

Kyle must find the truth behind a secret her dying mother kept and killed for before darkness destroys her. In a messy race against time, Kyle discovers decades of pain and a truth so ugly that it takes her to the treacherous place between this life and the next.

The Current's Whisper

by Deidra Parrish Williams

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DEIDRA PARRISH WILLIAMS

THE CURRENT'S
WHISPER

a novel



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CHAPTER 18

Saturday afternoon

“Psst. Hey, Mickey.”

I had dozed off. The room was dim, which meant the sun was on the other side of the hospital and it was probably somewhere around three o'clock. I knew who it was before I saw him. Only my brother, Peter called me Mickey. I jumped up and hugged him. I was so glad he was there.

“Hey!” I said, wrapping my arms around his slender back. He smelled like cigarettes and some sort of fried food.

“Damn, Mick, you skinny as hell. You eating or what?”

I ignored the comment about my weight. “Are you ever gonna stop calling me that?” I knew he wouldn't, and although it felt a little out of place in my grown up life, I really didn't want him to. Peter had a nickname for everyone. Audrey's was Sunny, and his was Shine, taken from a tough guy in an old gangster movie.

“How ya' doin'? I'm glad you're here.”

“Yeah, sorry I wasn't home when you called last night,” he said.

I had forgotten that I'd called him before leaving D.C. “No big deal.”

“Ay, where's everybody at? Aunt Mille and Livy didn't pitch their tent up in here yet? And where is Sunny? I figured she'd be here calling the shots by now.”

“They're coming. Mommy's basically been sleeping since I got here. She woke up for a minute but she's really tired.” We both looked over at her.

“Well at least she's been up. Last night, she looked like... I don't know, man, like she was checking out,” Peter said.

“Peter!” I said in a loud whisper. He could be so crude.

“I'm just saying, from what I could see she wasn't looking good.”

“Why don’t we go down the hall to the solarium? I don’t want to wake her up.” Nor did I want Mother to overhear us.

“You think she can hear us? She still looks pretty out of it.”

I didn’t respond, I just locked my arm in his and began walking. I thought about asking him if he wanted to get some coffee, but I figured he didn’t need it. He looked pretty jumpy already. “Where’s Trish?” That was Peter’s girlfriend.

“Working. She’ll probably stop through later. I won’t be here though, and don’t tell her I was, either. Don’t tell her shit,” Peter said.

“What’s with you two?” I loved Peter fiercely, but he sometimes felt like a stranger to me. Something in him had veered off the main road a long time ago, and he’d been drifting further ever since. I didn’t really care about Trish. She was just his current version of a girlfriend and there was no point in getting attached to her. Before long, Trish would be moving on to the *used-to* pile along with the others. Sometimes, after Peter disappeared, his exes would plead their case to Aunt Camille, hoping to appeal to her to help them get Peter back: *He used to love me. Things used to be different. We used to talk about getting married.* I once tried to care about the people who drifted in and out of my brother’s life, but I just didn’t anymore.

“Yeah, we’re together for now, but she pisses me off. That chick is a pain in the ass. Soon as I get my money right, I’m out.” Peter was looking from side to side and talking low as if he were plotting an escape and didn’t want the guards to hear.

“Well, listen, we should talk about Mommy. She’s going to need us. I have a feeling it may be cancer again.” I was searching his eyes to see whether he was with me.

“Who said it was cancer?” he shot back. If I hadn’t been looking closely, I might have missed the urgent look that flashed in his eyes. A look of worry, maybe even fear. It lingered for a brief moment and then it was gone.

“Nobody, but I have a feeling we should be prepared for the worst. And we are going to have to pull together.”

"Well, I'm here," he said, nervously gnawing at the meaty inside of his cheek, "I'm right here in the city, so I can slide by her house any time." But as the words left his lips I knew that counting on Peter for day-to-day stuff wouldn't be smart. He talked a good game, but he could be unpredictable in so many ways.

"But listen Mick, if I'm gonna be taking care of her, you need to get me my own key."

"What happened to your key?"

"She took it back, said some of her shit was missing and she didn't want anybody to have a key but her." Peter spoke with the righteous indignation of someone wrongfully accused, but I knew there was more to the story. Mother kept bills under her mattress—twenties, fifties, and hundreds— and when she suspected Peter was helping himself, she started marking them. It took her a while to be sure, but one day she asked him to break one of her hundreds and he did it with some of her own bills. I couldn't bring myself to tell him that, especially since Mother wasn't the one who told me. Livy did. The story apparently went the route of all of our family's best secrets: Mother confided in Aunt Camille, who shared the story with Livy, and telling her was about the same as posting it on Twitter.

"I can't get you a key if Mommy doesn't want that. But you don't have to have a key to run errands and check on her every now and then, get groceries, stuff like that. It wouldn't even be the kind of thing you'd have to do every day, just when she needs it."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, ah-ight, whatever. If I need to get in there and I can't, that's on y'all," he said. "Ay, where can you smoke in here?"

"Uh, I don't think you can. Hospital. Sick people trying to get well... oxygen tanks, you know?"

