon, come on,” he said, tapping his watch. “We don’t have all day. I know you need extra time, but if you have something to say, spit it out.”

No respect. Just like Miriam and Errick. Just like I could expect from whatever companies I’d be begging for employment now.

Byron was still chuckling when I shot my right hand out and grabbed him by the throat. “You never learned, did you?” The words blasted out of my mouth, riding a torrent of raw anger. Lifting all two-hundred-plus pounds of Byron off his feet, I pivoted and slammed him onto his desk. His body rattling with shock, he stared back at me with wide eyes. He tried to say something but I couldn’t make it out through the gurgles of spit and mucus dribbling from his lips.

“What do I have to do, Byron?” I kept my firm grip on his neck, knowing that was my only hope of keeping him subdued. He had just enough air to breathe, but beyond that he was caught off guard and was too surprised to defend himself. I leaned over him, nearly touching his forehead with mine. “You should be a better man than this, still picking with folks like a schoolyard bully.”

“Sorry.” Byron croaked the apology out through crusty lips slimed with his own slobber. “Please, for God’s sake, Deacon, let go.”

I jerked my hand away suddenly and stepped back as Byron gulped for air like a fish out of water. I couldn’t muster a drop of regret. “Don’t say I never did anything for you.”

Hacking and wheezing, Byron pulled himself off the desk, grabbed his phone, and began dialing. “You’re fucked now,” he said, his eyes stabbing me as he held the receiver. “Yes, I’d like to report an assault.” He paused to catch his breath and let loose with another cough. “This is Byron Collins, principal at Jackson Junior High. The assailant is Broderick Deacon Davis . . .”

The metallic taste of shame in my mouth, I turned and flung the office door open. Candy and Dejuan were seated outside, just in front of Byron’s secretary’s desk. All three turned toward me immediately, their eyes full of fear.

I paused before them. “I-I’m sorry,” was all that came out. With nothing to add, I continued past them, bolting toward the main office door. Chairs rustled behind me as the secretary flew from her seat to check on Byron and Candy rushed after me. She was shouting by the time I was in the hallway, something like “don’t leave it like this!” I heard Candy’s shouts, felt her anguish, but like a drowning man witnessing an on-shore robbery, I was powerless to help her.

Chapter Three

Maria

When confronting new clients, I always start with the same sentence: *There is no cure.*

Now I know there are more sensitive ways to say this, especially considering the average stutterer wants me to snap my fingers, hand over a magic pill, or perform radical surgery to untwist his tortured tongue. And don't think I don't pray for the day when I can wave a magic wand. Until then, the cold truth remains. My clients have to earn every bit of fluency themselves.

There's no cure. Is that a cruel message? Come on. Is there a cure for life itself? I've got unsolved ills of my own. From the day I learned my daddy never wanted me and my mommy couldn't handle me, stubborn wounds have threatened my best impulses and sank my fiercest dreams. I'm still standing, mind you, but I'm not special. I just keep getting up, whether life knocks me down or I've KO'd myself.

I kept that image of life as a boxing ring in my head this afternoon as I rode to meet my brother, Thomas, for lunch. Since my '96 Grand Am was in the shop, I caught a ride with Ramsey Folger, the nationally renowned speech therapist who hired me two months ago. True to form, Ramsey had eagerly locked me inside his luxury Volvo.

"Maria, Maria," he said, sighing, his baritone melting into the car's leather interior. "I just realized I'm taking you to lunch with someone else. Who's this you have time for, when you've passed on every lunch invite I've made?" He looked over at me again, flooding me with

the full wattage of his smile. “I’d started to think the secret of your figure was that you just skip lunch altogether.”

“Oh Ramsey, I wish,” I replied, rolling my eyes and huffing playfully. I had addressed him as “Doctor Folger” for three weeks, until he threatened to fire me if I kept it up. “My weight has been stubborn as a two-year-old the past couple years.” Although I’m tall enough that my weight “looks good on me,” as the old folks say, I’ll never compete with Tyra Banks or Naomi Campbell. I plead guilty to being a “baby with back.”

Ramsey shook his head. “So you do eat lunch, you’re just dissing me.”

“Please! We did lunch as part of my interview process.”

“And not once since, in two months.” Coming to an intersection, he braked gently and gazed at me again, adjusting the collar of his silk shirt. “Who do you think you’re fooling?”

