

THE MUSIC WITHIN YOUR HEART



Due to hatred beyond their control, Sophia and her family are forced to flee, leaving behind her secrets and the young love she forged. Can true love reunite childhood friends ripped apart for decades?

The Music Within Your Heart

By Isaac Samuel Miller

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Is love enough for a happy ending?

ISAAC SAMUEL MILLER

The Music Within Your Heart
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Section One

Chapter 1: **Destiny Delayed:** *The Trip Down Memory Lane*

Summer

July 19th, 1963

The sun began to rise as I woke up in the backseat of my dad's car after crying myself to sleep. The day was dismal, and the summer air was deprived of oxygen. An air conditioner from one's car or home was the only thing that could provide a cooling reprieve in California during the summer of 1963. I opened my eyes and reunited with my unwanted fate. Slowly, I lifted my head off the backseat and wiped the morning crust from my eyes. While removing potato chip crumbs from my blue jeans, I adjusted my dark green T-shirt and my pigtail hair style, that was becoming for a child with my round face.

I stared out the back window. My heart inched farther away from my true love as my dad increased his speed. I sighed. My dad should really slow down and turn around so that I can get back to my boyfriend. Just look at him up there, he's driving me away from my man. I slammed both of my fists against the backseat as my emotions erupted. "This year is by far the worst year of my life. My day couldn't get any worse. Perfect timing, Mom and Dad. Brilliant idea! Just pack up and move two days after I lost the California State Spelling Bee. Now everyone is going to think we moved to a new city because I'm a loser!" My dad slightly turned his head to his right and side-eyed me. My mother just scoffed.

My mother and father glanced at me through the rearview mirror. As the sun radiated through my father's light brown skin, his smooth oval-shaped brown eyes accentuated his unblemished skin. He looked at my mom and she smirked while staring into my dad's eyes with a countenance of trust. I exhaled and folded my arms while rolling my eyes. I would love for my mom to do something other than always following my dad's lead. My mom turned away from him and leaned back into the car seat. My mom's perfectly symmetrical face resembled the Mona Lisa. Her long eyelashes jumped out onto an onlooker's eyes, and her lips were positioned atop a wonderful physique, one that displayed the anatomy of a perfect woman.

They continued to sit in silence while I wrestled to filter through my heart's broken thoughts. I laid back on the seat, then suddenly rose again, eager to resolve my plight. I breathed in deeply and released a boisterous sigh. My dad glances at me through the rearview mirror, raising his eyebrows. *I hated to say goodbye and leave my best friend alone, with all our secrets buried in the midnight forest. I can't believe my dad is forcing me to move away from everything I love. I wish my parents could read my mind. I'm trying my best not to think about everything I'm leaving behind as we travel across this stupid bridge.* I continued to empty out my emotions while crossing the Golden Gate Bridge from Marin County to head toward our new abode in San Francisco. Filled with rage, I said, "Dad, this isn't fair! You know I didn't want to move." My dad stared at me, but he was silent.

While listening to the luggage move around in the trunk, I couldn't help but think: *Why did my dad allow the broken community of Novato to force us into exile?* My father delivered the news that we were moving six months ago during a family meeting. I felt like I was mentally prepared to move, but as this dreaded day drew near, I realized that my heart wasn't ready to leave my best friend. My dad ran over the leg of a chair, and the bump jolted our heads into the air

like a rocket. I frowned and held back the rage that was rushing toward my lips. I felt like screaming. I positioned my right foot in front of me, ready to kick the back of my dad's seat, but I changed my mind. Geesh—Dad. Why can't you see that I am in love? I really wish things could stay the same. I miss him so much already.

When my father delivered the news that we were moving, I stood up from the kitchen table as my mom and dad stared at one another. The chilling glance they gave me was too much to bear. Instantly, their stares filled my heart's eyes like a machine gun's relentless onslaught. I felt their intense disappointment in me. During that moment I discovered that the human heart is more powerful than the-all-encompassing human brain. Sammie is my addiction and my emotional high. I reacted to their stares with a sprint as my dad shouted, "Sophia, get back over here!" What a memory.

This is a bumpy car ride. I frowned while thinking of my love, looking at the back of my dad's head. I should've kicked his stupid seat earlier. I looked up at the wagon's ceiling before proceeding with my thoughts. My parents aren't aware that their synchronized voices interrupted my resolve to revisit the thoughts that only the love of my life knows. I can still hear his gentle but maturing voice like it was yesterday, whispering in my heart, "Sophia, get down, don't jump!" His earthshaking voice saved my soul. I sighed. The reality of losing Sammie pushed me to entertain thoughts of executing an idea, one that the racist community of Novato would have been proud of. Since we are apart now, I wish he'd let me finish what I started in the midnight forest.

I shook my head and smiled. *Exactly who was I trying to fool? I couldn't resist Sammie's piercing blue eyes; they complimented his curly blonde hair extremely well. He has the cutest little cheeks I've ever seen. I especially love how they rose whenever he used to sing to me. The night he rescued me, he looked at me like I was the most*

important person alive. I placed my hand over my heart. *I never got my chance to tell him that I love him too.* My heart compelled me to stare out of the back window at the life I was leaving behind. I was grief-stricken with my first heartache.

I dried my eyes with my hand. I could feel my tears drop out of my pupils every second that my dad's car inched away from Sammie. I scoffed. My face looked like a waterfall. I rolled my right hand through my hair to feel the gentleness of my curls. *Love will make you do some crazy things. I really need my Sammie, and no one is keeping me away from him.* I screamed and pleaded for my dad to turn the car around. I forced them, especially my dad, to recall the despicable reasons why he decided it was best for us to move. Before I could say my brother's name, my dad turned around to straighten me out. We swerved into the middle lane as my dad lost focus and said, "Don't you dare accuse me of not being fair ever again! My job is to protect my family, and besides, your brother would have been a little more supportive than what you're demonstrating."

I scooted forward while sliding my butt against the car's backseat, with both of my fists clenched together like I was ready to battle. I'll regain my happiness by force. I grabbed onto both sides of my dad's car seat. "I beg to disagree, you're totally wrong Dad! You didn't know Timmy like me."

My dad immediately reacted. He lost his cool after his eardrums embraced the painful thump of my brother's name echoing throughout his memories. He slammed on the brakes and stopped the car in the middle lane of the Golden Gate bridge, turning on the emergency lights and parking his car right in the middle lane like it was a parking lot. My mother screamed.

"Anthony, what are you doing?" He ignored her.

Several people stared and passed us by, gazing with perplexed eyes. My mom placed her left hand on the glove compartment and rolled the window down to expunge the saliva that sank into her throat from an adrenaline rush. As sweat broke through her skin, she quickly observed the awkwardness of our family scene.

My mother was frantic, but she calmly asked my dad to put the car back into drive.

My dad chuckled, pressing down onto the gas to antagonize her. He politely uttered a word my mom hated to hear. My father said, “No.”

In silence, we listened to the sounds of cars pass us by at sixty to a hundred miles an hour. It seemed like we were trapped motionless in time, then I heard my mom’s predictable words. She placed her right hand on her heart, as though she was executing the pledge of allegiance, and stared at my father as he rubbed his hands down his face, with what appeared to me to be enough force to tear his own skin.

Then my mother erupted like a volcano. “You know, I was going to try to just move forward without addressing this with you. But now, I see that we need to have this conversation right now.” My father glanced at her. “Don’t give me that look like you’re an innocent child. I know you very well, so I know what you’re thinking.” My mom shook her head. “Yes, Anthony, we’re having this talk right now in the middle of this freaking bridge!” My dad looked at her with a look of reticence as she continued in a lower tone, “Yes, we’re having this conversation. It’s been a year since his death, and we still haven’t addressed it as a family.” She faced my dad, and in a nonaggressive way, pointed her finger at him. “You can’t keep telling me you don’t want to talk about it.” My dad sighed, tapping on the steering wheel. “Anthony, you didn’t even come to your own son’s funeral. Why?”

Because you've convinced yourself that his murder was your fault. You can't keep blaming yourself."

It was rare to observe my old man in silence. But on that fateful day, my mom was letting him have it.

They continued to argue over the next ten minutes while I recalled the final four weeks of my brother's life.

I used to hear a lot about the pain of death through my dad's military stories. I now appreciate death's sting. My Timmy was my first experience with losing someone close to me. I grew accustomed to waking up to the loud sounds of my big brother brushing his teeth. That fool sounded like a wildebeest whenever he brushed his teeth. Every morning I yelled out, "Timmy, can you please close your door and stop all of that freaking yacking!" My brother brushed his teeth like he hadn't cleaned them in decades. His teeth were so white and perfect, which is why I didn't get his strict regimen. He relentlessly brushed his teeth for twenty minutes every morning. I dropped my head due to despair. Big bro, I really miss you.

Timothy was a natural born runner. Girls loved to see him run track. He placed first in all his home meets at Winnebago High School. Timmy participated in the four-hundred-meter race, and he was good at hurdles. He always slaughtered his competitors during his hurdle races.

Every morning my brother would brush his teeth, kiss me on the cheek, and say, "Little sis, what do you want for breakfast?"

I often replied, "Jerk, you know what I want." My brother would say, "Okay. That's a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with two eggs coming your way."

Boy, I surely miss those days.

Timothy was four years older than me. He lived long enough to finish half of his senior year in high school before he was killed. He planned to become a minister if his running career didn't work out. I really miss his prayers, too. Every morning he prayed for me, Mom, and Dad after he brought me breakfast in bed. After my brother whipped up his fancy breakfast entrées, he prepared his mind for his early morning jogs before he went to school, even though we lived in a racist town. The area we lived in consisted mainly of Black folks, mixed with a few kindhearted Caucasians. My dad assumed he was accepted in the Novato community because he served a few years in the military during the precipice of the Vietnam War. He gradually changed his views during the final four weeks that ultimately culminated in my brother's untimely demise.

I remember the incident that sparked a change in my dad's views like it was yesterday.

My dad, mom, brother, and I woke up to a shattered kitchen window. I entered the kitchen, pointing to the brick that shattered the window. Attached was a note. My dad picked the note up and read it angrily as his lips quivered. "Keep that black monkey off Shelly Street."

I panicked and ran to hug my dad, wrapping my arms around him like he was a teddy bear. My dad wiped my tears as my mom followed my course, seeking comfort from him too. Then, my father approached Timmy. I felt tension developing in the air while noticing Timmy, slowly, walking backwards upstairs. Timmy tried his best to be silent, but each of his footsteps bounced off the stairs like repeated cracks of broken bones. It was apparent that Timmy was guilty of something. My dad tightened his robe and pointed his fingers toward my brother

while still approaching the stairway. Timmy was standing atop the stairs at that point.

My dad placed his right foot on the bottom step of the stairs and looked up at Timmy as his voice trembled, “Timothy, what’s really going on?” My dad dropped his head and shook it from left-to-right. “I told you to stay away from Shelley Street, you know that block is flooded with the Klan!”

My father signaled for Timmy to come downstairs with his index finger. Timmy was annoyed, sighing before making his way downstairs to confront my dad’s gesture. He approached with caution. I miss Timmy.

My brother looked just like my dad.

Neither one of them had an Afro or any other popular hairstyle. They both had low haircuts, which complimented their high cheek bones. Their facial structures were engineered to fit their big, gorgeous, oval-shaped hazel-brown eyes. While my dad was dressed in a brown robe, Timmy had on a white tank-top that perfectly fit his chiseled physique. After positioning himself two feet away from my dad on the stairs, Timmy exploded and expressed his true emotions.

“Dad, we can’t let those fake Christians take over our lives. Besides, I’m too fast for them to catch anyway,” said Timothy.

My father shook his head before slamming his right fist against the rails of the stairway. “Boy, do you think this is a game? Your Black behind can’t outrun bullets! You’re not in some action movie.” My dad squeezed his forehead. “Timothy, this is real life, and there are evil people in this world who want to lynch you, just because you’re Black,” said my father.

My father stepped forward and placed his hands on Timmy's shoulders. "Please, Son, you're the only son I have, please don't run on that street anymore." My father burst into tears.

While watching my father, I thought to myself. I know the real reason why Timmy likes to jog on Shelley Street every morning.

My best friend, who lives a block over from our street, mentioned something shocking to me in the midnight forest. My friend said he saw my brother exiting the back door of some girl's house. I recalled him stating that her name was Molly. He mentioned he knew Molly's dad, and that there was no way her dad was home if my brother was there—not that I cared, but Molly was White.

My thoughts were interrupted as I felt the wagon begin to move from its parked position on the Golden Gate Bridge. The engine roared as my dad pressed down on the brakes. "That's enough, Debra!"

My mom didn't respond. It was like she knew how far she could go with him. Only the sounds of moving cars coupled with my father's engine could be heard. The silence helped to drift my mind back into my thoughts of Timmy. I exhaled.

I just wish Timothy had been smarter with his decisions. My brother didn't know that I was aware of his girlfriend. I thought it was best that my brother's secret remained clandestine. Maybe I should've said something to my parents? It's not like I didn't get sick every time I pondered the likelihood of some racist prick killing Timmy. I remember Spring of 1963 like it was yesterday. Timothy's final weeks alive were both haunted and cherished memories. I vividly remember the day that started it all.

During the earlier part of that day, I walked into the hallway that led to Timothy's bedroom. His room was next to mine positioned to the left.

I was spying on him a little. I liked to spy on my big bro.

Unbeknownst to Timothy, I observed him checking his watch. After observing his focused demeanor, I walked away from his room.

The day was gloomy as hatred filled the air of our Novato neighborhood.

Later at some point, Timothy developed an urge for a late afternoon snack, so he approached me, dressed in a white jogging suit. His quadriceps protruded out of his pants like a nail that couldn't fit into a wall. His upper body was well-defined, like an Olympic athlete.

College scouts were heavily on Timothy's tail for track and field. His chiseled facial structure was at a level above a model, too. He had everything going for him.

As I laid on the couch, half-dressed in a big pink T-shirt, Timothy approached me. Although it was just approaching evening time, I already had on a head-covering in preparation for bedtime. He stood directly over me while I stared at him, my body mimicking someone inside a coffin. He asked, "Do you want to walk to the store with me, Sophia? I'm dying to get a soda."

I sat up on the couch, but before I had a chance to fully consent to going with him to pick up a coke, he turned around to greet my father. My dad worked as a part-time sales consultant, but we survived because of his military checks. "Dad, do you mind if Sophia and I walk to One Stop to grab a couple of cokes?" Timothy asked.

My dad remained seated in his lazy-boy chair, with his feet propped up while drinking a cold beer. "Yeah, that's fine son." My dad pointed his fingers at my brother. "Just remember what I told you about going on Shelley Street. Make sure you take another route, okay?" said my father.

Timothy smirked. “Dad, you worry too much. Come on, Sophia, let’s bounce! You should take your new bike for a spin to the store.”

“Can I, Dad?” I asked. My dad placed his feet on the floor while lifting his eyebrows.

“Yes, Sophia, just don’t do that monkey bar crap.” He shook his fingers at Timothy and I, delivering an engaged forewarning gesture. “You two already know that certain people in this community are just dying to call you monkeys,” said my father.

For some reason, on the day we went to pick up cokes, I couldn’t get my dad’s voice out of my head, “Just don’t do that monkey bar crap.”

Despite my trepidation, the adventurer in me kicked in, whispering inside: Sophia, admit it, you love these monkey bar bike rides—they’re so much fun. My internal thoughts preceded a loud outburst, “Timmy, let’s roll!” Timothy and I mischievously decided to use the alternate route my father warned us not to take.

I did not realize at the time that I would vehemently grow to hate myself for disobeying my father. I still remember the joy my brother exuded.

Timmy’s large, dark brown eyes stared at me as he stated, “Sophia, get off the monkey bars and come pedal. I feel like running.”

My brother was hardheaded. He rarely listened to my dad. I felt safe with my big bro, though, so I often followed his lead. Timothy loved running and he wanted to be the fastest man alive. I was always impressed with his passion. He used to capitalize on every opportunity he had to run—that boy loved it.

I started to pedal faster while gallantly attempting to beat my brother to the store. Before starting my victory chants, I noticed him

almost running right next to me. “Timmy, you’re getting slow, you can’t keep up with your little sissy,” I said.

He glanced at me while turning his head to his right. “Sophia, you’re on a bike, just remember that.”

I put my head down and pedaled as fast as I could. “Ha-ha, excuses, excuses.”

I heard my brother scoff, then a disposition of caution insidiously possessed his soul. “Sophia, look up,” said Timothy.

I lifted my head to witness a massive clan of six White men standing about fifty yards away from us on a nearby sidewalk. I could tell that the men were eagerly anticipating our arrival based on the racial epithets I heard. Without hesitation, I made a sharp turn into the woods, that I knew all too well.