No matter how much I accomplished in my own right, no matter how much I grew, coming home thrust me back into the role I'd always played: I was the youngest; Carolyn's baby, and Audrey and Peter's baby sister. I couldn't get away from it. I could see Peter was battling a serious drug habit that was eating him up from the inside

out. I had seen plenty of women at H2H who looked and acted like him. They had washed-out eyes and attitudes. They were jumpy and suspicious. They hated mirrors and people that acted like mirrors. Part of me wanted to shake Peter until the big brother he used to be showed up. But I didn't. We each had our roles to play, and that wasn't mine.

"So when you gonna get married like Liv, have some kids, make me an uncle?"

It was an errant comment but I followed his lead. "I didn't know that being an uncle mattered to you." My feet were wrapped around each other at the ankles.

"You might as well have a couple kids. No way I'm having any. Sunny probably won't either, right? Only thing she loves is her bank account," he said.

"That's not true. You're so hard on her. I think it's just easier for her to pour herself into work than other things." I leaned back and tried to find a casual position in my chair. I couldn't help laughing inside at the fact that I was defending Audrey. But that's the sort of thing that happens with siblings. You can fight like hell with them, but as soon as someone else goes after them, your sword will swing the other way.

"What other things? You mean people? Real, fucking humans?" Peter said, waving a dismissive hand in my direction, which I could tell was intended for Audrey. "Whatever, man. She don't call nobody. Seems like she's just out for herself. All she cares about is her loot." Peter was talking loudly. His voice could easily be overheard in the hallway.

"You know that's not true. Audrey has been there for you, Peter."

"You're talking past tense. She *used* to be there. That's history," he waved his hand again.

"You're saying that like it doesn't count. She's helped you a lot. She helped you get a couple of jobs, didn't she?"

“You want to talk about who had whose back? Me! I always had her back. People used to hate her. See, you wouldn’t know ‘cause you weren’t there, but everybody hated that girl—in school, ‘round the neighborhood, and I was the one fighting her battles.” It was a tale I had heard Peter tell before. More than a few times, in fact. I didn’t have any trouble believing it, because Audrey was no congeniality queen, and Peter enjoyed playing the gladiator. But their old high school stories weren’t what stood between them now.

Peter went on, “Even though she was older, she was my sister and I wasn’t gonna let nothin’ happen to her.” They had been close; much closer than I had been with either of them. It came more naturally for them; they had the same father, lived under the same roof, and they shared the same pain of living at arm’s distance from their mother.

“I don’t mean to cut you off, but you know you’ve told me all of this before, right? And it was so long ago. That has nothing to do with anything anymore. I’m asking why there’s so much distance now.”

“Nah, it matters because she acts like she did so much for me, but she forgets I had her back, too. She thinks just because she gave me money that that’s more important. That’s what it’s about with her. Money! Money happened between us. It’s always money with her. I know she told you. She told everybody. I borrowed some money to work on a gig I had. I told her I couldn’t pay her ‘til it was done but she wiggled out on me.” Peter was a brilliant artist. He painted incredible murals that people paid handsomely to hang in their homes or corporate lobbies. He only needed a handful of projects a year to make a decent living. That and the willpower to stay clean.

“Did you pay her back when the job was finished?” Audrey hadn’t told me the story; she told Livy, and Livy told me. But I wanted to hear my brother out.

“Man, I never got paid what I was supposed to, ‘cuz I couldn’t finish the job. If Sunny had given me the whole nut like I asked her

to, I would have been straight. But she nickel-and-dimed me and I lost the gig. So nobody got their loot.”

We were both quiet for a few minutes. I was staring at Peter again. His attention was focused on picking a scab on his left thumb, but probably more on his fallout with Audrey. After his project fell through, he went to her house and they had a huge fight. Audrey could never prove it, but she insisted that a long scratch down the side of her BMW appeared the next day. I hoped he hadn't done it, but in any case, I refused to take sides.

At one time Peter had been a source of rescue for me. He loved doing the sorts of big brother things that make a little sister feel safe. But things were different now. He was angry a lot of the time and he could become so enraged that he was unable to control the throw of his hostility; it could land on anyone who was within reach.

A few summers ago, at a casual backyard barbecue in New Rochelle, Peter ended up in a showdown with his namesake. None of us could have seen something like that coming between the two of them. If a fight scene needed to be scripted in our family, Peter and Uncle Pete would have been the least likely pair. It started with a simple request for Peter to lend a hand with the grill, and somehow it escalated into an all-out brawl. Ripped shirts, blood, tears, hurt feelings. It was awful.

I think Peter was high. He had been edgy and jumpy that entire day. When Uncle Pete asked him for help a second time – Peter ignored the first request – Peter snarled “fuck I look like, your sous chef?” Uncle Pete didn't say a word before he backhanded Peter. Then they crashed into the lit grill and the meats were tossed into the dirt. They tussled until they wound up sprawled on the long picnic table in the yard. Uncle Pete was pinned down and Peter stood over him holding a long meat fork. He was practically growling when he said, “You sure you wanna tangle with a muthafucka who don't care if he lives or dies?” I was so scared. It was the first time I saw my brother rage like and that I couldn't believe he was directing it at Uncle Pete.

