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Ones Like Us

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***ONES LIKE US***

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# ***ONES LIKE US***

***A Novella by Keonya Booker***

## CHAPTER 1

Is rain on the day of a funeral a blessing or an omen? Kellie couldn't remember what her Grandma Geneva had told her years ago. She tugged at her pantyhose (*God, I hate these things she thought*) and peered out the window of her cousin Michaela's bedroom. Nearly pitch black voluminous clouds seemed to skim the tops of the fir trees planted on the front lawn. A rumble of thunder in the distance made Kellie realize that, blessing or not, rain would definitely be in attendance at her mother's funeral.

A loud tap at the door startled her. "Kellie, are you ready? We have to leave soon. Ma, said the service starts in less than an hour," Michaela shouted from the other side of the door.

Kellie grimaced at her reflection in the mirror, the wad of coffee colored nylon trapped around her knees. "Can you come in for a minute? I need help."

Michaela, who as of her recent foray into the popular clique at school suddenly liked to be called "Mickey" for short, bounced in the room. "What's up?" she commanded with a sigh. She looked down and pinched her nose. "Girl, I forgot how much of a tomboy you are. 'Hose, dresses, and makeup just aren't your thing, are they?" she smiled.

Kellie grunted shifting from one foot to the other. She felt like she was in a one-legged sack race at the state fair. "Just help me, please."

"Alright, alright. Roll them back down." Mickey reached for the nylons. "Watch me. You start here." Mickey began gripping the pantyhose between her thumb and forefinger. "You start at the bottom and ease them up. Unrolling a little bit each way. See what I mean?" she said doing her best Vanna White impersonation. "You can't put on pantyhose like you do your track shorts," she finished with a sly wink.

Kellie stared back at her cousin and rolled her eyes. "Dope. Tell Aunt Bernice I'll be down in a minute."

"Whatever you say, lil' one. Just don't stick your finger through your 'hose and get a run in them. You're already wearing my best pair," Michaela smirked and left the room.

Although she was only fourteen months older than her, Michaela treated Kellie like she was the baby sister while Michaela was the resident boss of “The Crew.” The Crew was a group of five teen girls who spent too much of their time downloading music, blowing their parents’ money at the mall, and scoping out guys. Despite the obvious fun that Mickey’s crew relished, Kellie wasn’t really into that scene. She would much rather spend an afternoon jogging through a nature trail than dropping four weeks of her allowance on a pair of *Juicy* jeans.

Regardless of Mickey’s insistence that Kellie “stop being a loser and get with The Crew program,” the two cousins were the best of friends. In fact, the only other person Kellie was even remotely as close to on Earth was her mother. But now she was gone.

Growing up, Kellie always wanted to be the spitting image of Michaela. At 5’4” and a taut 130 pounds, Michaela had what guys call a *thick* body. She had curves and a very womanly shape. *I get that from our Grandma Geneva, you know, Michaela once told Kellie while shopping for Homecoming dresses. Grandma G said I was...what do they call it? Oh, yeah. Stacked. That’s what I am. Stacked.*

Michaela’s skin was always clear and fresh, with a buttery caramel hue. Her eyes were so dark, you would swear you couldn’t tell where the pupil started and the iris ended. Her hair, just as dark yet thick and bouncy, was cut in a chin-length bob. When Kellie would go places with Mickey, or anyone else in her family for that matter, people never believed they were related. Kellie resembled none of the women in her family. At 5’10” and still growing, Kellie was decidedly tall and lanky. A far cry from the petite stature of her mother Lola, Aunt Bernice, and cousin Michaela. Kellie was athletic and certainly did not inherit the Rubinesque figure of the women on her mother’s side of the family.

With her size 11 feet and mile high legs, Kellie was destined to be a runner. Kellie’s skin was smooth in texture, but uneven in color. Kellie’s mother called her a lightly tanned butterscotch lollipop with bits of russet. Her eyes were a mix of gray and brown. Not quite hazel, but a very close imitation. Peppered across her nose and cheeks were clusters of cinnamon colored freckles that darkened around this time

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every summer. About the only thing Kellie did inherit from her maternal ancestors was a bubble butt, which looked simply ridiculous on an otherwise stick-like physique.