I pleaded with my brother, “Hurry Timmy, come on, let’s go this way! I know my way around these woods.”

Timmy’s breaths roared like a race car’s engine. He was the epitome of horsepower on two feet.

He screamed, “I’m right behind you, Sophia! Just pedal faster and don’t look back, I’m right behind you!”

A violent stampede seemed imminent as the voices of the hateful men synchronized together, shouting racist names. While the men united in their broken chorus, we continued to run for our lives. I heard their chains and a few of the men saying, “I’m going to beat your monkey brains out with my bat!”

A few of the men shouted the one word that all Black folks hate.

While gasping for air, Timmy erupted, “Sophie, please—please, pedal faster!”

I knew my brother was scared. He only called me Sophie when he was terrified.

My brother continued to sprint for his life while running behind me, screaming, “Sophie, let me pedal and you get on the front of the bike.” The sounds of severing leaves echoed in the woods as the blood-thirsty men continued to charge at us.

Within seconds, Timmy implemented his suggestion and swiftly placed me on the front of the bike. He pedaled like an Olympic cyclist.

One of the men managed to hit my brother in the back with a bat while we changed positions. I still remember the sound of the bat, pushing against the evening breeze, nature’s friction easing the force of that racist prick’s blow.

My heart is forever indebted to my brother for his heroism. There is no way I would’ve been able to keep pedaling at the pace I was going. I was so out of shape. I think my brother knew I wasn’t going to last much longer, so he sacrificed his momentum to give me a fighting chance when we switched positions. It wasn’t until later that night that my parents and I discovered his midback was broken.

During the chase, Timmy pedaled with everything he had, but those savages just kept on chasing us. Eventually, four of them stopped, but two of the younger ones from the group refused to give up. As we inched closer to a body of water, leading to our house, I realized we had to jump in the lake—to swim for our lives.

A tear fell from my face after arriving at the body of water. While panting Timmy said, “Okay Sophie, which direction? You mentioned

earlier you know these woods very well.” He stared at me, eagerly awaiting my response.

I can still see the fear in his eyes.

Swimming across the water was the only way to escape.

While observing him looking back, we both heard chants of hate bearing down on us like hot lava from a volcano. “Timmy, we have to swim for it!”

“Sophie, if we swim, we’ll lose our momentum.” He grimaced as we both panted. “Gosh, my back is really hurting,” said Timmy.

I pushed my bike onto the grass while pointing at the lake. “Timmy, the lake is our only chance!”

As the men’s voices closed in, my brother shouted, “Sophie, hurry—jump in the water and swim.” He kissed me on the cheek. “I love you, don’t worry about me.”

I could feel his eyes fixated on me as I heard his voice vibrating across the water. “Swim, Sophie! Swim!”

The lake was usually deep, but on that day, the waters were shallow.

The two men were right on Timmy’s tail. Once out of the water, I looked back one final time to observe my big bro charging at the men who were about one hundred yards away from him. I supplicated God to help Timmy return home alive.

I still remember how I felt once I realized I had to swim for my life. I didn’t know at the time that I would name the lake I swam in the Lake of Tears. I didn’t know at the time either—only four weeks

later—what I thought was a lake of safety would eventually bear a deplorable name.

I swam for about two minutes in the lake before exiting the water to run home as fast as I could. My house was no more than three miles away. While running I overheard a distant voice saying, “Hey, are you okay?”

The voice sounded just like the strange boy’s voice who I’d met. There was no time to clarify who was talking to me—I kept running while yelling, “Someone, please, call the police, they’re going to kill my brother!”

My thoughts of Timothy were interrupted again when the car halted. Lifting my head, I observed several traffic lights, wondering which direction my father would turn. I looked through the back window as we exited the Golden Gate Bridge. My dad took a quick peek at me through the rearview mirror. It was obvious he felt remorseful about his tone with my mom. He looked dejected.

I turned my head away from him, still upset about moving. My dad turned left then I resumed my thoughts.

When I finally arrived at my house, I rushed inside to tell my dad what happened. My dad immediately called the police. The sheriff’s office was only five minutes away. After waiting several minutes for the police to arrive, he lost his patience and approached me. Placing his hands on my shoulders, he said, “Sophia, take me where Timothy is!”

“Okay. It was six of them chasing us too, Dad!”

My dad instructed my mom to stay home and get a shotgun while she waited for the cops. Two weeks later, we discovered why the police never showed up during that fateful night. They were

preoccupied looking for a Black man who injured a White man in the woods—the guy my brother accidentally hit in the head with a bat while defending himself.

I guess my dad intuitively knew we went on Shelley Street, because he yelled at me as we exited the front door.

Night had fallen as we ran through the woods, and the sound of crickets echoed.

My father's indignation gradually increased as he entertained thoughts of Timmy being lynched.

The crackling sounds of leaves filled the night air, then my father lost his cool. While running and pushing low hanging tree branches away from his face my father said, "I just know that my boy is hanging in one of these trees." He looked to his right at me while I stopped to catch my breath. Pointing his fingers at me, he screamed, "I told you two not to go on Shelley Street!"

While weeping I said, "I'm sorry Dad, we should've listened. I just know Timmy is dead now."

"Your brother is a fighter, but six men is a lot for him to handle all by himself. I'm sure the KKK will send more men after him." My father looked up into the night sky. "Lord, please, help my son. These woods is a perfect place to murder a young Black boy."

My dad continued to charge forward into the throes of heroism; sprinting to rescue his only son from being executed for the crime of being Black, with a pistol in his right hand and one of my brother's baby teeth in the other.

At the time, I didn't know my dad kept our baby teeth for good fortune. We both were on edge as we drew closer and closer toward the lake. It was then that we witnessed Timothy swimming.

Timmy was only ten yards away from safe and dry ground.

My dad cried out, “Swim, Son!” His voice trembled as tears drifted inside his mouth. “Your daddy is coming!”

Before my dad had a chance to jump in the lake, my brother began to crawl out of it. I briefly stared at the army of KKK members dressed in white sheets.

Thank God they were a good distance away from us.

My stare was interrupted by thunderous sounds of gunshots—then my dad increased his pace after observing my brother being struck by a bullet. I instinctually dropped on the ground. My father confirmed my fears. “Stay down, Sophia,” he yelled.

Dust from the ground entered my mouth. It felt like I could taste death as I observed my brother limping toward us, then I stood up to face my family’s dire situation.

My brother was struck in his right calf after jumping out of the water; bloody and scared for his life.

My father wrapped Timmy’s arms around his neck and said, “I love you, Son!” His voice was filled with ardor. “Daddy is here now!” My brother limped for three miles to escape the jaws of death.

Unfortunately, this would be his only time.

As we continued running for our lives, I heard the same strange voice again, “Hey, are you all okay?”

I knew it was the same voice. What captured my attention at that time was when he said, “Sophia, are you all okay?” I turned around to see who the mysterious voice belonged to, before I was distracted by my father’s commanding call.

“Sophia, let’s go, we don’t have time to slow down. Some of them may have swam across the lake to hunt us down,” said my father.

When we arrived at our house, my mom rushed to the door and hugged my brother extremely tight while crying. “Thank you, Jesus,” she said. A few minutes later, we all jumped in the car to take Timmy to the hospital.

Before we stepped into the car, Timmy hugged me and said, “I told you I would be okay Sophie. Sorry about your bike, though.” He smiled.

While standing directly in front of my brother, I maneuvered my hands through my hair and smiled back at him. “I don’t care about losing my bike, I’m just glad I didn’t lose you,” I said.

Timothy wrapped his right arm around me. “Sophie, your bike saved my life. One of the guys’ shoestrings got tangled-up in it. Your bike pulled him down when he charged at me. His head hit the handlebars and the impact knocked him out. At that point, I knew I only had one of them to worry about. I managed to grab the other guy’s chain when he swung it at my face.” Timmy stepped into the backseat of our car. He grunted due to his injuries. “I grabbed his chain and pulled him close, then I kicked him in his knee. My kick forced him to the ground. After he fell, I picked up his bat and aimed for his knees. But he charged at me from an awkward angle, which caused me to strike him once in the head. I feel terrible, I think-- I may have seriously hurt him,” said Timmy.

Timmy always thought of others, and he aimed to turn the other cheek.

A part of me knew then that he had practically committed suicide, or that he would be arrested and spend the rest of his life in prison. No one was going to believe his truthful testimony of self-defense. Marin

County was ninety-five percent Caucasian and most of them were racist. At the time, I was just very happy that my brother was still alive.

After we got back from the hospital with Timothy, I couldn't help but ponder all night over the identity of the voice that would one day name and rescue me before I leaped from the Tree of Destiny. The strange voice I heard while running through the woods during the night Timmy and I were attacked revealed its identity shortly after that.

I assumed my brother's near-death experience, fractured scapula, and his injured calf muscle would've stopped him from seeing Molly. Instead, he went right back into foolishly sneaking out to see her—just a few days after he survived our bike ride to One Stop.

That same day, I'd heard one of the Klan members on the radio with a calloused voice of darkness say, "A monkey—a freaking monkey hospitalized Billy Joe." He chuckled after completing his statement. If only I'd known that Molly would be the catalyst for guaranteeing Timmy's demise, I would've mentioned his secret to my parents.

After Timothy's death, I think that's when my dad's blood pressure issues started. He was never the same. Every so often, I used to witness my dad crying in the living room with a can of beer saying, "What kind of pathetic loser allows his only son to be killed?"

He never forgave himself. My father claimed he thought it was best for us to move because of the death threats and burning crosses that became a weekly occurrence for us.

My brother was missing for two days before we discovered his corpse.

Unwanted Discovery

The day my brother went missing was agonizing for me and my parents. My father reported Timmy missing after he didn't come home one night.

I woke up to sounds of my bedroom door swinging open. I rolled over on my back and lifted the comforter from over my face. I could hear my father panting like a cheetah in duress while he stood next to my mom. My mother anxiously released a shocking statement.

“Sophia, your brother never came home last night. I just know something bad has happened to him.” My father walked forward and hit a nearby wall with his right hand, causing one of my baby pictures to fall onto the floor, shattering glass and scattering it about.

I wiped the crust from my eyes. “Maybe he’s at a friend’s house or something?”

My mother’s hands were on her hips. “Sophia, if you know something—” She pointed to my father, who was pushing the broken glass into one isolated area with his right foot. She continued, “Honey, if you know where your brother is, now is not the time to be a protective little sister—you’re not selling him out if you tell us where he is.”

My father turned his head to his right to face me while still kneeling. He exhaled. “Sophia, please listen to your mother.” He hesitated. “Does Timothy have a girlfriend or anything?”

Removing the comforter from over me, I sat up, sliding my feet into my slippers that were beneath my bed. I stood up and walked toward my parents while avoiding the broken glass. Bending down, I hugged my father. Surprisingly, he began to cry uncontrollably. My father rarely sobbed. “I just know something isn’t right—those pricks have my boy!”

My mother rushed in and lifted him to his feet. We all hugged each other, uniting to embrace the possible imminent danger to one of our own.

While crying, my mother said, “Anthony, I am going to call the police.”

My father responded sarcastically, “Go right ahead, but I’ll be out looking for him myself. You know last time we called the so-called law enforcement squad; they didn’t even show up.” He aggressively pointed his fingers downward while saying, “I’m leaving right now to go search for my son!”

My mother stepped forward, placing her hands gently against his biceps. “Anthony, don’t do anything crazy. You know those people will kill you,” she said with endearment.

He paused briefly before facing my mother, then he turned around to face me. “Sophia, stay with your mom while I go look for your brother.”

We tailed my father as he ran downstairs. He quickly grabbed his rifle by the front door and stormed out of the house. Before my mom had a chance to say something, we both heard the door slam. My mother opened the door, then I overheard my father saying, “Debra, get on back in that house and call the police like you said you were going to do!”

My mom sighed. Seconds later, I heard my dad’s wagon start up—then he backed-out of the driveway as the tires squealed against the pavement.

It was only days later that my best friend and I made a shocking discovery. We were in the woods, walking and talking.

While goofing around, he said, “Sophia, let’s play skip the rock across the lake.” While playing his boyish game, I noticed a red shirt that stopped my rock from skipping across the water. *Oh no. That looks like a dead body. I know my brother is missing.*

I stared at my friend, he looked confused. He was standing to my right about three feet away from me. With reticence, I pointed to my left at a body of water.

My friend asked, “What’s wrong, what is it that you see?” I was silent as I observed him focus his attention on the lake. He stuttered before clearly saying, “Whoa, is that a body?” After hesitating to react, my emotions took over as I panicked.

“I have to investigate if the dead body we see belongs to Timmy.” I sprinted forward, rushing into the water. Once in the lake, I flipped the body over to discover my dead brother, with eight holes in his face and two obvious gunshot wounds to his right temple. Timmy’s face was barely recognizable. His beautifully chiseled facial structure was gone and destroyed forever.

I overheard the sounds of my friend’s presence disturbing the flow of the lake’s calm waves as he rushed in behind me. “Oh God, I am so sorry, Sophia.” He hugged me while I sobbed.

“Jesus, you can tell that he was shot at close range,” I said with a mouth full of tears. I bent down in a shallow section of the water and held my brother’s lifeless body. “Why, God, why?” I gently rested his head in my hands and kissed him on the forehead while saying, “I am so sorry, Timmy. I love you big bro.” My friend tried to pull me away, but I erupted, “Get away from me!” I gasped for air as my tears distorted the smooth flow of my words. “I thought you were supposed to protect me and my family in these woods. How could you let this happen?” He was silent. I stood up and immediately apologized, “I’m sorry. I know that none of this is your fault.” I sighed. He nodded his

head as I said, “I just know that your dad is racist, and you knew about Molly.”

He waved his hands side-to-side in front of his chest and said, “Sophia, I had nothing to do with this!”

I looked up at the sky and noticed a full moon shining brightly above us. “I just don’t know what to think right now. You will never understand what it’s like to be Black. All Black folks just want to be treated like freaking human beings—for once in our miserable lives!”

My best friend shed a few tears while saying, “You’re right! It’s a shame that this happened to your brother. I am beginning to hate my own people for mistreating Black people just because of the color of their skin.” He kneeled beside me. “Look at me, Sophia, please.” I stared into his now teary blue eyes as he spoke. “I can assure you that I care for you. Sophia, I had nothing to do with this. I am deeply sorry for your loss. I will be here with you every step of the way.” He pulled me into his chest as I slowly released my brother’s head. Timmy’s deceased body drifted off with the lake’s mild current. My angry sobs echoed throughout the woods, as pain unlike anything I had ever experienced filled my grieving soul.

I continued to cry uncontrollably while he held me tight. I felt dead inside as the lake’s waters purified my brother’s blood. The lake consumed his body like a dead fish’s leftovers that floated to the top of the water. Timmy’s body was hard to observe. He looked like he had been devoured by a great white shark. The lake’s creatures must’ve taken several bites into his skin; a lot of his flesh was peeled off his face, like a mask that was unwilling to stick to its desired surface. Timmy’s appearance caused even more tears to race down my face like a tropical storm. I exhaled. My brother was murdered ten times over.

Minutes later, my friend walked with me to my house, but he stopped right before we exited a section of the woods—that earned the name, the Midnight Forest.

We stared into each other's eyes, and we both now knew what would happen if anyone saw us together. So, we quietly exited the woods and went our separate ways.

During that night, I named the lake that contained my brother's body the Lake of Tears.

The only thing that kept me together was reflecting on how my best friend was there for me. I smile. Later that night in my room, all I could do was reflect on how, just yesterday, I had discovered my best friend's name. For some unexplained reason, it brought me great joy.

His Name is Sammie

At midnight one day, I entered a section of the woods near my house where I felt like I was free to be myself. I sang at the top of my lungs. My performance was interrupted by an incredible voice, joining in and starting to sing along with me.

I turned to face the unidentified voice. I stared at a familiar adorable boy. He slyly approached, stepping into my personal space. I blushed and waited for him to say more.

Silence filled the air.

I shyly turned around, attempting to run away from what I was feeling—but my heart was paralyzed. My legs were motionless as infatuation's commanding call radiated through my soul.

“I really like that one too. You sing very well.” He extended his right hand, and I shook it. “To finally answer your question from a few days ago. My name is Sammie Walker.”

I pretended to frown, hiding my true emotions. “Sammie, right?” I asked.

He rubbed his chin and smirked. “Correct,” said Sammie. He grinned.

I placed my hands on my hips and took a few steps backwards, creating a little distance between me and his handsomeness. “So, what are you doing out here?” I asked.

Sammie waved his hands around to acknowledge where we were. “I come out here to sing, it’s my escape.” He pointed at me. “I usually wait until you’re done before I begin.” Sammie stepped forward and closed the chasm I created. He smiled while placing his hands against his heart. “I must admit, waiting almost an hour each night for you to finish up has been quite enjoyable for me.”