No matter what was going on with rest of us, Uncle Pete could always be counted on to bring the calm. Aunt Camille used to say he was 'easy like steeped tea in August'. But that afternoon, he growled back as he wrestled Peter off of him, grabbed him by the throat and put him on his back in the grass. When the fight ended, it was the younger Peter lying in the dirt with banged-up ribs and a bruised ego.

No one ate a thing at the barbecue that day. The meats Uncle Pete had prepared and the potato salad and bread pudding that Aunt Camille and Mother made all went to waste.

Peter pulled the scab from his thumb free and dropped it onto the floor of the solarium. Then he said, "You know I love y'all, right? I might not get along with you and Sunny all the time, but you're my sisters. I'll always love you. Don't forget that, ah-ight."

I took his hand and squeezed it. He squeezed back.

"So, what's your story, Mick? Why don't you have some Buppie on your arm and two-point-five kids by now? You're the type."

"The type? What's that mean? And what's with all the interest in kids?"

"You know what I'm saying, you look good, you work hard... you should have some dude to take care of you."

"What if I don't want some dude to take *care* of me?"

"You know what I'm sayin', Mick. You should have a nice guy in your life. And a family. I just figured you wanted all that. That's what it's all about, isn't it? Everybody needs love and shit."

"I guess I just haven't found Mr. Right." It was a stupid answer but it was the easy way out of a discussion there was no point in having.

When I'm apart from my brother, I tend to forget what a letdown being with him can be. I always greet him with a childish expectation that I'll find the Peter he used to be—the funny, artistic guy that girls fought over; the protective older brother who I could count on to toss the neighborhood bully in the bushes for throwing rocks at me. He hadn't been that person since he got arrested in

New Rochelle. His life could effectively be defined in terms of what came before that, and what came after.

Peter and four of his friends were pulled over for a traffic stop, and the cops found cocaine and marijuana in the car. Despite the fact that everyone knew that the driver of the car, Mike Engel, was the ring leader and the only bona fide drug user in the group, somehow he got off and Peter, the only black kid in the car, wound up with a record. He did four months in a juvenile detention center. It broke Mother's heart, and I think it broke something in Peter, too.

Uncle Pete was really hard on him about it. He took seriously his role as Peter's surrogate father. They had been close when Peter was small. Uncle Pete set high standards, and he tried to stay connected to Peter. He was the kind of man whose road was paved with thoughtfully chosen decisions, and for him, raising Peter as a source of pride. Aside from their names, the two Peters shared something none of the rest of us did. They were black men. They knew in a way that none of us girls could that what they had was hard won. And whatever it might be—a house, an education, a job, or just a modicum of peace—rested on shallow, unsteady ground that could give way at any time.

Peter became an outcast in the neighborhood, even to his old circle of friends. They wouldn't have anything to do with him. Never mind that those friends had introduced him to the drug scene, and that they stole money from their parents to buy drugs.

For a long time, all Peter did outside of school was sit in his room listen to music, and draw. When he finally emerged, it was in a new life outside of New Rochelle. He started running with bona fide bad guys from the Bronx, and before long, he was virtually out of reach to everything and everyone.

"So what happened to Jessie?" Peter asked me, again shifting the direction of the conversation, but this time with a strange, knowing look on his face. It had come out of nowhere

. "What are you asking about her for?" I wondered if somehow he knew that I had just seen her. Didn't seem likely.

He shrugged his shoulders to feign ambivalence. “You two were *real* tight back in the day, weren’t you?” Peter asked, looking me square in the eyes. I looked right back at him and what I saw startled me.

“Yeah, we were close. But not since college.”

“So what happened? Y’all just ended your thing?”

My heart fluttered with anxiety. *He knows*. Something in his eyes, or maybe it was his choice of words, told me he knew more than he was entitled to. *Ended our thing?* That wasn’t what you’d say about two people who were just friends. My mind was scrambling for a lie. I started sifting through comebacks, some sort of breezy response that would throw Peter off the trail. I tried them out in my head but they didn’t seem to work. “Why... what do you... what made you ask me about Jessie all of a sudden?” I wanted to lie to him, but for some reason I couldn’t. I was pretty sure he already knew and, to my surprise, part of me hoped he did.

“Just asking. What you all jumpy for?” he said with the same look.

I looked at my brother without saying anything, and in a matter of seconds I asked myself a dozen questions about what I wanted to happen next. For years I had wanted to talk to someone about Jessie, but it had never crossed my mind that it would be Peter. Now that the opportunity presented itself, maybe he was the perfect person. He hardly interacted with the family, and he probably didn’t care much about what I did anyway. And while he wasn’t always easy to talk to, he was more open-minded than most people I knew.

I guess he took my silence as the response he needed. With a perfectly straight face he asked, “So, you gay?”

Before he could finish his question, I belted back. “Give me a break. I’m not gay. I love men. God, that sounds so stupid. But... I mean... You know what I’m saying.” I sounded defensive, but I couldn’t stop talking while he was looking at me the way he was. “I actually met a really nice guy on the flight down here, an artist—not that I’ll ever see him again. But never mind him. I don’t even know

why I mentioned him. I'm just saying, I like men. I may not be very good at picking them but I am *not* gay, Peter." I was fumbling all over myself and my brother looked amused.