Kellie smoothed her dress with her right hand while pulling a reddish brown curl out of her eye. *I hate my hair. I wish I could just cut it all off.* She went to her suitcase and pulled out a bottle of crème hair dress and rubbed it through her unruly hair which tentatively became more manageable with the application of the salve. Looking down at the disheveled suitcase, with pants, shirts, shorts, and shoes spilling out, she thought, *I love my Aunt Bernice, but I'll be glad when I get to go back home.*

Kellie walked down the steps into her Aunt Bernice's family room adjacent to the large eat-in kitchen. Before she reached the last step, she heard the myriad voices fill the room. It wasn't quite 9:00 a.m. and Michaela had already jumped on her cell phone, probably talking to Kyle, her latest love interest. Tyrone Junior was on the floor playing an intense game of X-BOX, completely oblivious to what was going on around him. T.J. was the typical 10-year-old younger brother, annoying yet randomly sweet at the same time. Mickey's father, Uncle Tyrone, was sitting on the couch reading the morning paper. "Naw, Bernice I don't see the obit—" He stopped midsentence when he saw Kellie appear. Uncle Ty quickly dropped the paper, stood, and adjusted his tie. "Hey there, how's my second daughter?" he said walking over to her, arms outstretched.

Kellie did feel her Uncle Ty was like a father to her ever since her mother moved back to Virginia shortly before Kellie was born. He reminded her of a younger, chubbier Danny Glover. Uncle Ty spent a lot of time with Kellie talking with her, telling her how a man ought to treat a woman, the best way to shave extra seconds off her running time, and how to make a delicious ham omelet. All of the things, and more, she missed from her real father. Kellie shored up a half-smile. "I'm fine, Uncle Ty. I'm just ready to go and get this over with." Suddenly, Kellie and Uncle Ty were jarred by a piercing shriek from the kitchen.

“Carl, why do you do this every time? I asked you yesterday to pick up Mama from the rehabilitation center and you said yes. Must you act up every single chance you get?” Aunt Bernice wailed.

“What’s the problem, baby?” Uncle Ty asked, releasing his embrace of Kellie and leaning into the banister.

Aunt Bernice held the cordless telephone out away from her ear. “My trifling brother, *once again*, is flaking out at the last minute,” she cried, half in response to Uncle Ty’s question and half as a scolding to Uncle Carl. She brought the phone back to her ear. “*You know what...*,” she began. Kellie grimaced at the sound of the battle cry. Nothing good ever came when Aunt Bernice said those three fateful words. She eased out of the line of fire and sat on the couch with T.J., perfectly out of earshot and the ensuing sibling fight.

“We’ll do it, Carl. Just never mind. But I know this much, your worthless tail better be at the church on time. For real. Ain’t nobody up in here playin’ with you.” She slammed down the phone and glared at Uncle Ty. She softened at the look of concern on her husband’s face as he walked toward her. “Why baby? Why of all days?” she lamented, a small tear welling up in her left eye.

Uncle Ty gave her one of his famous bear hugs that made you feel safe and secure all at once, but at the same time like your insides were sitting on top of each other. “Don’t worry, honey—I got this. I’ll go get Mama Geneva and meet you at the church.”

“Thank you, sugar.” She kissed him lightly on the cheek. “You know how I hate funerals. I can’t believe she’s gone. This is such a hard day.”

“I know, sweetness. I know,” Uncle Ty continued to squeeze her close.

Kellie noticed that a look of worry crept onto Aunt Bernice’s face. She heard her say, “Do you think we should tell Kellie about...you know?”

After a brief moment of hesitation, Uncle Ty replied, “It might make her more upset if we do it now. Let’s wait until after the service, okay?” With a slight nod from his wife, he lifted his keys from the kitchen table and left through the back door.



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Kellie watched her Aunt Bernice finish up the breakfast dishes. *She looks so much like Ma she thought.* Their shapes resembled the petite voluptuousness of their mother, Grandma Geneva, but all three children, especially Uncle Carl, looked like their father, Kellie's Grandpa Louis. In fact, when you look at Michaela and T.J., they favored Grandpa Louis, too. When Kellie looked in the mirror all she saw was a mix, a blending of two worlds, cultures, and races. Neither one more pronounced than the other, but enough of both to be obvious.

Both Shaw sisters had short thick hairdos, Aunt Bernice's slightly longer in the back. Growing up and getting a date with the beautiful Shaw sisters was the crowning glory of many young suitors in Hampton, Virginia back in the day. *And they even act the same Kellie thought.* Although they were small in stature, the sisters were feisty and outrageously extraverted. Kellie recalled how often her mom would flip out on her one minute and be sensitive and sweet the next. That prickly devotion was one of the things she would miss most about her.