Placing my hands behind my back, I leaned against a nearby tree to my left. Sammie approached me and positioned himself one foot away from my face, as he cornered me while placing his hands against a nearby tree. His breath was fresh; the smell of Listerine exuded from his mouth. I playfully ducked under his arms and walked briskly with my back turned toward him, before responding to his remarks. “Hmm,” I said while turning back around to face him.

Sammie rubbed his hands across his forehead. “Singing is my passion too.” He walked up close to me again.

I stepped two feet back. “Sammie, was that you yesterday? I heard a voice when I ran through the woods.”

“Yes, that was me. Did you read my last letter?” Sammie asked.

“Maybe. But I wrote you back once regarding another letter you left for me in the tree,” I said.

“Yes, you did, and that’s what egged me on. Your brother needs to stay away from Molly.” He pointed to my favorite tree. “I wrote the most recent letter like a week ago. I placed it in your little tree spot.” He winked his right eye.

I smiled. “I haven’t put anything in there lately, and I haven’t checked it for deliveries either.”

Boy, was I lying. I knew exactly what he was referring to.

“Okay, if you say so. But look, the Klan is out to get your brother, Sophia. I know you didn’t know me at the time, but do you remember when I discussed my suspicions in one of my letters a few months ago?”

Sammie is so handsome. I love his ocean-filled blue eyes.

“Uh, yes, I read those. Do you think Molly sold Timothy out? Like maybe they had an argument and she got upset with him and turned on him?”

“That’s possible, Sophia,” said Sammie.

“How else do you explain the KKK knowing exactly where my house is? Remember when I mentioned in one of my replies that they threw a brick through my kitchen window?” I asked.

My arms were folded as Sammie stood in front of me with his hands inside his blue jean pockets.

“Yes, I remember, Sophia. That’s a great question. I watched Molly toss your brother’s jacket in his face a few days ago. It was apparent that they had a little spat,” said Sammie.

I tossed my hands into the air and clench my fists. “I knew it, I knew something was up with her. I’m going to go straighten her out right now for almost getting my brother killed.”

Sammie scoffed, “You don’t even know where she lives.”

I placed my hands on my hips while gently tapping my finger against his chest. “I don’t need to know because you do.”

Sammie sighed. “I’m not showing you where she lives—that would be messy.”

I frowned.

“I just want to protect you from any kind of drama. Trust me, my beautiful friend-- you don’t want to get mixed up with her family,” said Sammie.

“Beautiful friend?” I asked.

He grinned, grabbing my right hand; I immediately pulled my hand away.

He lifted his eyebrows and held his hands in front of him to suggest that he was harmless. “Yes, you are amazing to look at,” said Sammie.

I just remember blushing. It felt like my lips and cheeks had been propped open with a jackhammer as I held in place a smile that failed to dissipate.

“And don’t jump to conclusions about Molly. I actually think she loves your brother,” said Sammie.

“Oh, is that so?” I asked.

He placed his hands atop my shoulders, gently squeezing them. This time I didn’t pull away. “Yes! Look, Sophia, my dad is the chief

of police, and I can't even stop him from his hateful streaks. So, I seriously doubt that Molly will be able to stop her dad."

After our conversation, I stopped fighting the feelings I was developing for the brave young man who shouted my name in the woods. At the time, I never thought that I would've developed feelings for a White guy, not to mention someone I'd only seen once in my life at that point.

Sammie, no matter where you are, my heart will always cry out for you.

My sweet Sammie was so brave to date a Black girl, despite the horrific stories he told me about his dad. He told me that his mom didn't agree with the hatred his dad tried to foist upon him. He said that his mom was scared to stand up to his father; so, she cleverly appeared to comply with his racist views, out of fear of being beaten and removed from the widely accepted, but grossly mistaken privilege of racial superiority. Something my dad referred to as bigotry.

My painful memories of Timmy's murder are intertwined with thoughts of Sammie—when my family and I traveled toward our new destination during the summer of 1963.

After all these years, I can still vividly feel my final moments with Sammie before we moved away, just months after I learned his name.

Chapter 2: The Midnight Forest

The Night Before We Moved
1963

I walked through the woods alone, eagerly awaiting an opportunity to experience my life's end after discovering I wasn't going to be able to see Sammie anymore. Once my heart fully grasped the reality that we were moving away, suicide seemed like the right thing to do. It was too painful to know that in just a few hours, once the sun came up, I would have to leave my one and only true love.

While strolling through the woods, I picked up a chair I'd placed by a tree I was standing near the day before yesterday. The rope was already hanging from the tree. I wrapped the rope around my neck and crept toward the edge of the chair. Before leaping, I heard desperation in Sammie's voice as he rushed forward, "Sophia, please, don't jump!" My heart fluttered as the rope continued to hang from my neck.

Sammie flashed a small flashlight in my face as I lifted my hands to cover my eyes. His eyes pleaded with me while he sang—"I Can't Stop Loving You" by Ray Charles. Sammie's voice was so beautiful I couldn't help but sing along. During that moment, I knew I was meant to be a singer.

As I continued to stand atop the chair, a few inches from death's outstretched arms, Sammie stated, "Sophia, you have an awesome voice."

I held the top portion of the rope in my left hand above my head. I perked up a little before replying, "Really?"

While distracted by his compliments and heroic romanticism, Sammie cleverly cut me down from the tree, that was seconds away from taking my life. Then, I fell into his arms, wrapping my arms around his neck as he held me in a position that mimicked the execution of a professional dancer finishing a duet pose. He reminded me that Timmy's death wasn't my fault. He even attempted to blame himself for not warning Timmy about going to Molly's house.

These gentle words escaped from his mouth as he lowered me to my feet, "Sophia, a part of me knew one day that he would get caught, but I couldn't help but think of what I would do if someone tried to stop me from seeing you. I would have done the same thing as your brother." Sammie brushed his fingers against my left cheek. "I love you Sophia, and please don't think that I'm crazy. My life has drastically changed ever since we met." I looked at him with elation as my heart thumped. He continued, "After I read your song, I could hear your voice singing the beautiful words you wrote. Your song touched my heart." His voice started to tremble as he garnered more strength to open his heart while holding me with one arm while looking around in the woods. "Your singing forced me to look at life differently; it even compelled me to meditate on the monstrosities that I've witnessed in these woods." He looked around.

I hugged him, elated, as he continued to speak poetry into my heart. He positioned the flashlight to highlight the section of the woods where we were located.

"In fact, I've decided to name this section of the woods where we stand, The Midnight Forest." I smiled. "Sophia, midnight begins a new day for me, and each day reminds me of the unforgettable day I heard your beautiful voice brush against the trees inside these woods. I can't believe nature hid your voice from me for so long." He released his grip, and I held my hands over my heart. "I didn't tell you that I knew you could sing the first time I heard you, because, honestly, I enjoyed

stalking you.” I smiled as he grabbed my hand, pulling me back into his arms.

I felt safe.

It was the scent of his breath mixed with mine, as the closeness of our faces fought the compelling force of love’s magnetic field, that helped me feel secure. I slowly caressed his cute little cheeks while saying, “Sammie, why would you or anyone want to hear a colored girl sing in a town full of racists?”

He leaned in and squeezed my back, whispering in my right ear, “Sophia, I love hearing your voice. In fact, that’s the reason why I discovered your heart. After I heard your voice, I couldn’t help but follow you to see where you lived.” He faced me face-to-face again. His voice elevated. “After I heard you sing, I eagerly sought an opportunity to meet you. I first learned of your name whenever I would guard your soul from a distance. I came out here every night because I wanted to unleash my gift too. And—” He looked downward briefly before lifting his chin again. “And it was then that I knew I had to protect you from the carnage that takes place in these woods.” He accidentally dropped the flashlight, and the light shined away from us to my right and his left. “I watched over your soul as I listened with a strong desire every night.” He grinned. “You were actually out here referring to yourself in third person. I could hear you talking to yourself too.” He smirked.

While smiling I nudged him in his right shoulder before stepping to my right to pick up the flashlight. I flashed the light in his face to return the favor, he squinted his eyes as I said, “Just as long as I didn’t answer myself.” We both laughed.

Sammie blushed. “You might have, but I didn’t hear you.”

I handed him the light while saying, “You’re so funny.”

He shrugged his shoulders and playfully flashed the light into my eyes.

“Sammie, you better stop,” I said jokingly. I quickly glanced at Sammie’s leg.

I wonder why he walked with a limp. I noticed it every time I saw him. It was like one of his legs was slightly deformed or something. It was okay, though. He was still very handsome to me.

Sammie laughed. “I’ll try.” He wrapped his arms around me, and we walked for ten seconds, east of the tree that almost took my life. He flashed his light to his right and pointed to an obscure section of the woods that was compiled with farm machinery. “I managed to go unnoticed by you as I hid over there—only a few yards away from you. Every night for two months, I watched you unleash your gift into the midnight forest. It took me a while to develop the courage to bring you the song I watched you drop. I was so happy you dropped your song.”

I was confused. “Why?”

Sammie squeezed my right hand while facing me. “It gave me a reason to come to your house. I used to bring my gun out here to watch over you too.” I looked at him with flummoxed eyes as he stated, “I know what type of things occur out here after midnight.”

I grabbed his hands while gradually surrendering to his words. Sammie rubbed my hands along the surface of his soft hands. “Sophia, I was prepared to protect you during the night that you and your brother were attacked by the KKK, remember?”

“Yes, I remember that night, Sammie.”

“I withdrew my readiness for battle once I saw your dad running right next to you with his pistol.”

I pondered what he meant by the things that occurred in the woods.

I spun around in a circle, tossing my hands into the air. “Sammie, what type of things happen in the midnight forest?”

Sammie rubbed his chin. “I see you like the new name I’ve given this cherished part of the woods.”

I pointed downward to gesture that the location we stood in was important. “I think I do like the name you’ve given this spot. I’ll be honest too—it’s kind of a corny name.”

Sammie’s face brightened the midnight forest as his adorable and boyish smile canvased the scene. “Since we are naming things,” he pointed to the tree that almost took my life. “I think I’ll name that tree the Tree of Destiny, since it helped bring us to this point in our friendship.”

Weirdo is what I thought to myself while remaining silent.

“I know if I hadn’t heard you sing, maybe my dad’s racist views would’ve infiltrated my heart forever,” said Sammie. He stared at me like a grown man who knew what he wanted. “Sophia, your voice changed my life.” He pointed to the tree again. “Hearing you sing changed my life. It helped me to view all races the same.” He gently squeezed my lips together with his fingers. “I believe your voice has the power to bridge together unloving views.” He placed his hands on his heart. “Your gift makes me feel that love is within my heart.”

I looked around and thought to myself, the tree of destiny is the tallest tree in the forest by far. “Sammie, you’re so poetic! You seem to know all the right things to say.”

“Only with you,” said Sammie.

We walked and talked all night in the midnight forest. He went on to tell me about the evil history of the tree of destiny.

Sammie paused during our walk as howls from a dog echoed throughout the woods. Silence continued to ruminate until I noticed Sammie's gripping of my hand increase in pressure. "Sophia, I've seen some really bad things out here in these woods." I gave him my undivided attention. "The worse was when I saw a Black man—" He gulped. "I just can't say anymore."

I was teary-eyed as I stated, "It's okay, I understand. You don't have to talk about anything that makes you feel uncomfortable."

Sammie shook his head and wiped his tears. "Thank you, Sophia—thank you!"

I squeezed his hand and replied, "You're welcome, Sammie!"

"But I need to tell you the truth about these woods," said Sammie.

He told me everything then he said, "Sophia, will you be my—" I cut him off and replied, "Yes!"

"How did you know what I was going to ask you?" Sammie asked in a happy but slightly bewildered tone, with his eyebrows raised.

I blushed and replied, "Because I read your soul."

A few hours later, I snuck into my bedroom window. My bed was still stuffed with pillows, giving the illusion that someone was in the bed—fast asleep. "Sammie, I miss you already. You were my adorable stalker." I need to be quiet, so my parents won't hear me.

I stepped into the shower and washed my hair. Because of my wonderful Sammie, the tree of destiny failed to capture its one-hundred-and-twenty-sixth victim. It was the final home for dozens of

Blacks who were lynched by hateful racists. I only know the number of victims because Sammie said that he counted the number of victims he witnessed, but we concluded that there probably were more that he didn't see. He alluded to the possibility that his dad would most likely murder me and my family if he found out what I knew. I couldn't resist the urge to ask Sammie if he'd ever witnessed his dad kill a Black person, and if he had ever participated in any of his dad's racist acts. He empathically said, "No!" He mentioned that most of the people who conducted the lynchings were his dad's friends.

Sammie often walked half a mile to enter the midnight forest late at night. He sang at the top of his lungs too. I enjoyed learning that he was scared to tell anyone because his dad often called him a sissy for singing. This was why Sammie ran to the midnight forest to unleash his gift.

As I finished reflecting on Timmy and Sammie, finally, we arrived at our new abode in San Francisco.

Our new house was a different experience; I missed Sammie even more once we got there.

The New House

1963

I walked toward the new house, noticing that it was much bigger than our old house in Marin County. Friendly White and Black people welcomed us to the neighborhood. The open windows in the house welcomed the brightness of the early afternoon sun. While touring our new home, we heard a loud knock on the door. We were upstairs in my parent's bedroom when my mom said, "Wait just a minute, I'm coming." She tapped my father on the shoulder as she walked by him.

He was standing with his back against the entrance of the room. They walked downstairs together and then my father quickly turned around and said, “Go ahead get the door baby, I really have to pee.”

I followed suit a few seconds later, after overhearing a few men walk inside. I rushed downstairs. I observed two men with austere countenances dressed in military uniforms. Both men seemed to avoid interrupting one another as they unitedly asked, “Is Mr. Smith home?”

My mother looked at the men. “How did the military find us so fast?”

A tall White man responded. “Mr. Smith informed us of his move months ago, which is a requirement.”

A few seconds later, my dad rushed downstairs to the front door and saluted them. I overheard the men informing my dad that he was needed for another assignment. The two men were standing with their backs facing the front door and my mom was standing next to my dad. My dad was to the left of my mom.

My dad pointed at the men as he sighed with his hands placed on his hips, saying, “Now, you two know that I’ve served my country already—I’m a conscientious objector now.” My dad looked at the tall man. “Come on, Alex.” The shorter White man pushed his army hat down onto his head to cover his forehead a little more, as he and his counterpart continued to stand in front of my parents like assembled statues with great posture.

Alex stepped forward and the sounds of his boots bounced off the gray wooden floors. He replied, “Anthony, you must return to the base. Besides, John and I both know that you’re making that up—you’re no objector.” He placed his right hand on my dad’s left shoulder. “The psychiatrist will assess you and determine whether or not you’re still fit for battle. If you don’t come, you’ll lose your benefits and monthly

income.” Alex pointed at the other man with him. “We both know you need the money to take care of your family.” Alex’s head moved around as he surveyed the house before saying, “And nice new house, by the way.”

My dad paused before pulling my mom into the kitchen. I could hear them talking low amongst each other over the next two minutes. While my parents discussed things, I noticed the other man with Alex glance up at me on the stairway, which was positioned directly in front of the door. Then my dad walked back toward the front door while holding my mother’s hand. I overheard my father saying, “I’ll be there next week.” He scoffed.

“Okay. You have six days to show up,” Alex said.

I walked to my bedroom and left my door ajar after noticing the men preparing to depart. My dad walked them outside.

A few seconds later, he walked back inside the house, and I heard the car that the men were in crank up before they backed out of the driveway. I stepped out of my room to view my parents from the stairway while leaning on the top rail of the stairway. I looked to my left and noticed my father briefly glance up at me. I pretended to be surprised as I waved at my father. My mom erupted into a clamor, “I don’t want to lose you too, Anthony.” She grabbed his forearm and massaged it. They were standing by the front door, and my dad was nearest to me on the left side of the door.

My dad sighed. “Honey, I’m sure they will release me after they assess my health.”

“I sure hope so, because I can’t lose another one of my loved ones. I’ve already lost my son, so I can’t lose you, too.”

My dad promised my mother that he would be ok as they hugged and kissed.

Three months later, the same two men showed up to mention that my father was killed in the war.

“I told you all to leave my Anthony alone! Now he’s gone forever!” My mom screamed.

The two men united in a sigh as Alex said, “We’re sorry for your loss. You and your daughter will be taken care of.” I stood next to my mom as she held me and sobbed.

The pain from hearing my mom cry her heart out was unbearable. I didn’t know what to do.

Seconds later, I was overwhelmed by my heart’s own tears. Subsequently, the men left and the same sound of their engine cranking up flooded my memories with images of my dad and the good times we shared together.

Over the next few hours my mom and I mourned, pondering how we were going to survive without him.