"So, are you any better at picking women?" He doubled over and slapped the floor with his hand, howling with laughter.

"This is funny to you? No one knows about this. I was never with another woman. And to tell you the truth, it didn't end any better than the relationships I've had with men. "

"I was just kidding, Mick. Don't get all twisted. I really don't care." He said, patting me on my knee. "So what was it like, though? What do you like better, men or women?"

"This *really* is funny to you, isn't it?" He was barging into a fragile place with no regard for the delicate things in it, or the lengths to which I'd gone to arrange them.

"Chill, Mick. It's pretty run of the mill. I hardly know any chicks that haven't at least dabbled on the other team a little."

I never knew what to call what Jessie and I had had, other than passionate and utterly confusing. I enjoyed being with men, but I had enjoyed Jessie just as much. Maybe even more, and I never knew what that meant. Was I bisexual? Some kind of recreational lesbian? Was it something you could turn off and on? Did lots of women have secret affairs with college roommates and close friends?

"For real, relax. It's not that big a deal," Peter said. But that couldn't have been further from the truth for me.

At one time, I literally thanked God for putting Jessie in my life. She was smart and funny, but she could be patient with me when I needed her to slow down and understand things from my point of view. She was the one person who really helped me past the whole thing with Paul, especially when Livy couldn't stand to hear me talk about it anymore.

She was popular, too, but almost by chance. She didn't seek people out; they were just drawn to her. She took me everywhere she went, and she had this way of introducing me that made it seem

like I was somebody that other people should know. "You know Kyle McIntyre, right?"

I preferred smaller groups: Jessie and Devrie, or just Jessie by herself. And as comfortable as she was in crowds, she was happy to oblige me.

"I guess it's a big deal to you, huh?" Peter asked. "How'd you end up doing the do with your roommate, anyway?"

"God, Peter. Has anyone ever told you what a gentleman you are?" I said, rolling my eyes.

"Yeah, the ladies tell me all the time, baby girl, all the time." He winked a sarcastic eye at me. "I'm just trying to make you laugh. It's really not that serious."

"It was all pretty crazy the way it happened..."

Peter interrupted, "Was Jessie before or after that Silva mothafucka?" He knew all about Paul. When I wound up pregnant, Livy told him and he went berserk. I shouldn't have cared what happened to Paul; I should have just let my brother settle things the way protective older brothers do. But in a final act of self-degradation, I called Paul with the intention of alerting him that Peter knew about my pregnancy, and that he was coming for him. I never got to deliver the warning, though.

When Paul picked up his cell phone, he acted like he didn't know who I was. "I'm sorry, who? Oh Michelle, right. Please don't call me on my personal line. Schedule an appointment during student hours. They're posted in my office."

I yelled into the phone. "It's me! It's Kyle?" I was furious with myself for calling. For weeks prior to that, Paul had avoided me, not even making eye contact when he saw me on campus. But the day after I called him, he marched into my face. "You better not let me find out you had anything to do with this." He was practically growling at me. At the time I didn't know what he was talking about. I found out later that his beloved Corvette had been torched the night before, and that someone had spray-painted a cryptic message that kicked up a rumor on campus about him being gay. It was a

rainbow, plus a heart, followed by the word “games” in a circle and with a line drawn through it.

I was thoroughly impressed with my brother’s caper. It was as vicious as it was clever. Livy was right, Paul had been with plenty of other students and the fire could have been revenge from any one of them. The only thing that would have pointed to my brother was the arsonist’s creative flair. That rainbow was probably gorgeous.

“Jessie was after Paul,” I replied to Peter. He and I never discussed the incident with Paul’s car. Not that he wouldn’t have been proud to tell me what he’d done.

Peter harrumphed, “I didn’t think you had it in you, kid.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You say that like it’s something to be proud of.”

“Well, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s just some shit that happened. There’s nothing wrong with experimenting. People get off on a lot weirder shit than hooking up with their roommate. Nothing wrong with feeling good, I mean, long as you’re not hurting anybody.”

I shook my head at Peter. This wasn’t the conversation I had longed to have. I wasn’t gay; I was sure of that, but I didn’t know how to rationalize what I felt for Jessie. She had been everything to me once. She was the first friend I had outside of our family. She was the confidante I shared myself with. She helped me see life in a way that I had never before felt free to. And she was my gentle, passionate lover who came to me in the night, when darkness protected our secret and we fell completely into each other.

I loved it when she would get in bed behind me and fall asleep like we were two spoons in a drawer. The closeness was a lot like being with Livy at first, but it blossomed into something much deeper. I told Jessie about the madness in my life; growing up with a sometimes manic and controlling mother. Weekend visits with siblings who kept me at arm’s length. The mysteries about my father. The years of drifting around in a life that left me questioning what I could trust and where I belonged. I loved her in a way that I had

never loved anyone else and when she left, I struggled with what to make of it all, but Peter clearly wasn't the one who was going to help me sort it out.

"What made you think there was something between us?" I asked my brother.