Aunt Bernice was four years older than Lola, but Kellie always thought Aunt Bernice looked like the younger sister. Kellie attributed her mother's tired countenance to working a grueling seventy hours each week. Lola's days were spent working as a baker in the local doughnut shop and nights as a 911 dispatcher. Cooking was Lola's passion, another trait inherited from Grandma Geneva. Kellie could remember Sunday dinners at her grandparents' house. There would be so much delectable food you wouldn't need to eat for days afterward. You were so full of crispy baked chicken, deep fried catfish, creamy macaroni and cheese, zesty collard greens, mouth-watering cornbread, spicy Hoppin' John, and scrumptious chocolate pound cake, you could survive for seven days on one night's rations. Kellie's mom always had dreams of owning a bakery, but it would not happen. Lola never finished college, which is a big reason why she always insisted on Kellie finishing school.

As Grandma Geneva would say, *Bernice did well for herself.* She was right. The lovebirds were a good mix—Uncle Ty's mellow demeanor evened out Aunt Bernice's southern sass. Uncle Ty was a bank manager at one of the largest financial institutions in the country. Aunt Bernice had a part time seamstress business that she ran from out

of their home and what a home that was. Their house was located in a beautiful suburban complex in Hampton, ten minutes from the University. They lived in one of those “cookie-cutter” gated subdivisions. Mickey called it *Pleasantville* meets *The Cosby Show*. All the houses were practically identical: two-car garage, sprinkler systems, four sprawling bedrooms, etc. These houses were a far cry from the loud and cramped two-bedroom apartment Kellie shared with her mother on the other side of town.

Bernice and Ty were high school sweethearts but did not marry until after they both finished their degrees at Hampton University. After two miscarriages, Michaela was born and then T.J. As Michaela was entering her senior year of high school in two months, Uncle Ty and Aunt Bernice both tried earnestly to get her to apply to their beloved local alma mater. Michaela had other plans, namely going as far away from home as possible. Aunt Bernice nearly fainted when Michaela mentioned Florida A&M University, the University of California at Los Angeles and Temple University. *What’s wrong with Temple? Lola used to say. That’s where I went to college before I had my blessing.*

Blessing. That is how Lola always referred to Kellie. Always a blessing never a mistake like some might have perceived her getting pregnant as an undergraduate. Lola was only twenty when she gave birth to Kellie. She was beginning her junior year at Temple and between classes, financial problems, and the stress of a new baby, Lola dropped out and moved back home to Hampton. At least that is what Kellie was always told. Grandma Geneva and Grandpa Louis were devastated. They wanted another college graduate and Lola told them she would eventually return, but she never did. Lola took a few classes here or there at the local community college back in Virginia, but still had almost two years of credits to make up. With a small child to care for and bills to pay, college took a permanent backseat role.

Aunt Bernice bounded into the room taking off her apron. “T.J. cut that off for the millionth time, please. Michaela Lorraine Benson, get off the phone before your ear melts. Go get your umbrellas...it looks like a storm is coming. Go on now.” She let out a big sigh then, upon seeing Kellie, replaced her frown with a wide smile. “How’s my favorite niece?”

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Kellie lifted her head slowly, suppressing a smirk. “Aunt Bernie, I’m your *only* niece.”

“Actually, that’s not true,” she said, looking up to the ceiling. “Carl’s latest, ahem, uh...shall we call her *girlfriend* has three baby girls. One day if he ever does the right thing by her, they’ll be my nieces,” she grinned.

“Riiight,” said Kellie, tugging at her pantyhose.

Aunt Bernice sat down on the couch beside Kellie, moving T.J.’s game controller out of the way. She hugged Kellie tightly. “Are you okay? I mean, really okay?”

Kellie had been asked those same two questions, in that order, at least twenty times a day *every day* since her mother passed away six days prior. Each time she managed the same response. *Yeah, I’m fine.* But today, something was different. Kellie looked down. She was dressed in black, wearing pantyhose for the first time since her Grandpa Louis’s funeral, she felt sick to her stomach, and her mother was nowhere in sight.

“I’m mad, Aunt Bernie. Excuse me for saying this—but I’m pissed the hell off. Why did this happen?” she said fighting back tears, burning tension rising in her throat.

Aunt Bernice smoothed down Kellie’s flyaway hair and pulled her closer, rocking back and forth. “Only God knows, baby. Only God knows.”

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