“The military will take good care of us, though,” said my mom as we held one another on the living room couch.

She looked around at our house with a face full of tears. “The military will send enough money to pay for the house.” She released a deep exhale. “Uh, I’ll ask your Aunt Terri to come live with us so that she can help out too.” She dried my tears with her fingers, pulling me into her chest as I laid my head atop her breasts. “Your dad’s mom might be the better and more convenient option, though.”

I looked up at my mom and smiled. “I like Grandma Pat,” I said.

“Yeah, Patricia is something else.” My mother patted me on my right thigh. “Oh, and the military promised to pay for your college expenses, too.”

I sat in silence and listened to my mom.

The day ended, and the next few days were dismal moments in time for me and my mom. Five days later, we attended my dad’s funeral.

After my dad’s funeral, my mom was never the same. She started smoking and drinking all the time. She completely let herself go.

A couple of years after my dad’s death, when I turned sixteen, she was admitted into a mental institution; my dad’s mom looked after me. My grandmother was very lenient with her supervision.

Laying in my bed one night, I thought to myself. I am so thankful for my grandma Pat. She comes over weekly and stays with me when my aunt Terri can’t come. They both really help in stabilizing my life. But I must admit, the main thing that helps to keep me afloat is thinking about something my dad said to me. “If you and Sammie are meant to be together, he’ll find his way back to your heart.” I turned over onto my right side and fell asleep.

Sleep was the only time I had peace.

I used to sleep so much that three years flashed before my eyes—very fast.

Chapter 5:
Welcome to The Blues Cafe:
The Moment of Truth

July 15th

2:30 p.m.

Sophia's First Stop

I hopped out of a taxi and faced a venue. “Hmm. Soul Flare.” I walked toward a medium-sized white building. I liked the architecture of the building. It reminded me of a house. Its wooden posts were elegant, and they complimented the gray shutters. I looked toward my left and noticed a white sign that read: You must be eighteen to get in.

I pulled my sundress down from where it was entangled inside my glutes. I had forgotten my I.D., but at least I was of age—I had turned eighteen-and-a-half a year ago.

I approached the entrance of Soul Flare then another venue three buildings down to the right captivated my attention. Hmm. The Blues Café, I thought. The building should be a darker blue rather than sky blue. The Blues Café was massive compared to Soul Flare. I looked at Soul Flare, then glanced at The Blues Café once more. The Blues Café sounded more like a place where Sammie would play, so I started my search for him there.

I walked for thirty seconds before approaching the entrance of The Blues Café. Abruptly, I was stopped by the café's concierge. The vanguard immediately asked to see a form of identification. “Stop right there, Ma'am! I need to see some I.D. before I let you in.”

Shoot, I forgot my I.D. I look like I'm sixteen. He won't believe that I'm old enough. I smiled and placed my hand in front of my hips.

The guard raised his right eyebrow and grinned while releasing a flirtatious sigh. I hope he thinks that I'm cute. If so, I can flirt my way in, I thought.

I blushed in response to the way he was looking at me. Gently tapping his arm, I said, "What's your name?"

He was leaning against the entrance door of the building with his right foot elevated, pressing against the door. "Isaac." He licked his lips and pushed himself off the door. He folded his arms as we stood one foot apart.

"Isaac, I like that name." I smiled and blew a kiss his way. "Look, Isaac, I really have to use the restroom, but I left my I.D. in the car." I wondered why his countenance shifted.

Isaac held his right hand in front of him and frowned. "Look, Ma'am, I wasn't born yesterday. Now I need your I.D. before I can let you in."

I grinned. "Don't be in such a hurry, Isaac. What's your last name?"

"Johnson, which is why some people call me Mr. John," Isaac said.

"Well, Mr. John, I promise I'm eighteen. But I can't hold my bladder much longer." I flashed my brown eyes while demurely flirting with Isaac. I lowered my voice to sound more seductive while noticing a sign to my right, near the entrance door. Muriel Scotts is performing tonight. I lifted my eyebrows and quickly shifted my eyes as an idea entered my mind. Doesn't hurt to try, he might go for it.

"Please, Mr. John, I am performing tonight. I can't have an accident on myself. In case you haven't noticed, I am Muriel Scotts." I bowed my head in a playful way. I lifted my head after bowing before winking my right eye. *I hope he has never seen Muriel Scotts before.*

He stood back and shuffled his feet. “Oh really? Sing something for me then,” Isaac said.

Oh lord, I’ve never sang for anyone other than Sammie. Gosh, he’s staring at me. “Uh, okay! If I sing, are you going to let me in?”

He chuckled, waving his hands side-to-side while saying, “Nah. If you sing and you sound good, then yes, I will let you in.”

I must do this. Sammie might be here tonight. I swallowed my saliva and said a quick prayer. I sung one tag line from a song I wrote. The final two words of my tag line were Sammie Walker. I breathed heavily while staring at Isaac in anticipation of his response. My facial expression depicted someone who was waiting for a sign of approval.

Isaac clapped. “Wow, you definitely fit the sound of what I’ve heard about Muriel.” He clapped again. “How do you know Sammie Walker anyway?”

I started to perspire. For some strange reason I was taken aback by his question. I was completely motionless for a few seconds. Just hearing his name made me nervous.

Isaac waved his hands in front of my face. “Hey, are you okay?” He asked.

I smirked. “Yes, I’m so sorry. What were you saying?”

While rubbing his cheeks and caressing his beard, he said, “You mentioned Sammie Walker in your song. Are you referring to the local phenomenon?”

“Of course,” I said.

I didn’t know for sure whether or not he was referring to my Sammie. I figured I would just play along and see where it went.

Tossing my hands into the air, I slapped my hands against my thighs as gravity pulled them down. “I know him well.”

“That’s good to know because I’m a huge fan of Sammie. He performs here sometimes with a girl named Molly too.”

I placed my hands on my hips and executed a mild frown. “Oh, really?” I listened to Isaac ramble over the next two minutes. His thoughts were blocked by my inner dialogue. I couldn’t help but think of the Molly that Timmy used to date.

Isaac gestured for me to enter the club by opening the door. “Come on in and use the restroom, Muriel. With a voice like yours, you might put Sammie and Molly out of business.”

I entered the club, pausing after stepping in front of Isaac. “Would you happen to have pictures of them?” I asked. Before Isaac replied, I raised my left hand and said, “You know what, never mind.” I decided to stop being pathetic, I thought it was obvious that Sammie had moved on.

Isaac walked into the building and acknowledged my look of worry. “Are you sure you are, okay?” He asked.

“Yeah,” I said. I rushed to the restroom and cried while tossing a row of toilet paper from one side of the restroom clear to the other side. I halted, glancing at myself in the restroom. I looked so foolish. Thank God no one was in there. I dropped to my knees and ran my hands through my hair. Sammie, you better not be with Molly. I knew how to determine for certain whether Isaac was referring to my Sammie.

I exited the restroom and walked toward the front door. Approaching Isaac, I asked, “Hey, is Sammie playing here tonight?”

We walked outside the café.

He grabbed a pad out of his pocket, pointing to the itinerary on the notepad. “Yes, he is. His show starts around seven o’clock tonight.”

I frowned. Traitor. I planned to wring Sammie’s neck when I saw him. Sammie promised to wait for me.

Isaac interrupted my thoughts as he smiled like a lightbulb shining inside a dark room. His countenance depicted that of one who experienced a sudden epiphany. “Sammie can definitely use some more youth in his group.”

I gulped. “Wait, how old are they?” I asked.

“I’m not good with guessing people’s age, so I don’t even try,” Isaac said.

I began walking away. My backwards prance was interrupted by Isaac’s voice as he stepped forward to pat me on my shoulder.

“Muriel, wait! You have to sign in with my boss, Travis. He told me to look out for you.” He handed me a sign in sheet that was attached to a clipboard.

I held my hands up and said, “Okay, just let me run to my car.” I pointed toward the back of the building. “I’m parked around back.”

Isaac grabbed his chin and scratched his head while I continued walking backwards with a perplexed countenance. He shook his head with a bewildered facial expression and said, “I’ll walk with you around back.”

Immediately, I waved my hands saying, “No need for that Mr. John.” I continued to wave my right hand while slowly lowering my left hand. I ceased my backward stroll then I turned to face the direction I was walking in. Looking over my shoulder to acknowledge Isaac’s presence, I said, “I’ll be back up front in a second.”

“Alright, have it your way.” Isaac turned around and walked to the entrance of The Blues Café.

I sprinted in the opposite direction toward another building. As the distance increased between Isaac and I, I heard him yelling, “Muriel! Where are you going?”

Sophia’s Second Stop: A Date with Destiny

*July 15th
3:20 p.m.*

I rushed into a venture entitled, Frank’s Donut Shop.

Normally I would’ve been winded, but my early morning workouts were paying off. I must’ve jogged for at least ten minutes. I couldn’t believe that Isaac thought I was Muriel Scotts. I panted. Sammie, Sammie, Sammie, you got me doing all types of crazy things, I thought.

I leaned against a wall inside the donut shop, then I walked past a trashcan before pausing at the counter for service. In a mild undertone, I said out loud to myself, “I am hungry,” while staring at a glazed donut. I ordered two chocolate glazed donuts with a bottle of milk. My heart was taken aback by the perfectness of the guy that walked out from the back of the store. He was gorgeous. The guy extended his hand and handed me my donuts. I was standing directly in front of him while he leaned on the counter, resting his forearms against his muscular chest. His arms were toned; his muscular build reminded me of Timmy.

I stood frozen by his attractiveness. He kind of reminded me of Sammie, too. The main difference was that he was Black. The mystery

guy stood six-feet-and-four-inches-tall; his skin was caramel colored and smooth. His eyes were hazel brown, and he had the smile of a man that was confident. He looked like he was twenty-five. I couldn't take my eyes off him, he was gorgeous. While holding my donuts, he smiled and signaled for me to pick up my donuts.

I blushed before grabbing them. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Thank you for the donuts." The way he looked at me, after handing me my donuts, was intriguing. His lips looked delicious whenever he licked them.

The handsome man removed donut crumbs from his white apron, maneuvering his large hands across his lowcut hair, as his chiseled, square-shaped facial structure gradually displayed a boyish smile. His cheeks rose as high as a mountain top, exposing his pearly white teeth. He walked from behind the counter and approached me with the stealth of a regal male lion and asked, "What's your name?"

I expelled a mild cough while clearing my throat. "My name is Muriel Scotts."

"Your name can't be Muriel Scotts, because I know her personally." He laughed. "She performs at The Blues Café this afternoon around 4:00 or 5:00 p.m."

I slapped my forehead. I was so embarrassed. I hoped I wasn't blushing too hard. I was in-awe, the man was gorgeous. I extended my left hand, tucking the donut bag into the right side of my purse. "Please excuse what just happened." I laughed while placing my left hand on my chest. "And my name is Sophia Smith."

He looked up at the clock on the wall above the cash register to his right. "Sophia, I get off in five minutes. You should stick around for a little." He displayed his perfect white teeth. "I want to talk to you for a few seconds. My name is Kyle, by the way." Kyle started walking toward the back of the store.

I didn't expect to meet Mr. Gorgeous there during that afternoon. I should've gotten out of there as soon as possible. "Kyle, look, I am sorry, but I have to go—like right now. I'm kind of in a rush too. And besides, I'm looking for someone."

Kyle turned around and stopped his pursuit toward the back of the store. "So, are you seeing anyone?" He ascertained my hesitancy, walking even closer toward me.

"Well, no not really." I am still unsure why I said that. "I'm here to find my old boyfriend. The only reason we stopped dating is because my dad forced me to move away five years ago."

Kyle laughed while holding his hands with his fingers extended in front of his chest. "Whoa, that's a lot of information." He winked his eye at me. "Save a little for when I get off. And answer this for me though, have you talked to or seen your used to be boyfriend since your move?"

I exhaled. "No, I haven't."

Kyle slyly inched closer and grabbed my hand.

My hands started to perspire.

Whenever I really like what I see, it was always obvious to well-trained eyes. I knew Kyle's eyes were well-trained, so I played the play hard to get game. I pulled my hand back after shaking his masculine hands. My enthralment was interrupted by his words, "Wait here for a few minutes, I'll be right back."

As he walked away, I looked around, observing a vacant shop.

I probably should've left.

I crossed my arms with a guilty countenance. I felt like I was cheating on Sammie. I looked up and observed Kyle approaching. His footsteps moved to the beat of my throbbing heart. I was so nervous.

Kyle parked his face a foot away from mine, pointing to a nearby booth that was behind me, adjacent to my left. “Come eat your donuts with me over here,” said Kyle. He led the way.

I hesitated while looking over my left shoulder with my back facing him. He sat down at the booth, and I smiled. “Since this will be the only time I ever see you, I guess I can eat my donuts with you,” I said.

He gently tapped the table with his fingernails. “Why will this be the only time?” Kyle asked.

I turned to face him while walking toward a table. Standing next to a booth, I said, “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m only in town for one night.”

“This will be the only time I ever see your pretty face?” Kyle asked.

I sat down and slid into the booth before pulling down on my dress with my hands. “Yep!”

He held his hands in front of his chest and pushed against the air while saying, “Okay, no need to be abrupt.” He licked his lips. “Since you’re only going to be here for one night, it won’t hurt for you to tell me where you’re staying?”

I stared into his eyes. “Actually, I never thought about where I was going to lay my head during my bus ride here. I was distracted by my mom, coupled with anticipation to see Sammie.” I blindly planned a trip there during that time without finding a hotel. “I don’t have a place to stay right now, but I’ll just get a hotel,” I said.

“So, that’s the lucky guy’s name.” Kyle lifted his right eyebrow.

I glanced at him. Kyle was such a typical guy.

“By the way, all of the hotels are booked. Everyone came to see Muriel perform tonight. You’ll have to catch a taxi to a motel now—and the nearest one is about thirty-five-minutes away. I doubt that you’ll be well-received in that area, if you know what I mean.”

“You’re right. It’s pretty racist here,” I said.

He grabbed my left wrist and elevated my right hand as I held a donut. He lifted my hand and positioned it in front of his mouth. He took a bite and said, “I think you’ve already found the man you’re looking for.”

That was cute, I thought to myself.

I blushed. No—no, Sophia, you’re here for Sammie. I quickly stood up. “I need to go! Sammie is performing at The Blues Café.”

Kyle stood up and wiped his lips. “If you don’t find Sammie performing at The Blues Café, just swing back through here so we can talk some more if you like. Also, you’re welcome to spend the night with me.”

I waved my hands side-to-side. “No thanks, Kyle.” He was a little pushy.

Kyle followed me toward the door as I walked away. “Okay, but if you change your mind, I’ll be waiting right here until eight tonight,” said Kyle.

Once I made it to the door, I paused. A part of me wanted to stay, but I didn’t know Kyle. I quickly visualized Sammie singing his heart out to me while resisting the urge to look back at Kyle, as I walked out

of the donut shop. Once outside, I noticed a taxi drive by. I signaled for the taxi to stop, then I entered the car. “Please, take me to The Blues Café.” I knew it wasn’t far away, but my feet were hurting.

“Okay, it’s just five-minutes up the road,” said the driver.

“Okay.” The Blues Café was my final stop on that day.

**Sophia’s Third Stop:
*The Moment of Truth***

*July 15th
4:00pm*

The taxi dropped me off at the entrance of The Blues Café.

I peered through the window of the taxi as I sat in the backseat. I observed a long line of people entering and waiting to enter the club. The crowd was going crazy. I exited the taxi and paid the driver. I approached the café while overhearing the MC saying, “Our next performer is going to kick things off a little early this afternoon.” The MC introduced the performer. “Ladies and gentlemen, let’s welcome Samuel Walker to the stage.”

I love his full name, it’s so cute. Although he prefers to be called Sammie over Samuel.

Looking at the long line, filled with excitement I screamed, “I knew it was my love!” I glanced at several people staring at me. Waving my hands, I said, “I’m sorry guys, I’m just excited to see Sammie, I’m a huge fan.”

“Yeah, we can tell,” Someone yelled. Several people laughed.

I paid them no mind.

I heard the singer's voice and smiled. I knew it was him. Without thinking, I sprinted toward the entrance door, attempting to skip everyone in line. I pushed my way past the guard and screamed, "Sammie—Sammie, Sammie, I'm here!" The guard glanced at Sammie singing on the stage. The guard yielded after he realized Sammie recognized me. Sammie's jaw dropped.

I noticed Isaac, the guard from earlier patrolling the stage where Sammie was performing. The new bouncer grabbed me and said, "Lady, have you lost your mind?"