"I don't know. There was something there. You know like the way dogs let off a certain smell when they're in heat? There was something invisible that you gave off. I doubt that anybody else could see it, but I did. I'm tuned in to shit like that," Peter said.

I was sorry I asked.

"So, was she the only one?"

"What's with all the questions about my personal life?" I wanted to close the door now.

"I'm your brother. I can't know what's going on in your life? Maybe you *are* gay and you're suppressing it."

"I am *not* gay. And we can end this discussion right here. I don't know why we're sitting here talking about my sex life. We need to be talking about Mommy."

"Ah-ight, but what is there to talk about? We don't know what's wrong and when we do, we'll deal with it." Peter said, looking at his watch as if he just realized that he'd missed an appointment.

"So, when the time comes, we can count on you for running errands, stuff like that? If we need a key for you, we'll have to ask Mommy." I was recapping the discussion like it was an H2H staff meeting.

"Ah-ight." Peter said with his hands out, palms up, as if to say, of course

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"Now you wanna ask me questions? No, never been with a guy. Had my share of threesomes, though. What else you wanna know?"

"Please, I don't care about that. What's the problem between you and Mommy? Sometimes you act like you don't even like her." I think we were both surprised by the question; I wasn't normally so direct with him. I tended to give him lots of wiggle room in case he

wanted to slip away. But I was gunning straight down the middle now.

Peter didn't say anything. He just shrugged his shoulders. At another time, perhaps when Mother wasn't fighting for her life, I might have accepted his reluctance and moved on, but not now. So many abandoned memories had crept up on me in the past few days—even in the last few moments sitting there with Peter.

It all sat spread out in front of me—a nasty pile of lies and secrets. I had tiptoed around it for so long, and I wasn't going to do it anymore. Although Dr. Tannous hadn't given us a prognosis, I knew Mother was dying, and I refused to let her leave me to live with the lies. I had to try to figure out where the truth was and Peter was a good place to start.

"The past couple of days, I've been thinking so much about when we were young. Living on Sycamore Street. All the weekends in New Rochelle. I guess it's, you know, the idea of losing Mommy. What about you, do you think back on any of that stuff?"

Despite outward appearances, Peter was nobody's fool. He could see that I was trying to find a point of entry, another way to get him talking about Mother. "Everybody thinks about the past," was all he said. He wasn't going to make it easy.

"What kinds of things do you think about?"

Peter responded, "Whatever. Depends."

"After you and Audrey moved to Brooklyn with us, did Mommy ever talk to you about why you had to live in New Rochelle?"

"Which time?" he said in a sarcastic voice, and chuckling a little. "Yeah, we knew the deal. At first we *wanted* to stay there. We liked it in New Rochelle. But later on..." he paused to come up with the right words, then stopped. I waited for him to finish, but he didn't. He completed the sentence inside his own head.

"What do you mean, 'which time'? Why did you put it that way?"

"Because we bounced back and forth more than a few times. It's not like we ever lived with y'all, but we would come stay during

school breaks, stuff like that, and I guess, at first, I hoped the visits would become permanent. But when we'd come, your mother was working and we stayed upstairs with the Randall's most of the time. You remember them? The Randalls?"

"No," I hated that he was referring to Mother as *my* mother, but he was doing it for his benefit, not mine, so I refused to acknowledge it.

"I think the last time we came was the time you got burned," he said, tapping his finger on the bony part of my upper chest where my burn had been when I was small. "I remember that like it was yesterday. Part of your night gown stuck to your chest. You screamed like hell. I was scared I fuckin' killed you. And Mommy, man, she lost it on me. I thought she was gonna send us packing that night. Wow, that was a bad scene. You probably still have that scar, don't you?" he asked.

"Yeah, but it's nothing now. I have to look for it to find it," I said, catching Peter's gaze. There was residue after all. There was something left of the brother I remembered. I embraced him with my eyes. Then I realized something. "Wait, I thought you and Aud lived with us for a while. You guys weren't really living with me and Mommy?"

"Yeah. We just came to stay here and there. Basically visits." I don't think he was aware that he was helping me string things together and I needed to keep him talking while he was distracted, I assumed, with reconciling his own memories. "I know she was probably trying to get her shit together so she could take care of us. Had to be hard. Three kids, two fucked up fathers. She probably did the best she could. Can't be easy making it work in a black family. That's why so many brothers are walking around messed up in the head, Mick. Don't know who they are or where they fit. Know what I'm saying? When you find your Mr. Right, Mick, don't let him run out on you and your kids. You'll probably end up with a real good dude. But even if he does some private sector shit, don't think that he has it made. It's hard for them white collar brothers, too, man.

Going to work every day for them is like going behind enemy lines. World ain't changed all that much for brothers. They keep their foot on our neck. And if they ain't doing that, they act like we're invisible."

I hadn't seen this coming and it annoyed me that he was using a time like this for a rant about the plight of the black man. I wanted to stop him, but I didn't have the heart to.