“I’m shy. Sue me,” I said, trying to sound flip but feeling my brow tighten as the Volvo’s dashboard clock flashed the time: 11:33. Thomas is frighteningly punctual. “You can’t fault a girl for having lunch with her brother, can you?”

“It’s a free country.” Ramsey chuckled as our light turned green and he sped past the neighboring cars. “Just know that I’ve got big plans for you, Maria. I not only want you to help me run this summer’s SRC, I want you to get every benefit you can from my reputation.”

The Speech Recovery Clinic, or SRC, was Ramsey’s annual intensive summer program for adult stutterers. Although he had spent most of his career treating children, Ramsey’s SRC had put him on the national map. Using a mixture of tried-and-true therapy techniques, innovative exercises culled from his own research, and good old-fashioned ass-kicking motivation, Ramsey had put nearly two hundred stutterers on the road to fluency, or a pretty effective imitation. On top of that, he trained each client—whether a college athlete, a medical

student, or a corporate executive—to go home and wow the local media with their improved speech and stories about the guru who’d made it all happen. Small wonder the brother had received hundreds of thousands in grant money, along with regular calls from regional and national media.

I kept the good doctor’s national platform in mind as the jangle of his gold wrist bracelet told me he was on the prowl. A second later, I felt his warm right hand rest on the knee of my linen slacks. With thirty thousand in school loans hanging over my head, I couldn’t afford not to have Ramsey in my corner, but the challenge would be keeping him out of my bed. At forty-two, Ramsey’s almost fifteen years my senior, but the brother’s not exactly a mud duck—short, sleek, and stylish, with high cheekbones and a well-groomed goatee, he reminds me of an aging Taye Diggs. Unlike the Taye in my daydreams, however, Ramsey is married with two teenage daughters.

I slid my knee away from his palm, smiling all the while. “That’s it up there, next block,” I said, pointing toward the Starbucks shop where I’d agreed to meet Thomas. I glanced at the dash clock again: 11:36. Six minutes late. This was not going to be fun.

“I’m familiar with this spot,” Ramsey said, grinning. He pulled to a stop right in front of the store and clicked his hazard lights on. “Maria,” he continued, placing a hand on the top of my passenger seat, “relax. Your face muscles are as tight as the skin on a drum. Don’t disrupt God’s beauty with all that stress.”

Feeling my eyes drop from his, I exhaled as Ramsey dropped his hand from my seat and gripped his gear shaft. “I’m fine, but thank you. I’ll see you after lunch.”

“You need a ride when you’re done, just ring my cell phone. I’ll be running errands nearby.”

I climbed out of the Volvo and stood with my back to the Starbucks for a second, watching Ramsey speed away and wishing I had time to check my look in a mirror. My boss had me worried now; I thought I'd looked fine a few minutes ago on campus, when I ducked into the ladies' room to check myself. I had pulled my coiled curls into a conservative bun for the day, foregone my favorite eye shadow, and outfitted myself in deep purple linen slacks, a matching vest, and a white short-sleeve blouse. I was a little more plain-Jane than usual, but today I had to meet Thomas's standards, not mine.

My brother stood in line, about six people away from the counter, when I walked through the front door. From behind, he cut an oddly striking figure: Five foot eleven, broad-shouldered, bald-headed, and dressed in a dark gray wool suit with well-shined leather shoes. He stood amid the usual Emory crowd of students, academics, and peaceniks, looking tense and out of place. A fish out of water, he gave off a vibe as corporate as it was stiff. I inhaled deeply and sidled up to him, touching a tentative hand to his left elbow.

"There you are." He looked at my hand on his elbow just long enough to convince me to remove it, then gave me a quick "side-arm" hug. He'd snatched his arm back off my shoulder before I realized he'd even touched me. "I was starting to think I had the wrong date or time, little sister."

"No, you had it right." I planted my feet next to his and played at studying the menu. Did I owe an explanation for my late arrival? I knew Thomas wanted one.

We stood in silence, hemmed in on every side by the shouts of completed orders coming from behind the counter, the aimless conversation of fellow customers, and the sidewalk traffic waiting outside the opening and closing door.

In seconds the silence got to me. “I got hung up on a case review at work,” I offered, playing with the silver locket around my neck as I spoke. “I’m meeting with a new client this afternoon and had to review his application. When I looked up from my desk it was almost eleven-thirty. I got over here as quickly as I could.”