I erupted. "Yes!" Sammie ceased singing, startled. He was wearing a navy-blue suit. The top button of his white-collar dress shirt exposed a patch of sweat atop his chest. He was still staring at me by the entrance door. Our eyes were locked in on one another like a magnet to electricity. I heard the sweet sounds of Sammie's voice echoing through the microphone, "Sophia, is that really you?" A medium-sized crowd was frozen in silence. Sammie looked out into the audience before reattaching the microphone to the mic-handle. Sammie rubbed his forehead and sighed, then he grinned and said, "Uh, look—I'm so sorry guys! But I have to talk to her. I'll be back on stage in just a second."

"Hey, get back on that stage," screamed someone.

As Sammie inched closer, yelling at the doorman. "Please, get your paws off of her, right now!"

Before I had a chance to fully behold the magnificence of the man I love, I observed a beautiful blonde step in front of Sammie.

Who the heck is this heifer? Why did she just grab ahold of him like he's her man or something? Sammie didn't appear to be shocked. What? Then, she just kissed him right on his lips.

I pushed the guard out of my way, sprinting away with a heart full of shame. I cried. I guess my mom was right. I'm so stupid.

I heard Sammie running behind me. "Sophia, wait! It's not what it looks like!"

"Just let me be," I screamed.

I ignored his calls while creating distance with my strides. I thought my dad was the most honest man alive. If my dad was a cheater, then why should I believe Sammie? I paused and turned around after faintly hearing the club manager screaming at Sammie. "You're embarrassing this family. If you don't get back on that stage, you'll never sing in this town again!"

Ahh. That's right, I forgot that Sammie's uncle ran the club he told me about.

I paused and thought to myself for a few seconds. I turned around to face the direction of Sammie's voice. Sammie was nowhere in sight. I placed my hands on my hips and pondered. *He's not the same boy I fell in love with back in the midnight forest.* I lifted my head and began walking toward Frank's Donut Shop.

Along my stroll, I listened to cars pass by. The compacted sounds from the vehicles fused with my rage like a crescendo. Should I really be mad with Sammie? I mean, it has been five years. I guess my mom was right. How foolish of me to think that a man would wait around for me. I'd planned to give him the note that contained the address he left with me. I was going to finally tell him that I love him too. I scoffed while walking along the darkness of the streets. I just wanted him to see that I'd held on to his note. I practically guarded it with my life. I wrote my new home address on the note that I was going to give him tonight too. Originally, I hoped that he would come search for me just like I did tonight. But obviously he's moved on.

Three minutes later, I arrived in front of Frank's Donut Shop. I pulled the door open and synced my broken heart with the sounds of the bells on the door. Yep, that's about how my heart feels—noisy and confused. I entered the shop and observed Kyle walk from the back after he heard the bells. I know my face probably depicted a depressed soul. I breathed in then exhaled.

Kyle smiled when he saw me walk in. He increased his walking pace as he approached me.

My eyes were watery.

Kyle placed his hands on my shoulders. "I can tell that you're bothered by something." He stared into my eyes and his eyebrows elevated into the sky. "What happened? Did you find Sammie?"

I turned my back to him; he walked in front of me, placing his hands on my shoulders again. I quickly grabbed his hands, removing them from my shoulders. I grunted as I tossed my hands into the air while saying, "I found him alright—I found his cheating behind kissing another woman. I should've known Sammie was using me. How stupid of me, to think that a White boy could actually love a Black girl."

Kyle looked perplexed. He scoffed and said, "Wait—wait, wait, what!" He frowned.

I held my right hand up. Kyle and I were face-to-face. "Kyle, please save your pro Black demeanor."

He scoffed again. "Nah, it's not even like that. So, you're telling me that Summie is White?"

I sighed. "It's Sammie, not Summie! And yes, Kyle, he's White." I took a deep breath. "The love of my life is White." I thought it was

foolish of me to date outside of my race after I saw Sammie kiss another woman.

“Uh—” Before Kyle had a chance to voice his thoughts, he yielded to me falling into his arms. He held me as I cried like a baby.

I made a fist, repeatedly tapping his chest with my right hand. I looked up at Kyle as he held me. “I really don’t know why I’m being this open with a complete stranger.”

He rubbed my back and held me tight. “It’s okay.” He reached behind himself and grabbed a napkin to help dry my tears. “I can take you back to my place since you don’t have a place to stay tonight.” He yielded to my unfavorable stare. “I know how that may have sounded, but I promise you—I won’t try anything. I just want to make sure you’re safe, and that’s it. You can stay a couple of nights with me, and then I’ll drop you off at the bus station on Sunday.”

Huh, where did he get Sunday from?

“I never mentioned that I was staying a couple of nights.”

Kyle seemed so anxious. He must’ve really liked me.

“Oh, my bad,” said Kyle.

I attempted to walk away but Kyle cut me off at the entrance. “Sophia, I’m so sorry how that came out. Look, I just want to help you make it through the night, okay.”

I stared at him for a few seconds as my emotions ran wild. “Ugh!” I was too broken to think clearly, so I didn’t resist his charm.

We exited the shop and walked around toward the back of the store. Kyle held open the passenger door of his car. I lowered my head and paused before entering his car. I turned my head to the left while

pointing my fingers in a flirtatious way as I said, “Now, don’t you try anything.”

Kyle smiled and closed the door after I was inside. He walked to the driver’s side and entered the car. We departed into the streets of Marin County, arriving at Kyle’s house about thirty minutes later.

Chapter 8: **Don't Fight What You Feel in Your Heart**

While sitting on the bus, I began to daydream about being back home. I visualized myself taking a warm shower, waking up in the morning to the scent of my home. Suddenly, I snapped back into reality after ascertaining that the bus may have had a problem. Someone was checking under the engine.

Engulfed in daydreaming, I pondered. I hope my bus ride back to San Francisco is peaceful. Meeting Kyle was worth the experience, despite the fact my encounter with Sammie didn't go as planned. If I don't see Sammie again, the thought of what if I'd handled things differently will torment my mind forever. There was no way Sammie could catch up with me with his cerebral palsy.

I sighed. If I had to grade who was better looking between Sammie and Kyle, if I'm being honest, maybe Kyle is aesthetically more attractive. But he doesn't have Sammie's heart. They both are tall with broad shoulders just the way I like my men. But Sammie's gift of music is what united us.

While staring through the window, I observed someone pull up in a white pick-up truck. Seconds later, a guy stepped out of the vehicle, wearing a hat that obscured his face.

It looks like he resembles Sammie.

My face filled with joy.

Is that who I think it is?

I couldn't tell for sure, because I only saw his side profile. I wish I knew what kind of car Sammie drove. That info would've really helped me identify who I was looking at in the car.

The bus started to move.

I stood up to get a better look, but the speed of the bus pushed me back down into my seat. "No!" I missed my clear view of the front of his face. Two silent tears fell from my eyes.

Thirty minutes later, the bus's engine started to sputter.

Oh no, I hope we aren't breaking down.

The bus pulled over, smoke coming from underneath its hood. The driver immediately ordered everyone to get off the bus. Grunts and sounds of frustration from several passengers were rampant. The driver phoned for help.

Finally, after waiting around for an hour for a new bus to arrive, we started driving again. Thirty-five minutes later, we arrived at the bus station in San Francisco.

The bus driver opened the door. I stood up, yawning with outstretched arms. After stretching, I grabbed my luggage then glanced to my left, observing the same white truck from Marin County's bus station.

Is that the same vehicle and guy I saw back at the other bus station?

I observed with intense concentration, noticing what appeared to be Sammie leaning against his car. *Is that my Sammie? He's in the same pick-up truck I saw earlier, too. If he wasn't like seventy yards away, I could see better. That stupid red hat he has on is getting in the way too. I smiled, glancing at the lady in front of me as she looked back at me. If that's him, why is he just standing around looking at his*

watch? He must be waiting around for someone. I rocked side-to-side while peering over the shoulders of the people in front of me. "Come on, come on, hurry up people," I mistakenly whispered out loud. I wish my seat wasn't at the back of the bus. I placed my luggage on the walkway then rubbed my hands across my head. I can't wait to exit this bus.

The line started shifting forward.

Maybe Sammie found my note? I indicated on the note when I was headed back home. Sammie could've easily tracked down the bus station.

I peered out of the window and notice the unidentified guy removing his hat. My face lit up. "That's him!" My smiled expanded from one end of the earth all the way to the other end. My body began to stiffen as nervous feelings attacked my soul.

The line moved forward a little. I looked out of a different window near the front of the bus, smiling as the remaining passengers continued to exit the bus.

My arrival was delayed by an hour or so because of mechanical issues. So, either Sammie was waiting for someone else, or he stuck around just for me. My heart was pounding out of control. I dried sweat from my hands by using my shirt. I wanted to find out what really was going on a few days ago at The Blues Café.

I took a few steps forward and noticed that only five more people were in front of me. Those people were taking way too long to exit this bus. I stomped on the walkway like an irritated toddler. I couldn't miss my chance to talk to Sammie again. I peered through another window. What is Sammie doing? Is he looking at the paper I dropped? I slapped my forehead. I grunted, tossing my head back to express my frustration with the wait on the bus. I attempted to push through the remaining

three passengers in front of me. An older white lady turned around and said, “Ma’am, just wait your turn!” I ignored the lady in front of me, continuing with my pursuit.

It dawned on me that I wrote the old address to my old house in Marin County on the paper. I looked upward. Thank you, God. You must’ve arranged for Sammie to be here at the bus station since you knew he wouldn’t be able to find me otherwise. I sighed. I can’t believe I wrote the wrong address down like an idiot.

Before I was able to exit the bus, I watched Sammie repeatedly looking at his watch. Sammie shook his head like he was frustrated before placing his hat back onto his head.

Hold on, Sammie, I’m coming.

I could tell he was growing impatient. He did that thing where he placed his hands on his hips while squeezing them together with his free hand whenever he was anxious. I was next in line to exit the bus. If Sammie was waiting for me, he had been waiting for almost three hours, and he was about to leave. He must’ve thought I wasn’t there since my bus was a few hours late. It didn’t help that I was the last person to get off the bus. It also didn’t help that another bus was slightly obscuring his view of me too. I could tell Sammie couldn’t see me. The bus right next to me was blocking his view of the middle and posterior sections of the bus I was on. Finally, I stepped off the bus, but Sammie entered his car. “No! Ugh!” His car was facing the street away from me—so he couldn’t see me.

I dropped my luggage and ran behind Sammie’s truck. I screamed, “Sammie, please don’t go!” I sprinted as fast as I could. My cheetah-running instincts kicked into high gear. But my legs were still sore from my workout yesterday with Kyle. Sammie dissipated out of sight as I leaned over to catch my breath. “Whew!” I breathed heavily.

“No—no!” I dropped my head in despair before standing up to look around. Several people were staring at me with strange countenances.

I turned around, searching for my backpack. I left my luggage behind. I canvased the area and located my luggage. I wrote the address where my mom was residing in my note as well. Even if Sammie didn’t have my new home address, maybe he would try to find me through my mom. I decided to keep her admitted for at least four more months, in case Sammie couldn’t find me at my house. I knew it was selfish of me not to grant my mother’s wishes, but I had to leave a conduit for Sammie to find me.

I looked up and observed a police officer standing near my luggage. It looked like he was waiting for me. The White officer stood six-foot-tall, with a build like an NFL linebacker. The officer spat in my direction. “Hold it right there.” He scratched his head and looked back while pointing toward the bus. “A few people on the bus accused you of attacking them,” said the Officer.

My mouth opened as wide as an alligator. I waved my hands in front of me, saying, “No—no, that’s a bold-faced lie.”

“Ma’am, that’s not what several eyewitnesses’ told me,” the officer said.

I was in shock. It was weird, the officer kind of looked like one of the men who chased Timmy and I during our One Stop encounter. I looked around and observed some of the people that were on the bus with me. A lot of them were now standing outside the bus station. The older White lady from the bus yelled while pointing her fingers at me. “That’s the rude Negro girl right there that assaulted me!” The lady walked forward. “Officer, arrest her for assaulting a White woman.”

As ridiculous as her claims were, I knew the officer believed and agreed with her. I never assaulted her—I just pushed her a little in order to get by her.

The officer picked up my backpack and tossed it over his right shoulder as he said, “You’re under arrest for assault. Hands behind your back now!”

I pulled away as the officer wrestled me to the ground. I screamed, “I haven’t done anything wrong! You’re lucky I can’t see your face because of that stupid hat you have on.” I exhaled. “Your sunglasses are hideous by the way. If only I could see your ugly face, I’d look you right in the eyes and spit in your face—you bigot!”

He uttered the one word that all Black people hate. “I know you didn’t just call me a—” I turned on my stomach as I desperately tried to roll over so that I could spit in his face. “You racist fool! I can’t wait to spit in your face!” My speech was interrupted by the sudden pain I felt in my back. I erupted into a clamor. “Ouch, get your knee off of me!”

“Shut up, you monkey!” The officer pressed his knee into my back. “Stop resisting or I’ll blow your black little brains out.” He pulled out his handcuffs.

I breathed heavily before I started to cry. “I’m not resisting anymore. Please, just don’t shoot me. I’m not resisting you.”

He handcuffed me and picked me up then escorted me to his car. A few seconds later, we drove away. While in the backseat I said out loud, “This isn’t right what you’re doing.” The officer looked back at me and smirked.

“You and your whole race aren’t right, that’s what isn’t right,” said the Officer.

I observed the officer looking at me through the rearview mirror. He chuckled and said, “And you better hush up back there before you end up in a lake, you little gorilla!” He laughed.

I was shaking and my makeup was washed away by my tears. *I’m going to die, just like Timmy*, I thought to myself. “God, please help me.”

“Shut up back there—I won’t say it again,” yelled the Officer.

The Interrogation Room

When we arrived at the police precinct, I immediately asked for a lawyer. I sat inside the interrogation room, then the officer who arrested me proceeded to uncuff me. As he exited the room he said, “I’ll be right back. And you’ll get your low-grade public defender. I know that’s all you can afford.” He chuckled, then I jumped as I heard the door slam.

“Good. Some type of defense is better than nothing,” I said. I twisted my hands in the air to enjoy the liberty of free hands. My mom and dad instilled the importance of understanding that there isn’t any Black privilege in the world, especially in the justice system. What a poor job the officers’ did in searching for my brother’s killer. My thoughts yielded to the sounds of the door opening as the officer reentered the room.

He approached me and spat in my face. He slammed his hands on the table while saying, “Little black monkey, you are done!” He breathed heavily as I wiped his spit from my face.

I leaned forward with my voice trembling while attempting to speak. “Please, just get my attorney,” I said in a low tone.

“Speak up, monkey,” said the Officer.

“You heard me,” I said.

He chuckled and stood up straight. “You people are so dumb.” His footsteps inched closer, with the sounds of his boots tapping against the floor, which lifted the hairs on the back of my neck. His hot breath bounced off my skin. “Sophia, I know who you are.” He walked in front of me. “You probably don’t remember me, but I most certainly remember your black butt. I requested a transfer to San Francisco after I found out your mother was institutionalized out there.” He frowned.

Before the officer finished articulating more racial epithets, someone who appeared to be a lawyer entered the room.

I stared at the guy that entered. *I recognize him.* I raised my eyebrows. I was taken aback by the sheer coincidence of him showing up to represent me. I looked at his dark brown hair. His front teeth were rather large, just like the guy I was thinking of. He had the same build too. I glanced at his stomach. *His belly looks a little bigger than what I remember as a child.* Man, he had to be almost seven-foot-tall. His green eyes reminded me of the color green inside a rainbow. His double chin was rather unusual for someone that’s not significantly overweight.

As the guy approached me, sounds from the heels on his black dress shoes tapping against the floor echoed in the room. I observed his ensemble as the officer that arrested me attempted to walk out, but the guy angrily said, “Officer, stay!”

The guy seemed upset with the officer. *He must be a lawyer,* I thought.

The lawyer extended his hand, glancing at his hand while I twirled my left index finger. I hesitated before saying, “I think—I know you?”

The attorney smirked, pulling his hand back to his side, then he exhaled. He started speaking but his words were blocked from being processed by my brain. I was distracted.

It was a lot to take in. I continued to internally entertain if I knew him for certain. “Have you figured out who I am yet?” The guy asked.

I squinted my eyes. You’re one of the military men who delivered the bad news about my dad’s death. How did he know I was detained? Maybe it’s just some random coincidence.

The apparent lawyer pulled out a chair and sat next to me. “Okay, since you’re still struggling to figure out who I am, I’ll just tell you.” He looked me up and down. “Sophia, you’re all grown up now.” I stared at him with a countenance of distrust. “You don’t remember me? I served with your dad.”

I nodded my head to gesture that I remembered him.

He exhaled. “Okay, good. I decided to pursue my passion as a defense lawyer after I was honorably discharged from the military three years ago. I’ve been practicing law for two years now. It didn’t take much for me to get my career going, since I’d already finished most of my curriculum whilst I was in the military.”