"Except when we come walking down their street or up in their office for some bullshit job. Or God forbid, their daughter brings us home." He slapped his leg and laughed. "You betta believe they can see our black asses then. Mick, they beat us down. Even people from other countries. They can be dirt poor, illiterate, whatever, but they come here with it in their heads that no matter what crack they crawled out of, they're higher up on the totem pole than we are. Ain't that some shit? We're nothin', man. They'll fight for the rights of a stray dog before they'll fight for me," Peter said, motioning across the room to an imaginary crowd of bigots.

I waited silently. I could tell that there was more.

"One time I was standing down at Ground Zero chillin', eating a slice of pizza, and one of these Iraqi-looking street peddlers calls me a 'nigga'. I'm like, 'Whoa, no this dude didn't!' He could hardly put a full sentence together in English but he knew it was okay to call me a nigga." My brother's face was full of outrage.

"Just out of the blue?" Part of me wondered if Peter had done anything to provoke the comment. But that was unfair. It made me no better than the peddler. In fact, worse. I was Peter's sister. If I wasn't willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, who would?

"Yeah, I'm just standing there. Swear to God. I was actually standing there checking out the stuff this dude was selling. This motha-fucka can hardly speak English, Mick. The ink probably still ain't dry on his green card and he has the nerve to be calling *me* names. We ain't shit to them." He paused again, shaking his head. I could tell he still wasn't done, but there was no way I was going to try to stop him now. "How you gonna take everything from us—our

land, our freedom, education, our families, everything. Everything! And have the fuckin' nerve to wonder why we're mad. We're mad 'cause we ain't got shit. You took it. It's just modern day slavery. No chains but no freedom either. And, check this out: not only do they treat us like shit, but they want us to cosign it by not calling them on it. 'Aw, come on, that's the past. You had a black president. What else do you want?' Man, fuck atta here with that. Things are worse now than ever. Trump is all about racism. He's the swing of the pendulum. As far as we got when Barack won," he said, holding his left arm out, "that's how far backwards these hateful people are trying to take us with 45." He was almost breathless with anger. "You know, out of all those dudes I got arrested with in high school, not one of them has a record now. Just me. Everybody else got to hit delete like it never fuckin' happened."

When he got arrested, no one shared much of the detail with me. I knew he was with his friends from school but after the case was settled, I suppose that topic was stashed away in the same place where our family put all of the other unsavory things. "Yeah, just me, baby-girl. I was smarter than all of them, never been in any trouble, and I didn't even *like* getting high until I started hanging with those fools. But when everything went down, I was the one who ended up doing time. How do you justify that I did time and none of them did? When I got out, I went by Mike's house and his father rolls up on me and tells me he'll have my black ass locked up for good if I ever so much as slowed down in front of their house. Mike didn't say shit, either. Just stood there."

He wasn't talking to me. Not really. It felt like I just happened to get caught in the spray when it all came uncorked. I hated to hear how badly life had hurt the smart, good-natured boy my brother used to be.

"Even sometimes your own people look down on you, Mick. That's what really kills me. It makes you build up this *fuck it* attitude. You know? It's like, if people think you're useless and stupid then, hey, you know, like the song says, 'give the people what they want,'

right? At least you know nobody'll ever try to take it from you 'cuz it's the only role they really want to see you play anyway, the fuckup."

"I hate that all of that happened to you. I didn't know all the other kids got off. You're not a fuckup, Peter. And nobody that matters thinks that. You shouldn't carry that around with you, being mad all the time. That doesn't help anything."

"You walk in my shoes and try not being mad," he responded. "You know, I saw Mike's dad a few years back. I wanted to punch that mutha-fucka square in the jaw. I was at a gas station and he walked by and looked at me like, I don't know, like I was shit on his shoe. Like he was thinking, 'Yeah, I knew you wouldn't be shit.' But I'm getting mine, though. 'Even though y'all tried to knock me down, I'm getting mine.' That's what I should've said."

I had no idea Peter had been so wounded. What happened to him in high school interrupted his life and changed everything that came after it. "I'm sorry you went through all of that."

"Sounds crazy to you, huh? Your life is nothing like mine. But that's because sistas don't have it like we do. That's why you gotta be in your man's corner, Mick. When a brother comes home from the wars every day, he has to know that at least one person has his back. You gotta let him know you're his, like, his refuge and shit. Know what I'm sayin'?"

I did. Peter's purge filled the room. I could see the throngs of persecutors he painted so vividly. White women clutching their pocketbooks and men covering their daughters' eyes. Juries with unjust hearts, convicting men who were targeted and unfairly tried. People who think but rarely say that crime, violence, and poverty are inextricably linked to people with brown skin. People that looked just like my talented, wounded big brother.

All that Peter said, and the things he didn't say, too, reminded me how much I didn't know about him, his life, who he had become and why. As a black woman, I'd experienced discrimination too, but what Peter was talking about and the hurt he'd endured was

something I couldn't truly understand. It made me think of the women at H2H and how their journeys had been affected by men like Peter. Fathers, uncles, brothers, and lovers who became entirely consumed in the same battles with demons, both real and imagined. It made them so skeptical of life that even love felt like a risk; whether the giving of it or the getting. It made loving men like Peter a bloody battle where sometimes nobody won.