“That’s why I always show up early for engagements,” Thomas replied, his eyes still on the menu. “We could have just met over at the house next weekend, Maria, like I said.” He had only agreed to this meeting after I insisted we fit something in this week. Though he lived and worked out in Stone Mountain, he had agreed to meet me since he was in the area, on his way to the airport. “Meeting today was tough for me. Clearly it was a strain on you, too.”

I let his little rebuke go and made small talk while we ordered. Thomas was handling business as usual on his job, where he was global manufacturing director for a large Coke supplier. His wife, Lucille, didn’t work, but had her hands full decorating their new home and keeping up with their “adopted” son, Jamil.

In a few minutes we had picked up our food, a Café Mocha and raspberry Danish for me and a large decaf and chocolate chip muffin for Thomas. We grabbed the only open seats and settled into the small circular table.

“Lucille wants to have you over for dinner, by the way,” Thomas said suddenly, before taking a long pull from his coffee. “When I get back into town Sunday night, I’ll call you, and we’ll figure out a time.”

“What about you or Jamil?” I tried to coax a smile from myself, let my lips spread. Thomas was my only living adult family member, but it was Lucille who wanted to have me over? My sister-in-law is a perfectly sweet, traditional lady with whom I have no qualms, but

the girl's not exactly my soul mate. I preferred the idea that Jamil had suggested the invitation, but I knew Thomas would never admit that.

"Well, of course Jack and I both want to see you, too," Thomas replied, chuckling faintly and fondling his coffee cup. "It's just that Lucille runs the household, so all invitations come through her."

Dialing up my response, I edited the Georgian lilt out of my words; it was a reflex action whenever I was with Thomas, who had long ago shed his. "I would love to come over soon," I said. "Once you and I come to an agreement, we'll all be spending more time together anyway."

Thomas pulled his hands away from his cup, straightening his back. "An agreement about what?"

"Thomas, I couldn't wait any longer to tell you. I'm ready to tell Jamil that I'm his real mother. I want a more active role in his life."

Thomas cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair, throwing one leg over the other. "Go on."

"I don't want to shake things up all at once," I said with a strained smile. "You and Lucille have done a wonderful job raising him, and you will always be central to his life."

Thomas's eyes grew colder, more opaque. "Go on."

"You know I have my master's degree now. By the time I finish running this nationally renowned clinic with Dr. Folger, I'll be ready to get certified and write my own ticket. By this time next year, I could go into practice for myself."

"Go on."

"I have my act together. I plan to get a house next year, something with a decent-size yard and in a safe neighborhood with kids Jamil's age."

Thomas finished another sip of coffee, then held up a hand. “Do you want to compare the house you have in mind with mine, Maria?”

His smart-ass question popped me out of “professional” mode. “I ain’t competing with you,” I said, hearing a touch of my accent return as my chest grew pimply with goose bumps. “I’ll never make two hundred thousand like you, but I’ll be able to provide very well for any children I raise.”

“And you want to raise Jack.”

The clamp on my emotions popped open. “Stop calling him that!” I rooted my eyes to my brother’s. “Jamil is still my son, and I never agreed to a legal name change.”

“You see, right here,” Thomas said, his voice filling with gravel as he shoved his coffee aside and began tapping the table with a long index finger. “This is why you’re still not ready to raise your son, Maria. What businessman in his right man is going to hire a ‘Jamil’? You might as well stamp the word *ghetto* on his forehead. You’re an academic, haven’t you heard about the recent employment studies? Résumés with ethnic-sounding names get tossed!”

A familiar wave of nausea swept me as I stared back at Thomas. “That’s what I named him, and since you’ve never made the name change official, his name is still *Jamil*.”

“What the hell were you thinking anyway, coming up with that name? Mee-Maw probably stuck a fist through her coffin when you stuck that child with ‘Jamil.’ We have called him Jack since the day you dropped him on our doorstep, and that is what he answers to now.”

“That doesn’t make it right.” I let my words hang in the air for emphasis and wiped a tear from my eye. “You don’t think I know Jamil loves you and Lucille? I see it in his eyes every time I go over to your house. I respect that.” It was true, even if there were nights I

prayed Jamil would show more interest, more curiosity, more *something* in me. I longed for the day when he would ask me why we looked so much alike.