I exhaled. *Mister, I don’t care.* “Uh, how did you know I was arrested?” The officer that arrested me reentered the room.

He grinned and turned around with an indignant countenance while facing the cop that arrested me. While staring at the officer with bloodshot eyes of rage, the lawyer said, “I’ll tell you later how I found out about you being unjustly arrested.”

The attorney turned his attention back to me. “Sophia, I need to have a serious talk with you.” He pointed while focusing his attention on the small interrogation room. “You can’t afford to end up in a place

like this again. These racist fools aren't playing with you. They'll lynch you, and not think much of it." I swallowed my saliva. "The laws are on White folks' side. Although the policemen took an oath to serve and protect their communities, I hate to say this, colored people were not on their list of people to protect."

I turned my head to loosen the tension in my neck. "Yeah, I reached that conclusion after my brother's death," I said. I took a deep breath.

"Smart girl. I can assure you I hate the things that kind Black folk like yourself have to go through. I've been looking after you and your mom for a while now."

His statements compelled me to cross-examine his sincerity. I think this guy has an ulterior motive. Why is he practically stalking me and my mom?

Then, it dawned on me—the officer who arrested me was Billy Joe. Ahh. Billy Joe is the guy Timmy accidentally almost killed a few weeks before he met his tragic end. I jumped up out of the chair and attempted to run out of the room while saying, "Billy Joe is going to kill me!"

The lawyer whose face I couldn't match with a name, quickly stood up and his chair fell to the floor. The sound of a chair bouncing off the floor frightened me. I paused and gasped for air, which gave him enough time to grab my arms as he said, "Wait—wait!" He frowned at Billy Joe. He pointed his clenched fist at him and said, "Wipe that smirk off your face, have a little class."

Billy Joe patted the handle of his gun that was inside his holster. "Yeah, yeah, we'll see about that," said Billy Joe, his calloused and baritone voice echoed through the room.

The lawyer sighed while turning his attention back to me. I fell to the ground in a desperate pursuit to free myself from his commanding grip. “Calm down. Billy Joe won’t be able to harm you now.” I looked up at him from a subdued position, his height overwhelming my fears of Billy Joe.

He gave me reassurance while saying “Sophia, I’m protecting you now. And besides, I have a lot of evidence connecting Billy Joe to over fifteen lynchings of young Black males.” He looked at Billy Joe with fury and agitation. “Billy Joe will be going to jail soon.”

My survival instincts were fully activated as I observed Billy Joe pull his gun out of the holster. He slammed his gun on the table and violently charged in my direction. Oh no. I hid behind the lawyer, his long arms kept Billy Joe at bay.

With saliva flying from his mouth like stinging mosquitos, Billy Joe screamed at the lawyer. “You monkey loving traitor!” They started wrestling and Billy Joe seized his opportunity, spitting in my face. The barrister started to quote laws, then three officers rushed into the room because of the raucous. The officers detained Billy Joe, taking him into custody after they were threatened with lawsuits and prison time by the counselor. It was kind of weird that they seemed so afraid of the lawyer. I guess that was a good thing.

One of the officers’, short with blonde hair and light blue eyes, assisted with escorting Billy Joe out of the room. The officer that was escorting him stopped at the door of the interrogation room, then turned his fragile physique in the lawyer’s direction. His murderous eyes pierced the counselor. “Don’t worry, Billy Joe will be exonerated from whatever little crimes you think you have on him!”

The lawyer glanced at me as I shook uncontrollably. The counselor responded to the officer, “Look here, you bigot, Billy Joe is a serial killer. The people he killed only committed the crime of being Black.

If you have sympathy for a scumbag like Billy Joe, then I feel sorry for your soul.” The lawyer waved his fists in the air. “Whatever God your nation of racist pricks professes to serve can’t stand in the way of true justice. You might as well quit now. You and Billy Joe don’t serve the God of the Bible. I really hope you look at the work you’re doing and change your wicked ways.”

Billy Joe’s devotee spoke out again, replying with a statement that sealed his fate. “Billy Joe and I love to kill Black monkeys. We will kill some more Blacks as soon as he gets off.”

The lawyer pulled out a small rectangular device and squeezed it. A few seconds later, an army of FBI agents dressed in navy blue FBI jackets rushed in to arrest Billy Joe and his accomplice.

I rubbed my hands across my face while trying to ascertain what was unfolding in front of my eyes. I didn’t realize he was baiting them. However, something was still fishy about everyone there. It was like the lawyer was more concerned about Billy Joe rather than starting the process of doing legal work for me. I was slightly confused.

After the arrests were solidified, the lawyer turned around and looked at me while saying, “I know you’re probably confused about what you just saw,” said the lawyer.

I quickly chimed in. “Yes, I’m definitely confused.”

“No worries, I’ll explain. I work with the FBI to help protect African Americans from mistreatment. What those racist monsters’ were doing is illegal. Also, while it’s on my mind, you should listen to your mom more, she’s right about the staff at her facility. I know your mom is mentally sick, and I can’t objectively prove everything she told me. However, I wouldn’t put ill intentions past any of the people who are caring for your mother. You really need to look into getting her out of that hellhole that she’s in.”

I took a few steps back and exhaled. “Uh, what’s your name, anyway?” I asked.

The lawyer glanced at the agents, signaling for them to leave him alone with me. He extended his right hand, then I finally shook his hand. “My name is John Proctor.” He sighed. “I am so sorry, I thought I’d introduced myself when I walked into the interrogation room earlier.”

“You did. Informally, I guess. You just didn’t mention your name.” I scratched my head. “Tell me more about your relationship with my dad?”

John picked up the chair that fell on the floor, then he sat in it while gesturing for me to take a seat too. I rejected his offer. “Your dad and I got really close after he went back to serve in the Vietnam War. He accidentally saved my life too. The landmine that killed him was really destined to end me. Your father placed his foot on the landmine before I had a chance to step on it.” I turned my back to John.

John stood and walked toward me. He placed his hands on my shoulders after I started to sob. I shrugged my shoulders and said, “Please, remove your hands, I’m fine.” Through my peripheral vision I could see him executing inappropriate facial gestures. Why is he smirking? I faced him. Seemed odd. I took a deep breath. Something is up with Mr. John Proctor.

John lifted his hands and poked his lips out while tossing his hands into the air. “Alright! Anthony mentioned I was a good Christian man, and that I had more to live for than he did. He asked me to look after you and your mom. Although your dad had sealed his fate once he stepped on the landmine, I could tell a part of him felt like maybe a miracle would happen.”

“Um,” I uttered, turning around to face him while wiping my tears.

“Sophia, why were you arrested? Every time I attempted to ask that knucklehead Billy Joe why, he got an attitude and asked, ‘Why are you helping that black monkey?’”

I scoffed. “I’m just sick and tired of racism. Billy Joe arrested me for no reason—for no reason at all!”

John exhaled. “Give me your version of what happened at the bus station? Because Billy Joe has a very believable story regarding why he arrested you.”

I was too embarrassed to tell him what happened. Staring at the walls, I conjured up a story. No one will believe that a Black girl was trying to get off a bus to chase after her White soulmate.

John continued to look at me with anticipation. The sounds of his shoes rubbed against the floor. The noise from his shoes added to the intensity of my delayed response.

I pointed my fingers at my complexion. “I did nothing. It was simply because I’m Black.”

John shook his head while staring into my eyes. “I see why you would feel that way. When we came and took your dad back to the base a few years ago, he told me why he moved and what happened to your brother. I’m not going to have a problem getting you out of here. I’m sure this community doesn’t want to be all over the news like Marin County was when the KKK shot your brother to death a few years ago.” He abruptly walked toward the door and elevated his right hand, signaling for me to hold my thoughts. “Hold on Sophia, I’ll be back. I’m going to get you out of this place.”

“ Thanks, Mr. Proctor.”

Five minutes later, two new officers entered the room, releasing me. This whole encounter is interesting but odd too. One of the new

officers stated, “Ma’am, you’re free to go.” I stood up and exited the room.

Mr. Proctor paid for a taxi to take me home. He handed me one of his business cards and said, “Call me if you need me. Meanwhile, I’ll continue to look out for you and your mother.”

I looked back at him through the backseat of the taxi as the driver slowly drove away. Mr. Proctor waved at me as I stared at him. Something about Mr. Proctor, just didn’t seem genuine to me.

Unforgettable News

The Next Day

Staring at the ceiling in my bedroom, I started cogitating the events that transpired over the past few days. While crossing my feet I continued to lay on my back while twirling my fingers. Nothing went as planned. I picked up a pillow and placed it over my face while screaming. “I feel so stupid for even attempting to find Sammie. Nothing ever goes my way, anyway. I’ve lost Dad, Timmy, and now Sammie too. Not to mention I was harassed by a racist cop as well. And on top of that the one that my brother was involved with.” I started to cry then I wiped my tears and said out loud, “Every time I allow myself to love someone, I lose them.”

I like Kyle a little, but why would I even waste my time trying to develop something with him? My mother is practically out of my life as well. She’s mentally unstable. Timmy and my dad were such brave men. I need to be more like my brother and father. “Ugh! Why do I always talk like a defeatist?” My brother used to tell me that negative thinking will produce negative results. Maybe I keep losing because I’m expecting to lose.

I moved around in my bed. I am made in God's image, and Timmy used to remind me of this. The real reason I sat out my first semester of college is because I felt guilty about surpassing Timmy. I don't think it's fair for me to go to college since Timothy didn't get his chance to go. I also sat out because I wanted to search for Sammie too. I exhaled. I must get ahold of myself. I sat up in my bed like someone that was resurrected from the dead, bracing myself by placing my hands behind me, where they sank into the mattress.

Why didn't I just tell my family about my gift in music? I really don't know why I was so afraid to tell someone other than Sammie. Well technically, I didn't tell Sammie he discovered my gift in the midnight forest. I smiled. "I am in deep thought this morning." My mom used to tell me that my only hope for being successful was to find a good Christian man who could take care of me. But I never saw myself the way my mom saw me. I am more than just a housewife.

I lifted my right hand, rotating it in a circle to stretch my hand from the pressure of pressing down on my wrist. I placed my hands back on the mattress. I've always felt like I have something special bubbling within me. I placed my hand on my chest. "I can feel it in my heart." I just know that there is something special for me to do in this world. I'll never be happy until I manifest the musical gift that God placed inside of me. This is one of the reasons why I'm so connected to Sammie. He's the only person who makes me feel like I can do anything. He encouraged me to use my gift and to share it with the world.

I positioned myself toward the edge of the bed. "When I start college next year in January, I think I'm going to major in music." I need to nurture my gifts. I stood up and reached for my toes, with my knees locked to stretch my lower back and hamstrings. Do I feel like exercising this morning? I twisted my neck to the left and right while reaching for my toes. I probably should drive back to Marin County

later today so that I can register for my classes for the spring semester. While standing fully erect I spoke out loud, “I have so much stuff to do.” I’ll just jog this morning. I miss my grandma. She called last night to say that she’s staying a few more weeks in California. I got dressed and walked outside for a morning jog.

While jogging at a moderate pace, more thoughts flowed throughout my head. I only have a few months to prepare for my audition on December 17th, in Los Angeles. I need to find a job, too, since my dad’s funds are starting to run low. I started to breathe heavily as my jogging pace increased like the speed of a gazelle. I’m going to need a way to pay for food, taxes, electricity, water, and gas. I need to work on getting my mom out of that place, so she can go stay with my aunt.

After I finished jogging, I took a quick shower. A few minutes after, I freshened up, then walked past a picture of Timothy that was hanging on the living room wall, I stopped to stare at it. I remembered how Timothy used to pray to God every day. He used to mention that King David asked God to direct his life, even though he disappointed God on more than one occasion. Timmy used to feel like God didn’t love Black people until he had a revelation. My brother had a way of explaining things that would make me feel differently about White people. That’s another reason why I love Sammie, he gave me hope.

I walked away from Timothy’s picture and my inner thoughts continued to accelerate. *I’m going to need a lot of courage if I’m going to become the next Aretha Franklin in December. Sammie said this to me a while back, “Why would God give a Black girl such a beautiful voice if she wasn’t my equal?”*

I entered the kitchen and poured a glass of orange juice as thoughts of Sammie’s blue eyes brighten my day.

My gift drew our hearts together, and that's why I'll never stop hoping for us to meet again. I swallowed a portion of my juice too quickly, which caused me to choke a little. I placed the glass on the countertop with my fist over my mouth. I coughed then exhaled before speaking out loud, "Whether or not I have Sammie in my life, I am going to go after my dreams." It's my only way to honor Dad, Sammie, and Timmy.

I peered through the kitchen window with the sunlight shining through, glancing at the kitchen's illumination while coughing. It's time for me to head out and go visit my mom.

I exited the house in a black one-piece jogging suit, entered my car then backed out of the driveway. While driving I started to reminisce over my weekend and the moments I shared with Kyle. I stopped at a stop sign in my neighborhood. Two seconds later, I pressed on the gas, but I slammed on the brakes as a young child suddenly appeared in front of my car. "You crazy little kid, I almost hit you." I smiled while experiencing a flashback of playing with Timothy as a little girl. I miss my brother.

After the boy crossed in front of me, I looked to the left and right before resuming driving.

I gripped the steering wheel tightly then entered onto the highway. I've suppressed my gift. I should've still been practicing. Sammie obviously didn't allow the fact that I wasn't in his life stop him from living his dreams.

While rotating my neck I pulled my hair from underneath the hood of my hoodie. I turned on the radio and sang along to a familiar song. Just hearing myself sing again fills my heart with joy, like the scent of a beautiful rose. After exiting the highway, I pulled over onto the shoulder of the road. My chest throbbed as the pain from not using my gift flowed throughout my soul. I punched upward, striking the ceiling

of my car. A few seconds later, I drove back onto the road, pausing at a stop sign for several seconds. My tears were interrupted by a honking horn behind me. “Okay, okay,” I yelled. I pressed down on the accelerator.

A few minutes later, I arrived at my mother’s facility, parked the wagon, then exited the car, filled with emotion. I showed my I.D. to the guard, and she gave me the okay to enter. I walked inside the facility like a tiger, staking out the scene. *Hmm. The way they’re looking at me is creating a fear in my heart. I feel like something bad has happened.* I approached the window to fill out the paperwork to visit with my mother. The attendant at the window said, “The doctor wants to see you.”

While lifting my eyebrows, I scanned the pristine hospital, with its freshly painted cream-colored walls. *That’s interesting.* “Uh, is my mom, okay?” Before the guard replied I immediately turned to my left, facing the direction of heels piercing into the hospital’s floor. Like a sharp needle, the continuous sounds of heels dug into the facility’s surface. I caught a glimpse of a white coat before facing a tall, middle-aged White woman with short blonde hair.

Oh, that’s just Dr. Peterson.

Dr. Peterson halted and said, “We need to talk.” She pointed her fingers toward the end of the hallway. “Sophia, let’s go to my office.”

I grabbed the doctor’s arms, stretching her coat’s sleeve then we paused in the middle of the hallway. “I just know something is terribly wrong,” I said.

Dr. Peterson looked dejected as she sighed. *Something’s wrong.* I started to cry while helplessly staring into her eyes. My emotions exploded as I fell to my knees and said, “I just know that something

terrible has happened!” I looked around as my tears fell on the floor. “Did you all kill my mom?”

She exhaled. “No, Sophia,” replied Dr. Peterson.

I stood up with tears falling onto my jacket. “I recall my mom saying that she was being beaten. I just attributed it to her mental illness.”

Dr. Peterson politely removed my hands from her jacket. I hugged her then placed my hands atop her shoulders. “Maybe she was right, maybe Billy Joe’s dad does own this facility.” John Proctor alluded to this as well back in the interrogation room. But my mom never mentioned anything about John Proctor. I wonder why?

“No one here harmed your mother. However, I’m saddened to inform you that your mother passed away,” said Dr. Peterson.

“Wait, what?” I shook my head out of disbelief. “None of this makes any sense! When?” I asked. *Why are the other staff members looking at me so strangely? Too many of them are walking around, it’s never like this. It’s like they’re planning to do something to me or someone else. I don’t know, but I’ve never seen so many White people dressed in white scrubs. Even the guards have on white shirts and pants today. It kind of looks like a KKK meeting just ended—just without their dresses and head-coverings on. I don’t trust the vibes I feel here.* I turned my attention back to Dr. Peterson.

Dr. Peterson stepped forward and said, “She hung herself Friday. We tried to notify you, but no one was home when we dropped by.”

Lies. I contorted my wounded soul like a baby in a fetal position. “Oh no, this can’t be true. Dr. Peterson, please tell me you’re lying!” I stared into her eyes while desperately anticipating a different reply. “Please, tell me this isn’t real!” My sobs echoed through the hospital

like a lion's roar. I turned my back to her, placing my finger and thumb over my forehead. My head started to slowly sink into my shoulders. As my head continued to drop in despair, I turned around to face Dr. Peterson. "I just—" I stuttered. "I just—I just saw my mom a few days ago."