I wanted to hug him. Or do something that would sooth his pain just a bit. He didn't want that, though. Not from me. Maybe not from anyone.

I could only imagine how much space all that pain was taking up inside of him. No wonder he sometimes seemed like he was about to boil over. I felt guilty for not initially wanting to hear it. And instead now, felt privileged that he had opened up to me. Our conversation was a sobering reminder that privately, every one of us was dragging something around, from one destination to another, not facing it, but also refusing to let it go. I didn't speak until Peter's voice had completely evaporated. Then through the silence I asked, "Did you know anything about my father?"

He didn't seem fully with me, but he answered with a sort of despondence, "That guy Keith. Mommy cut him off a long time ago. That's how Olivia told it, anyway." Good ole Livy. If there was any insider information to be had, she would have it.

So, it *was* him. The mysterious Keith guy was my father, after all? And he's not dead. "I used to hear Mommy and Aunt Camille talking about him, but I couldn't really put together what they were saying. Sometimes it seemed like they were talking about money. Maybe he owed Mommy money, or something? Sometimes they'd be fussing..." I trailed off, leaving room for my brother to fill in the blanks.

"All I know is that Mommy cut him off when you were little. She didn't want him around. But he sent her money sometimes to help out with things."

“He sent money? Are you sure? Why wouldn’t she want him around if she was willing to take money from him?”

“I ‘on’t know all that. But I know he was sending money. I saw checks myself. Sometimes they came to Aunt Mille to give to Mommy. I figured she didn’t want him to have her address.”

“Really? So everyone knew my father except me.” Peter didn’t respond. “She told me my father died. Why lie if she kept him around and he wanted to be a part of my life?”

“I didn’t know him. And, shit, I ain’t saying for sure that dude was your father. Livy ain’t God. She gets stuff wrong sometimes. Maybe your father *is* dead.”

“Mommy told me he was dead when I was little. I don’t understand why she’d say that about somebody she stayed in touch with. Do you know more than you’re saying, Peter? Is he dead or not?”

“I don’t know. Hand to God.”

He was telling the truth. Of everyone, I could say for certain that Peter had no agendas. “You must know something, though. When’s the last time he sent money?”

“It’s not like I kept track. You need to ask Mommy, or Aunt Camille.”

Neither of them was in the room with me, though. I decided to set the topic of my father aside for the time being. “Do you remember me ever being sick when I was little?” I asked him.

“Sick? Like how?”

“I don’t know, like did I ever have to stay in the hospital or have any kind of special treatments... anything like that?” I needed some part of what Mother told me about the past to be true.

“Uh-uh, no, you were never sick like that.” Peter’s face was sober and clear. “There was a time when you were around three or four... maybe you were five, I don’t remember... but something happened to you.”

“What?”

"I don't know. It wasn't like anyone said what happened, but something must have, because you just got... like... weird. You weren't sick, just really, really quiet. You hardly talked at all for a long time." He was looking at me with a sympathy that made me feel uneasy. "You don't remember?"

"No. What do you mean, didn't talk? To you, or to anyone? When was this?"

"You talked fine when you were little and then, I don't know, something shut down. You were like moot or something. You talked to Mommy a little, but that was really it. For a long time you just wouldn't talk. You must'a been like six or something. It was funny—I mean, not funny-funny, but you know, funny that the lights went out inside this happy little girl and nobody talked about it. You know how we do... just act like shit ain't happening. 'Elephant? What elephant? Oh, that... pshhh, that ain't an elephant, that's our coffee table. G'head, put your drink on it.'" He laughed a loud, inappropriate laugh.

"Six? I would have been in school by then? Definitely talking..." I wanted to go back to the place he was describing. His words felt like love. My brother had known me at one time. He saw light in me. "Where did we live at the time? Was it Herkimer Street? Do you remember?"

"Nah, I'm not sure. And don't hold me to the age. I can't swear to it. I just know you were little. And you all were moving a lot then. We mostly saw you at Aunt Mille's."

I had never heard anything about what Peter was describing, and that only made it more significant. It meant that it was part of the secret, mine and Mother's. The one that our family protected in some kind of unspoken pact. I was certain that it was something big, and I had to learn more about it. Knowing when it happened seemed like it would help me collect more detail. "Was it before or after Gran'pa Ernest died?" I asked.

Until that moment, Peter had been sitting with his torso leaned forward, his elbows resting on his legs just above his knees. When I

asked the question, he let the whole of his head and neck go, until his head dropped down and hung between his knees. He sighed and clasped his hands behind his neck and just sat there. It looked like someone had struck him over the head and he was crouching to protect himself from a second blow.

“What? What’s the matter?” He remembered something. I had no idea what it was, but I knew it belonged to me. It sprang forward from a tucked-away place. He put it there who knows how long ago so there would be no risk of it being stumbled upon. Could it explain the darkness that left me gasping for clean air? A whispering inside of me told me it could.

He lifted his head and sat all the way back in his chair. He looked at me with no knowledge of what I was feeling. He was consumed with his own thoughts. “It was after he died. After that you changed,” he said.

“Okay, it was after. What does that mean? Did you remember something? Why did you react like that? What happened to me?” I wanted it. It was mine and I wanted him to give it to me.