Not my baby, though. Jamil, who wears my clear, rich chocolate complexion; my wide, brown-gray eyes; and his father's button nose, loves Thomas and Lucille to death. In his young mind and safe little world, they are unquestionably "Mommy" and "Daddy."

I inhaled slowly, picturing myself in the sanctified calm of my yoga studio. "I do want him back, Thomas, okay? I want him back with me, full time, all the time. But I know better than to expect that right now."

"So what is your point?"

I started to pull at my locket again, the closest thing to a family heirloom I've got. "In addition to letting him know the truth, I want to start spending time with him again, that's all. Let me keep him one weekend a month. Or, what if I just have him for a week or two this summer? I can take several days off and take him camping, to the zoo, maybe take in a Braves game--"

"Jack's seven years old, in case you've forgotten. He's just started playing tee ball, he's not following professional teams yet. Camping? He hates the outdoors. He's a very intelligent, bookish boy."

"You make him sound like you." I knew my tone was dismissive, knew I was headed somewhere I shouldn't go, but pain had gripped my soul and forced my lips wide open. "He's not, Thomas. You do realize that, don't you? A history lesson: You and Lucille can't have kids. That was why I let you raise Jamil in the first place. But we agreed it would be a joint effort. That's all I'm asking for."

Thomas's head had dipped momentarily during my tirade, but he recovered quickly. "Very easy for you to be smug now, isn't it? You weren't so cocky the night you brought a three-month-old child to our door, crying about that sorry-ass nigger that knocked you up."

I felt familiar drops of rain splash onto the top of my head, ping off my shoulders, and sprinkle my nose, the way they had the night I carried a blanketed, squealing Jamil up Thomas and Lucille's driveway. I gripped the table's black lacquer, so strong was the recall of that moment. I could go days sometimes without it crossing my mind, then lose a complete night's sleep reliving it.

I could barely see straight that night. I had broken my pledge again, stopping by a convenience store on the way home from Jamil's sitter's house. First there had been my latest migraine headache, then Jamil's colic, then my boyfriend, Guy McCutcheon, made the day a hat trick of nightmares. A late-morning phone call from his probation officer confirmed that I was on my own with this parenting thing.

"I don't know when his ass is getting out this time," the raspy-voiced, older white man had said candidly. "First he's carting heroin around, then he has the nerve to pull a gun on the arresting officer? Don't plan your life around him."

I returned from Jamil's sitter that afternoon, placed my screaming baby into his shabby crib, and emptied a six-pack of beer, one can following right behind the other. My fourth "fall" in three months of motherhood, after staying clean and sober throughout an unplanned pregnancy. I had loved Jamil enough to abstain while he was inside me; once he was out, though, my resolve had gone bye-bye.

That hard truth drove me to Thomas's in a huff, self-disgust oozing from my pores. I needed time to get *me* together. Young and dumb, I pictured a day would come when Thomas

would give me my baby back, once I finished school and at least hid my demons as well as he did. Seven years and I was still waiting.

Thomas scooted closer to me, leaning across the table and masterfully keeping his voice low. “What did I tell you, Maria? We would help out, keep you from having to drop out of college, but in return we would raise Jack as our child.”

I tasted the bitterness of my own tears as Thomas continued.

“We’ve held up our end of the deal. You’re the one breaking it by making demands now.” His seat creaking under the shifting of his weight, Thomas stood. “You’ve finally made some strides in life, little sister. I suggest you don’t throw them away by complicating your life with a lawsuit. I will not let Lucille’s heart be broken by your attempts to steal Jack away.” He looked down the bridge of his wide nose at me, as if he could squash me with his shoe. “Don’t forget, unlike us you can always have more children. You think very carefully before we talk again.”

I reached for words and found none as Thomas whipped past me, then out the front door. Sitting there, a shaft of sunlight painting my face through the window, I blotted my tears with a napkin and shut my eyes, picturing our grandmother, Mee-Maw. My angel.

Mee-Maw raised Thomas and me a few miles west of downtown in her wood-framed, two-bedroom house. Raised us as long as she could, at least. She died when I was in seventh grade, as the combination of her diabetes, hypertension, and kidney failure caught up to her.