"Yes, we know." She pulled out a note from her coat pocket then handed me a piece of paper. "Your mother left this note for you." I snatched the note and immediately read it. Dr. Peterson continued, "We didn't think much of it when she asked to see you a few days ago. Your mom asked me if I would write a letter for her, addressing it to you. I didn't know your mom was illiterate."

With the note in my hand, I frowned and said, "That's bogus! How could you not have known that?"

"I didn't know." She exhaled. "Your mother said she always wanted to share her thoughts on paper. She mentioned, whenever you came to visit her again, she wanted to write something for you that showed remorse for when she refused to see you the last time you were here."

I reread the note before balling it up and tossing it at Dr. Peterson. While pointing my finger at her I said, "You all killed my mom—I know you did." Dr. Peterson attempted to hide a smirk.

"Since you're going through a lot, I'll forgive you for throwing that paper at me. And by the way, a young gentleman came by looking for you yesterday. He was a young White boy. I think his name was Samuel or Sammie." Dr. Peterson squinted her eyes. "What are you doing fooling around with my kind anyway?" She grinned. "I could tell that he cares for you, though."

While looking startled I replied, “I really don’t have time for this today.” Wait, she just said Sammie. “Uh, what did you just say?” I asked.

Dr. Peterson sighed. “Since you’re dealing with a little pain, I won’t make an issue out of your tone with me. But he came in with a piece of paper. It was a letter you wrote to him I think,” she said.

I was bewildered. *A little pain? Something is off here. I should probably be cautious.*

Dr. Peterson crossed her arms. “The guy said he tried to find your house, but you left out the street name on your address or something like that. The Sammie guy may have even mentioned that you wrote down an address to a house that your parents had in Marin County too.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Anyway, you mentioned in the letter where your mom was hospitalized.” She pointed down the hallway in front of her toward the area where the front desk was. “He also left a note for you, the guard has it at the front desk.”

I was shocked and completely silent as I scratched my head. Then, I noticed an ink pen on Peterson’s coat. I grabbed the pen without her permission.

She scoffed. “Excuse you,” said Dr. Peterson.

“Sorry,” I replied. I picked up the piece of paper I tossed at her. While picking up the paper, I dissected the note I read. My mom’s final words to me were, “I love you and do well in life.” Seems like my mom should have said more. I turned my attention back to Dr. Peterson while quickly looking around at the unusually high volume of workers. I probably should put more emphasis on Sammie to distract them from thinking that I’m suspicious of my mom’s death, just in case these people are up to something. I hate to say this, but I just can’t trust certain White people, especially after all that I’ve seen. I glanced at

Dr. Peterson as she looked at some of the workers walking by. *Dr. Peterson has no empathy and that's very alarming.*

I wrote my correct address on the paper. "Dr. Peterson, please give this paper to Sammie if he comes by looking for me again." She took the paper and walked away without saying anything.

I didn't pay Dr. Peterson any mind. Instead, I headed toward the front desk to pick up Sammie's note. After I arrived at the front desk, the guard chuckled and said, "Hey, I ripped your note up, you black monkey." Leaning forward, the guard stuck her head out of the glass opening. "You don't deserve to date anyone in my race."

I tensed up. Dazed in a fearful silence, images of my brother's blood, gushing out of his right temple and flooding the lake of tears, flashed through my mind. While still backpedaling, I turned around and walked in the opposite direction.

"I don't want to die!" She's a new guard who obviously believes that mixing races leads to a mongrel-breed. Due to trepidation, I started to run. While running, I overheard a woman yell, "Be sure to cremate your mom! That's what she wanted!"

Huh?

After storming out of the facility I charged toward my car, looking back over my shoulder as my pace increased. I know Dr. Peterson heard that woman. There's no way my mom asked to be cremated. I continued to run toward my car like a wild horse. I'm so saddened by my mom's suicide, but at least my mom wrote me a letter. Or maybe she didn't? I had no idea my mom was contemplating suicide. I stopped my pursuit and leaned over to catch my breath. I looked behind me before restarting a rapid walk to my car. *There's no way I'll be able to drive to Marin County now. I just don't have the energy.* "I just can't believe my mom killed herself!" Thoughts of the midnight

forest rushed through my mind. Thoughts of the night when I attempted to take my life froze my brain's capacity to think.

I unlocked my car then rested my hands atop the roof. I scoffed. "I need to find out what really happened to my mom." Or maybe she committed suicide? I'm on a collision course but I don't like where I'm headed.

I stepped inside my car and drove away. After I arrived home, one of my aunts called to inform me that my grandmother had a heart attack after she found out about my mom's death. The institution called my aunt in California after they couldn't reach me or my grandmother at home.

Lord, this is too much.

I dropped the phone, leaving the cord dangling from the wall. I sat at the kitchen table and sobbed while saying out loud, "First my mom and now my grandmother too."

This is too much.

The Day of the Funerals

A Week Later

I drove into my driveway after attending my mother's and grandmother's funerals. It was best to have them together. My black dress was smeared with me and my family's tears. I remained in the car, reflecting on my mother's well-done makeup. My mother looked a little better than my grandma. My mother's face looked so good. She looked like she was finally at peace with her life. She laid in the casket like a soul filled with life. I know people say rest in peace, but I believe that the dead are conscious of nothing, so only the living can rest in

peace. The dead are not aware of rest nor peace. Still, for my mom I would say she's finally at peace.

While peering into the rearview mirror, I noticed some of my family members drive up. My mom's side of the family is small, she only has two sisters. My aunts, Doris and Dorothy, both have two kids.

My cousins stepped out of their cars.

Everyone was dressed in black. I hadn't seen my cousins, Janet, Victor, Travis, and Lonnie, in a very long time.

I jumped after hearing a knock on the window, on the driver's side of my car. Looking to my left, I noticed Aunt Doris. I rolled my window down then Doris said, "Sophia, are you going to be okay? You're all by yourself."

I hesitated before I replied, "Uh, I think I'll be fine."

"Okay," said Doris. She walked in the direction of the rest of my family.

My left leg hung from the car as I watched my aunt walk away. For being on the older side, Aunt Doris looked amazing. Her figure is astonishing, and her skin is flawless. I love the freshness of her long hair too. Her hair just seemed to ride her behind like a horse's saddle. It's the longest I'd ever seen in my life. Her cute little pie face is pudgy, though, unlike my mother's.

I stepped out of the car, signaling for Doris to come my way. "Aunt Doris, come here please." Doris approached along the pavement like a runway model.

While standing near my car Doris said, "Yes."

“I know, I answered you earlier, already. I just want to express myself a little more to help ease your concern. Again, I think I’ll be okay.” I exhaled. “It just seems like life is happening to me all at once. First Timmy, then my dad, and now my mom. I just don’t know if I can take any more losses.” Sophia shook her head.

Doris pulled me into her arms, we both shed tears. While hugging each other, Doris said: “I can only imagine what you’re going through right now. I remember how your mom and I felt the night we lost both of our parents. You never got a chance to meet your grandparents, Sue and Bill—you didn’t miss anything, in my opinion.”

I leaned against my car, listening to Doris bash her parents over the next two minutes. I met my grandparents on my dad’s side, but I never met or knew the names of my grandparents on my mom’s side. My mom always said she didn’t want to talk about them, it was too painful for her. My dad never met them either, my mom’s parents were dead, long before my mom and dad crossed paths.

I intervened while Doris was in midsentence. “Auntie Doris, can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” said Doris.

“If I ask you, will you tell me the truth?” I observed other family members walking up toward my house. I held my hand up, signaling for Doris to stay put while I unlocked the front door to my house. My family entered my house. After unlocking the door, I walked down the steps and walked over to Doris. I stood in front of her, then we reversed positions. She was leaning against the car.

“To answer your question, of course, Sweetheart. What do you want to know?” Doris asked.

I gestured for my aunt to move to the left then I opened my car, hopping inside whilst inviting her to do the same. After we were seated, I sighed. “What happened to my mom’s parents?” I asked.

Doris faced me on the passenger’s side and placed her hand on my thigh. “I’m sorry your mom never told you what happened.” She took a deep breath then stared out of the window. With her head turned away from me, her face was filled with tears as she uttered, “Sophia, are you sure you’re ready to hear what I’m about to disclose?”

I placed my right hand atop her shoulder then I tugged at her shoulder, inviting her to face me. My face was a pool of tears.

“Yes, I’m ready. I feel I’m missing a lot of pieces in my life because I don’t know my history,” I said.

Doris nodded her head. “Your grandfather wasn’t the greatest man in the world. Your grandpa Bill was a molester. He molested all three of us. Your mom, although she was the youngest of us three girls, was the only one who had the courage to stand up to him.”

“I didn’t know my mom was molested by her own dad,” I said.

Doris sighed. “Not just your mom, but me and your auntie Dorothy too.”

I lifted my right leg to a partial Indian-style posture, my left leg hanging below the surface of the car’s seat. “What happened to my grandparents?” I asked.

Doris held her hands up, gesturing for me to be patient. “I’m going to get to that part in a second,” she said.

“Okay, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Sophia, considering everything you’re probably feeling right now.”

“Thanks for being here for me,” I replied.

Doris tapped my thigh. “Any time.” While looking straight ahead away from my face, she said, “One day when your grandmother was out shopping for groceries, your Grandpa Bill decided to take advantage of me and Dorothy. That was how we found out he was doing the same thing to the both of us. At first, Dorothy and I thought he only violated us separately. Neither one of us knew he was engaging in his despicable behavior with the both of us.” She shook a little. “We both were terrified. While in the middle of his perverted acts, your mom walked in with your grandpa’s gun. She closed her eyes and fired several shots at him. A ton of bullets pierced his flesh but none of them were fatal.”

I lifted my eyebrows and rubbed my right calf.

“When your Grandma Sue returned home a few minutes after his shameful conduct, she learned about what he did to us.” Doris started to cry. “I hate to even mention what happened next.” Doris dried her tears with a napkin. Silence filled the car for several seconds. I locked my eyes onto my aunt while waiting for her to finish revealing the details. She looked at me and asked, “Are you sure you want to know the rest?”

I placed my hand on hers. “I need to know everything,” I said.

Doris lifted her hands to convey the trauma she was experiencing from reliving the events. “I guess my mom lost it. She grabbed her shotgun, shooting my father several times. Later that night, after everything settled down, I guess, she had a chance to process the reality that she had killed her husband. I don’t know if it was the pain of knowing my dad molested her daughters, or if she felt guilty about

shooting him in the heat of the moment. All I remember hearing was a loud gunshot. We ran to my mom's room and found her lifeless body on the floor. She had a massive hole in the left side of her head."

I put my hand over my mouth. I was in shock.

"Your mom used to say, 'If only I hadn't picked up that stupid gun, then maybe my parents would still be alive'. Your mother felt like, although our dad wasn't a good man, she still would have rather seen him alive and in jail rather than six feet under." Doris sobbed.

"Auntie Doris, I'm glad you're sharing this with me. But can we stop here? This topic seems to be a lot for you now."

"Thank you. Uh, and it just crossed my mind. Do you need any financial help with anything while I am here?" Doris asked.

"I think I'm okay, thanks, though. My mom's life insurance will cover my expenses for some bills I need to pay. I plan to use the remaining funds for school and my singing career."

Why did I just say that?

Doris looked elated—but puzzled. She cleared her throat. "Singing career?"

"I meant my college career!"

"Oh ok, I thought for sure I heard you say, 'Singing career?'"

"No, I can't sing to save my life." Without any warning I opened the door and got out of the car. That was a close call.

While still sitting in the car, Doris said, "Well—don't let me hold you back my dear, go talk to your cousins. They all really miss you."

I smiled. “Thanks for talking to me, I love you.” I walked away only to be struck deeply with grief. Doris stepped out of the car and approached me. “I’ve never felt a pain like this before,” I said.

She grabbed my hand and caressed it. “Auntie, I need some time to myself. Can you just let everyone know I’ll be in to mingle with them in a little?” I said.

We held hands and entered the house a few seconds later. Once inside the foyer area, I decided to go to the bathroom. While walking to the bathroom I observed that about fifty people attended the funeral. Most of the attendees were friends of my mom and grandma. Before entering the bathroom, I paused to observe my dad’s two siblings, Uncle Jake and Uncle Troy. I look forward to chatting with them after I pull myself together. I entered the bathroom, then closed the door.

A few minutes later, I exited the bathroom and approached my four cousins that were sitting on my living room couch. When they saw me inching closer, they stopped talking amongst themselves. “Hello.”

While standing in front of my cousins I removed my heels. My feet were hurting. While holding my heels in my hands, I said, “I’m so happy to see you all, but today really isn’t a good day for me to catch up with y’all. Please understand.”

My cousins looked around at one another. Then, one of them said, “No problem, we totally understand.”

“Thank you,” I replied. I walked forward and hugged them one by one. My cousins scooted over to the left and right sides of the couch, making room for me. I sat down and glanced to my left and right. I smiled. “I promise, girls, I’ll come visit you all in a few months. You all are the best cousins in the world. I really appreciate y’all more than you know. Thank you for coming out to support me. I know I broke tradition by coming home first before I buried my mom and grandma.

But I just needed a few minutes of familiarity to get my head together. Now it's time to head back out to bury them.”

My cousins looked at one another while nodding their heads to respectfully acknowledge my needs. They all hugged me in a spirit of unity, as their arms formed a wall of love around me.

A few minutes later, my family and I were guided by policemen to Cella Gardens, the burial site. I drove myself to the burial site. While driving in the car, I thought to myself. *I need some type of solace right now.* A few minutes later, I exited the car, then my family and I approached the burial site. We unitedly walked together, like a crowd of silent protesters. After everyone gathered around, Minister Boykins said a few words before ending with a word of prayer. After finishing his prayer, he stated, “Does anyone have any last words to say?”

I was taken aback after observing a large figure step forward, embracing Boykin's invitation.

I thought to myself as a cool breeze blew underneath my dress. Aunt Dorothy has gained so much weight. Her black dress looks more like a gigantic comforter. I sighed. Aunt Dorothy can be so superficial at times too.

Standing over my mom's casket, Dorothy delivered her last words to her sister's lifeless body.

I exhaled. Right after this, we're going to do this again for my grandmother; at least we are getting everything out of the way in one day.

My entire family cried while Dorothy expressed her final words. A clamor of despair erupted because of the pain of our losses; our cries for comfort sounded like an orchestra of emotional pain.

Chapter 19:
Join the Fan Club:
The Search to Reunite with Sammie Begins

Sophia

I woke up to get dressed and I put on a pink warm-up suit. After getting dressed, I exited my hotel room to walk toward the elevator.

I can't believe that I am about to embark upon this journey to find the man who means so much to me. I've been waiting for this moment for twenty years, and now it's finally going to happen. I glanced at my wristwatch. Plenty of time. My flight leaves in four hours. I just want to get there super early in case something goes wrong. I exited the elevator onto the first floor before entering the lobby.

I used the telephone in the lobby of the hotel to call a taxi.

“Good morning, I need a taxi to take me to the airport. I’m staying at The Grand Lux on Blueborn Avenue,” I said.

“Okay, Ma’am. Someone will be there to pick you up in about twenty minutes,” said the clerk over the phone.

“Thanks,” I replied, hanging up.

I looked around before walking near the glass exit doors. I sat down adjacent to the entrance, so that I could look through the window. While sitting, I picked up a recipe magazine to skim over it. A few seconds later, I placed it down. I’m leaving today, but I won’t arrive in London until 11 p.m. tonight. I’ll purchase my tickets for his concert after I arrive in London, and I mailed him a couple of fan mail letters to his address in Arizona. I wish he had a fan address in London too. I plan to write Sammie a letter every week until he responds. I

wish that his letters weren't vetted by his staff. They're probably going to think I'm just some crazy fan who is obsessed with Sammie. I know if Sammie gets his hands on one of my letters, he will reach out to me for sure.

Fifteen minutes later, I looked back, observing a taxi outside the hotel. Finally. I exited the hotel with my luggage bags. I smiled while knocking on the passenger window of the taxi. *Hmm, an Asian male.*

He rolled the window down and asked, "Where to?"

"To the airport," I said.

I stepped into the car, then we drove to the airport.

I didn't know Sammie would go on to become a famous singer without me in his corner. I always envisioned us becoming superstars together. I wonder what Sammie has been doing with his life over the past twenty years, besides singing? We have so much to catch up on.

Twenty minutes later, I arrived at the airport. "Ma'am, we are here. But please, remain in the car for now. I will get your things out for you so that you can relax before your flight," said the driver.