He was chewing on something but all he said was, “Life is something, Mick.”

“Why? What does that mean? You said I changed after Gran’pa died. Didn’t anybody talk about it? Why did I change?”

“I don’t know. It was a strange time. I don’t know all of what happened.”

“Okay so tell me what you remembered. What *do* you know? There’s something you’re not telling me. I can practically see it banging around in your head. Why did you react that way when you realized it was after Gran’pa Ernest died? What’s the significance of that?”

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

“Come on. That’s bullshit and you know it. Tell me the truth. If it has to do with me, I deserve to know.” Now it was me whose voice was spilling into the halls. People were turning to peek at us as they walked past the solarium.

"I'm not saying you don't deserve to know. If it has something to do with you, then you should know. All I'm saying is, I don't know where things fit and I don't want to get into it."

It was out of character for Peter to retreat from an uncomfortable situation. If someone had a tender spot, he usually had no problem being the one to poke it. I felt like my opportunity was slipping away. "Get into what? What's the big secret? If something happened that affected all of us, why can't I know about it? Everybody else seems to." I was leaning in, heaving words at him.

It was useless. It didn't sway him in the least. "Let me ask you something, Mick. Let's say I did something really bad when I was young. Like, I killed somebody." I felt my eyes widen. "Calm down, I'm not saying I did. Just listen to me." I was trying, but the idea of him murdering someone terrified me. "Imagine I killed somebody. Say it was that dumb fuck, Ricky who lived around the corner. Imagine I killed him but no one ever knew it was me. He was an evil ass and nobody would have missed him. Would you want to know about it all these years later?"

I couldn't answer. "What in the world does that have to do with anything? Please tell me you didn't hurt anyone, did you?"

He got deadly serious. "Listen, Mickey. If someone tells you, 'Don't go down this street because the ugliest thing you've ever seen will swallow you whole,' do you need to go down there to see it for yourself? Or is a warning like that enough? I mean, you weren't going down there anyway, so why risk it? Just keep skipping down the street you were on. Know what I'm sayin'?" His voice was practically a whisper and although he wasn't giving me what I wanted, I didn't miss the implication.

This was what my family had asked me to do all my life. *You don't need to worry about that... Put that out of your head... Don't dwell on the past.* I had let everyone else package and feed me their brand of the truth, and there was a price to pay for that.

"Peter, I don't know what you're trying to protect me from, but please..."

He interrupted, "Listen, Mick, there are some things in life that you have to just walk away from. No questions. Just walk the fuck away. Believe me," he said.

But I couldn't. Not after knowing that whatever Peter was fighting to conceal had been fighting to keep me off balance all my life. This was my chance to pull it into the light and stomp its guts out. I had to see it. I had to put my hands around its neck and choke the life out of it. This was it. I could feel it vibrating in every ounce of my flesh. My life depended on it. "Dammit, Peter, tell me. I can't walk away anymore. I *need* to know." I was on my feet, hands in balled fists and I could feel my mouth closed down to a skinny slit that the words spit through. "You have no idea. Every day, Peter. Every fucking day, I know there's something. It taps on my brain. Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. But it's like... like a ghost tapping me in the dark. No matter how hard I try, I can't see it or touch it, but it never leaves. Just tap, tap, tap. I know it's always there. Whether I'm awake, asleep...it doesn't matter. It's there, reminding me that I can't get too comfortable because the minute it do, it'll snatch me and pull me under. You have no idea what it feels like. I deserve to know what happened. Peter, please."

He stood up, wiped tears from my cheeks, kissed my forehead and turned to leave, saying casually on his way, "Everybody tells me I don't know when to shut up. I'm glad your eyes are open now, Mick—and you opened my eyes a little too—but this is a conversation you need to have with your mother."

I was crushed. "You're gonna just walk away in the middle of this?" I had laid myself bare and having him turn and walk away from me made me feel so alone. I was. Peter had his own issues to reconcile and he couldn't help me with mine.

"Later, Mick. Love you," he said without even turning around.

He left me standing there, in the center of a freshly-hollowed crater. I wanted to throw something at him as he walked away, but he didn't deserve that. He was right. Mother was the one I had to confront. It wouldn't be easy to wrestle the truth out of her, even

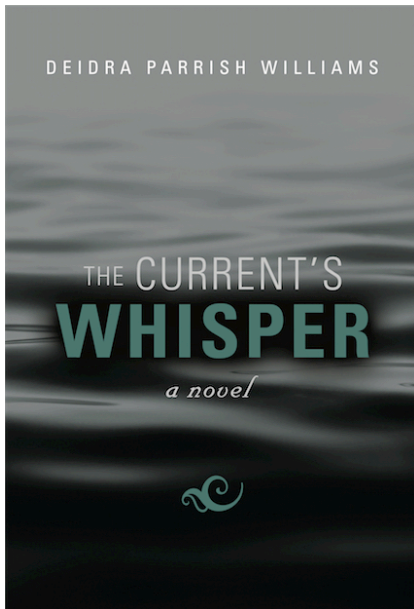
with her failing health. But one way or the other, I had to do it before it was too late.

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