Tall, stooped, and hobbled by a bad foot, Mee-Maw always pushed us to crawl out of the hole life had pitched us into. Her daughter, Rosie, who had abandoned me and Thomas shortly after my birth, hadn’t been heard from since leaving Atlanta to flee robbery charges, and our father (or fathers, if you believed neighborhood gossip) was a complete mystery. I had my own

reasons to suspect he had been an Afro-Cuban, but they weren't based on any birth certificate. The closest thing I had to a piece of him was my locket, a triangular piece of silver emblazoned with what Mee-Maw believed was the image of a Yoruba priestess. It was a gift from my father to my mother, one she had left behind.

If not for Mee-Maw, the truth is Thomas and I probably wouldn't even be in touch today. "Even iffin' it's only half a bloodline," she had said once in a nod to the rumors, "it's more than you'll have with anyone else you meet. Stay true to each other." The fact we had even met today showed Mee-Maw's words hadn't gone totally unheeded, but in our own way, Thomas and I had spent the years since her death fleeing our shared past. Far as I could see, my brother had morphed into a robot—brilliantly rocking his intelligence and living the privileged life we'd never experienced as kids, but shutting everyone other than Lucille and Jamil out of his inner life. Especially me.

Who was I to judge, though? While Thomas had drowned his abandonment in textbooks and computer screens, I had turned for comfort to Guy, a spoiled, drug-soaked mess who hadn't seen his son since Jamil was a few weeks old.

What I didn't understand was why I had to keep paying for my sins, while Thomas went his merry way transforming my son from Jamil into "Jack." I had paid my dues, hadn't I? Made my way through college and grad school. Networked my way into assisting a leader in my field. What else remained? What would make me worthy of getting my child back?

You can always have more children. Thomas made it sound so simple, but unlike him, I had no Lucille, no solid partner waiting to help me raise a new life. Plenty of brothers I knew would gladly help me manufacture a baby, but I'd be on my own for the rest of the journey. I'd

learned the hard way that I couldn't handle the pressures of single motherhood; with Jamil, I'd nearly repeated the cycle Rosie began with me and Thomas.

I'd seen enough in life to throw away my rose-colored glasses. Forget love; I had to get my career on solid ground, prove that I'd earned the right to reveal my identity to Jamil. I couldn't waste precious energy searching for a soul mate that clearly didn't exist anyway. Two years I'd been celibate, and I'd stay that way for five more before messing with someone who might threaten my ability to bond with my son.

I stayed there in my seat at Starbucks, losing all concept of time. There'd be no new children for me. I just wanted the one I already had.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Was Deacon's employer, the American Dream party, right to remove him from his job? Should he have fought them and sued for discrimination? Why or why not?
2. Do you know anyone who stutters? Why do you think they stutter? Would you hire them to work for you? Why or why not?
3. When Deacon felt disrespected by his son's principal, how should he have handled the situation? Have you ever had a tense meeting with your child's teacher or principal? How did you handle it similarly or differently from Deacon and Candy?
4. Maria gave Jamil to Thomas because she feared she'd be as unfit as her own mother had been. When she couldn't get her drinking under control, did she make the right decision by giving Jamil away?
5. Once she gave Jamil to Thomas and Lucille, should Maria have insisted on being up front with Jamil about her identity from the start? Why or why not?
6. Because Deacon's stuttering was relatively mild, he managed to hide it during most of his young adult life, until it caught up to him. What types of secrets have you attempted to hide from others, until circumstances forced you to be open about them and seek help?
7. When Deacon and Maria were nearly caught in their affair at the clinic, should they have just confessed? Why or why not?
8. Discuss Deacon's father and Deacon's evolving view of him. Was Frederick just another "failed" black leader or a sincere hero with a few human flaws? How have your own views of your parents shaped your life?
9. Should Maria have even entertained filing suit to get custody of Jamil? Was she right to blame herself for Guy's reappearance and kidnapping of Jamil?
10. Why do you think Deacon's marriage to Mercedes didn't work out? Should he have considered her offer to reconcile?
11. What do you think of Deacon's mother and the ways she walled herself off from her family, after Frederick's death? Was she just protecting herself, or being selfish?
12. Considering the many ways he tried to help her, could Maria still maintain a working relationship with Ramsey?
13. Was Maria right to meet Guy and Jamil on her own, without Deacon's help?

14. Why do you think Deacon's pending marriage to Maria will be more successful than his first? Or, why not?
15. Should the truth about Frederick Davis's death ever be revealed? Would it help or hinder the leaders like Perry Hooks, who are trying to follow in his footsteps?