I smiled while reaching into my purse. "Thank you so much. You deserve a nice tip, here you go. I'll take my bags from here. Take care." I exited the taxi, then walked inside the airport. I stopped to observe the scenery. Look at the size of this place, there're so many different little outlets too.

I resumed walking. I needed to check my bag in. While navigating through the airport, I noticed a few people sprinting with their luggage. They're in a rush. I exhaled. *I could really use a cup of coffee. I'll get some before I go to my terminal.* I walked through security, then I got coffee. Afterwards, I walked for three minutes until I found my gate. Once at my gate, I took a seat. *I think I will read a couple of chapters*

of the Bible while I wait since I have almost two hours before my flight starts boarding.

Two hours later, I heard an announcement that my flight would begin boarding in five minutes. I stood up, gathering my luggage. A few minutes later, I stepped on the plane and noticed a lot of people. *Seems like a lot of them are from London. Oh yeah, that's right, we just had an international religious conference downtown.* I looked at my boarding pass. *Great, my seat is way in the back. At least I'm close to the restroom.* I placed my carry-on bag in the overhead compartment, then I sat down. A few seconds later, I fastened my seatbelt. I said a silent prayer to God. Ten minutes later, the plane sped against the tarmac, gliding into the sky like an eagle.

Once the plane was above the clouds, I experienced an epiphany. *The reason I love Sammie so much is because he takes my heart so high into love's sky.* I smiled, lifting my eyebrows. *That's a great song title, love's sky. I need to start working on this one right away.*

I pulled out a pen and a note pad, then I started writing "Love's Sky."

Love's Sky

Love is like heaven soaring through your heart. Love is change and sometimes love is strange. I chose to love you from my heart, that's why my life will never be the same. Love doesn't have a name; it chooses whomever it wants. My heart chose you, so please don't front.

It's never good to refrain from accepting love's dos and don'ts. Love's sky always takes you higher than what you want. I just pray you fall for me exactly the way I want.

True love comes with abundance; there's never a drought. I look forward to the days when our love sprouts. One thing that's for sure, your love, I never doubt. You inspired me to speak from my mouth, the seasons of love that navigate constantly while still respecting love's north and hate's south.

There will always be two forces in the world, and may you, my girl, always be the good source. I can feel our love in your voice. Your presence is like gold, you are perfect, although you're stuck with me like a mold. A mold can sometimes annoy its host just like a worker does with their boss. Either way it goes, we all must still soar high and pay love's cost.

Love's sky is a mindset only true lovers live by. Love is high and hate is low. Baby, please don't go. Please love me forever, no matter where I go.

I looked around at the other passengers, then I reread my song. *Wow, another great song. Whenever I'm thinking about Sammie, I have the best love concepts flowing throughout my mind.*

I wonder how Isabella is doing. I miss my baby. I hope she read my letter with tears of joy. I smirked. I can't believe that little sucker moved out on me. She had the courage to stand up for what she believes in. Courage is something Izzy must've received from her father. Kyle was a courageous man, and a good person overall.

I wonder how Sammie is going to react when he lays his blue eyes on me. I think Sammie will be pleased to see his chocolate cupcake. That's one of the pet names he used to call me. I don't know why he called me that lame pet name, but I think it's cute.

I blushed while laying my head back. A few minutes later, I fell asleep, with love's sky on my mind.

**The Life of a Superstar:
*Sammie, Sammie, Sammie***

Sophia

I woke from a little turbulence on the plane. As my eyes slowly began to open, I became oriented to my surroundings. I looked to my left and right. How much longer do I have before I arrive in London? I yawned, placing my hands over my mouth and listening to the captain's announcement through the intercom. "We have fifteen-minutes before we arrive in London. Get ready to experience the time of your lives, especially if this is your first time in the UK."

I can't wait to get myself together for Sammie's concert tomorrow. I really hope and pray that I am fortunate enough to win one of his backstage visits.

A few minutes later, the airplane landed on the tarmac. I tightly grabbed onto the seat-handles, bracing myself as the plane sped down the runway. Thank God, we made it safely. I'm ready to get off this plane. I observed the unfasten seatbelt light come on. I'll be happy when this line starts moving. While walking in line like a prisoner, I realized I didn't have my luggage. Dang. I immediately turned around, maneuvering through oncoming traffic. A few seconds later, I collected my carry-on, then exited the plane. After gathering my bags from baggage claim, I searched for a taxi to my hotel. I hope that Hotel Supreme is extremely nice. I've heard a lot about it through different articles.

I entered a taxi as the driver stepped out to place my bags inside the truck.

The driver entered the car, starting the meter. A thin, elderly European White male glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “Ma’am, where would you like to go?”

Through the backseat I observed the amazing architecture of the buildings in London. *I wish the United States had the characteristics of these buildings. I love the retro and distinctive appeal that the city’s uniqueness portrays. London reminds me of The Golden Gate Bridge but with structures like the bridge inundated throughout the city.*

The driver cleared his throat, asking again, “Destination, please?”

I exhaled then said, “Forgive me. Hotel Supreme.”

He smiled as the sun shined on his gray hair. “Excellent choice. Where are you from?”

“I’m from California,” I said.

He looked to his left then entered onto the street. “Oh, you’re from the United States. That’s bloody great. There’s a place near your hotel that serves the best donuts, you should try them. Blue Heaven Donuts.”

The driver must’ve read my mind. I leaned forward, poking my head out while observing London’s roads. *It’s so cool to see people driving on the left side of the road. Their way just seems backwards to me. Their buildings look like castles too. It’s like they’re made for queens and princes.* I laughed out loud. *I forgot, queens and princes live here.* I shook my head.

The driver made a sharp left turn, then he asked, “Verdict?”

“Maybe some other time,” I replied. I need to cut back on my calories anyway.

“Of course, and no extra charge for our slight detour. What brings you to London?”

His accent is to die for. Their accents are so bloody cool. “I am here to see Sammie Walker live in concert.”

He smiled while stopping at a red light. “Wow, he is a great talent, isn’t he? I like his songs, especially *The Midnight Forest*.”

I leaned forward and asked, “Wait, Sammie has a song called *The Midnight Forest*?”

“Yes, I love that song. It’s one of those songs they haven’t played on the radio yet.” He glanced at me through the rearview mirror with a look of surprise. “You don’t know about *The Midnight Forest*?”

“I actually haven’t purchased any of his albums. I haven’t been able to listen to his music. It hurts me too much. We used to date, back in the day. I’ve been trying to find Sammie for years now. We came up with *The Midnight Forest* together. Well, actually, he named the woods.”

The driver pulled up at the donut shop, looking back at me. “Go ahead and take a stab at it,” said the driver.

I told him never mind, laughing before glancing at the pristine appeal of the donut shop. “Thank you for showing me where it’s located, but again, I’ll pass.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Okay!”

“Back to the song though,” I said.

“I’m listening,” said the driver.

“The song is about a girl who he saved from suicide through his unspoken love for her at the time. His love gave her a reason to live

again. He calls it The Midnight Forest because he met the girl in the woods at night. At some point during their numerous encounters, he realizes that he has fallen in love with her at midnight every night, since they enter the woods every night at the same time. At first, the girl doesn't know she's being watched, and the guy isn't aware that what's really attracting him to the girl isn't her beauty, but her gift of music. The irony is, he has the same powerful gift that the girl has too. The Midnight Forest represents hope that they will meet again to rekindle what they cherished in the forest. And, at some point during his life, The Midnight Forest is abandoned by the love of his life. The love of his life interrupts their romance because she's forced to move a long distance away from his heart. The song is about the guy searching for his love after she moves away."

"Wow, that's pretty good since you haven't heard the song," said the driver.

"I am the song!" *It's about me.*

We arrived at Hotel Supreme, and the driver placed my things outside the hotel. I waited in the car until he finished unloading my belongings. The driver reentered the taxi and I paid him. While exiting the taxi, Sammie's song broadcasted on the radio.

"Hey folks, I hope you all are feeling bloody great today. My name is Peter and I have a song for your souls. It's by Sammie Walker. Here's The Midnight Forest," said the radio personality.

My face lit up and I dropped my luggage, racing to the taxi. I reopened the door and said, "Oh my God!" The driver smiled. I jumped inside the taxi, waiting for the song to come on. The driver looked through his rearview, observing me staring at him. I waved and smiled, and he did too. The driver didn't say anything. My heartbeats spoke for me.

Sammie started to sing. “If love is real, it will find you still. No matter where you go my love for you will grow. I didn’t know the night we met that love’s greatest story was on set. My feelings for you have grown over the years, as I search to find your heart with my tears. I miss you so much. I pray you hear these words: My greatest fear is dying without you near,” sang Sammie on the radio.

Abruptly, I jumped out of the taxi. My heart was throbbing. I ran inside the hotel, entering the lobby restroom. I locked myself in a stall, crying uncontrollably. I banged my fists against the door. I just couldn’t finish listening to his song. That song was handcrafted for my soul. I know now that Sammie’s heart is crying out for me.

A few minutes later, I checked in and purchased a ticket to Sammie’s concert through the hotel. What a coincidence, they had five floor seats remaining for their guests. Since the coliseum is supposedly only one or two miles away, Sammie’s marketing team probably partnered up with Hotel Supreme to accommodate his fans. I smiled while walking to my room. Once inside, I observed the palace-like features of the room. *Wow, this golden looking brick floor and antique furniture is very nice.* A few seconds later, I started to unpack.

I unpacked, laying my outfits across the bed. *Which one will get Sammie’s attention?*

The red dress is the one that will make Sammie turn his head to see who I am. This dress kind of reminds me of the time when I met up with Kyle twenty years ago after my mom’s funeral. I think red helps me to relax. I glanced at the clock in my room. The concert started in four hours. “I need to get started on my hair and makeup.”

While freshening up in the shower, I visualized a moment that Sammie and I shared in the midnight forest. *I was so used to performing at night. I did that because no one could really see me, at least that’s what I thought until Sammie discovered me. Once he*

realized I was scared to perform during daytime hours, I guess he made it his mission to help me break free of my fears. I'll never forget our early Saturday afternoon together. It was the first time I'd sung during the day.

The day was bright like a camera flash, shooting directly into our eyes. The trees were our protection from the sun on that day. As we held hands, Sammie pushed me in my shoulder. I could hear the birds chirping. “Hey Sophie, why are you hesitating? Are you a chicken or something?”

I pulled my hand away from his, facing his beauty like a brave woman. “My name is Sophia. Be patient with me, I’ve never done this before. I’m scared, if I’m being honest with you.”

He attempted to run but his leg gave out on him. He fell and I ran toward him, helping him up. He stood up. “Learn something from what I just did. I have cerebral palsy, so I can’t sprint, but I went for it anyway.” He brushed leaves off his jeans and said, “Sophia you have to release your gift and just be free.” These words sealed my heart forever with him.

I placed my hands over my face, turning my back to him out of shame. “I’m trying, Sammie, but it’s daytime. Normally, we come to the midnight forest during nighttime, and we stay here until the next morning. I don’t want my parents to see me or find me singing in the woods.” I turned around to embrace his touch atop my right shoulder. “I’m only comfortable showing you my gift,” I said.

That was my only time seeing him shed tears. As his slow-paced tears crawled down his cheeks, he looked at me like I was the most important person alive. “Sophia, I get what you’re saying, but you have a dream to become a world class singer. How are you going to perform in front of thousands of people if you can’t become one with nature?”

“Nature?” I asked.

He sighed like a disappointed father. “Nature doesn’t judge people, it’s only people that judge you. I like to sing amid the natural elements. I like the serenity I feel whenever I am singing out here.” He looked around. “The breeze carries my voice and my song echoes against the trees. I don’t know where these woods carry my voice to, however, what I do know is that the feeling I receive from being free out here gives me confidence. One day, when I’m performing for millions across the world, I’ll be reminded of the beauty I feel whenever I sing with nature. My memories here will calm me down and help me to be poised as I tap into my gift. Sophia, you know what the real source of my comfort is, right?” He pulled me into his arms like a grown man.

“No! Sammie, I’m not a mind reader.”

He laughed like a little chipmunk. “I thought that’s something guys normally say to girls?” Sammie said.

“It is, but you know I’m a tomboy, and—” He interrupted my thoughts.

“The true source of my comfort, Sophia, lies with you. That’s why I love to come out here with you. I used to sing just for me and to connect with nature, but now I sing for you too. Listen closely to a new song that I wrote. It’s called *My Favorite Color is You*.”

I didn’t know twenty years ago that Sammie would turn this into a hit song in London. I stepped out of the shower to put my makeup on. I got dressed and prepared for Sammie’s concert. I glanced at myself in the mirror before exiting the room. How can you not see me in this red dress? I caught a taxi to the concert. Once there, I walked in and heard thousands of fans screaming at the top of their lungs. I was cleared by security, then guided to the first floor after showing the attendant my ticket.

I maneuvered through the crowd to locate my seat near the stage. I'm sitting in the front row, about twenty rows from the stage. It's the best that I could do since the other seats were already sold out. I listened to Sammie's opening act say, "Let's get this party started!"

I glanced at the bright lights flashing around the room. The darkness reminded me of the midnight forest. The loudness of the music jolted my heart, sending shockwaves of emotions through my veins. *I'm about to have a great time.* I looked around at the audience, observing thousands of people chanting, "We want Sammie!" I joined in, "I love you, Sammie!" I can't wait to see him step on the stage.

A hush went over the crowd, everything turned pitch black, then everyone went crazy as they heard the raspy voice of the world's leading singer. "London, are you ready to party?" *Oh, my God, that's Sammie voice. He sounds so masculine, and older.* I stood on the tip of my toes in anticipation. I shrugged my shoulders. *Well, duh! That's because he's older.* I blushed. *I can't wait for them to turn the lights back on.* The lights illuminated the arena again, as the sounds of a drumroll intensified. The crowd stared at the stage. The stage moved and opened like a volcano. Sammie came from underneath the stage, jumping out of a golden box. He stood motionless for ten seconds—the audience went wild.

I stared at Sammie like I would never see him again. Tearing up, I placed my hands over my mouth. *His outfit looks amazing. I love his white suit with the gold trim along the sleeves.* I smiled. *He even has a little chest hair showing for us. His hair is very long now. He must've dyed his hair brown too.* Sammie tossed his sunglasses into the audience; his directed aim was a distance away from me. Sammie said, "London, how are you feeling tonight?" He held the microphone toward the crowd. The crowd erupted with a collision of sounds.

I screamed. "I love you, Sammie!"

“Let’s get this show going. My first song tonight is, My Favorite Color is You,” said Sammie.

I snapped my fingers while moving slowly to the melody of his song. *Oh my God, Sammie sung this song to me, twenty years ago. Is this really happening? It’s like I just noticed I’m twenty years into our future. I am at his concert in London and he’s singing the song, the same way he sung it twenty years ago, during the daytime in the midnight forest. The only differences are that we are in London, he doesn’t know I am here, and he’s singing his heart out to me in front of thirty thousand people.*

I started to cry while listening to the second verse.

Sammie was on his knees, tilting to his right because of his bad leg. He rocked his pelvis back and forth while moving to the rhythm of his soul. He sung his heart out as chills captured his number one fan, forcing goosebumps to sprout up like plants on top of my arms.

As my fantasies ran wild with my racing heart, I continued to listen to Sammie sing.

“I knew your love would find me amid the trees. Your kisses freed my need to be free from my loveless spree. You taught me, it’s a necessity to be true to you. All that I do is for you. If someone’s heart could stand alone forever on its own, then mankind would perish with no moments to cherish. Without great memories, there’s no heart to love. All things changed when I met a special girl. I never had a chance to love you, at least not the way I wanted to.”

“I’m leaving our future with you but only the nature of true love can draw us together like glue. I miss you girl; your presence is my world. If somehow you could see how my life is torn in two without you; to nature I would confess, I’ll never lose you again to life’s contest.”

“Without you, I’m just a friend to nature but with, I’m befriended by the world. Finding you is what made me great, oh how I plead with nature for just one more date. You’re my favorite color, you’re special like no other. I love you like no other!”

“My favorite color is you. My favorite thing about you is living my moments with you. You bring out the best in me. I see you and me together as one. I’m only interested in what we will become. Let’s be together forever, you’re my favorite person now and forever.”

Sammie temporarily struggled to stand. Once fully erect, he dropped back down to his knees, then a hush went over the crowd. I can feel his emotions pass through the crowd like a breeze. *I finally understand now what Sammie meant by releasing your gift into nature. Nature doesn’t adapt to its environment—nature is the environment. It permits outside elements to use its resources in whatever ways it chooses.* I looked around. Sammie is literally controlling the entire stadium. We all were forced to tap into his heart’s frequency. He made all of us feel his pain.

With teary eyes, I spoke out loud, the crowd still going wild. “I can’t take seeing my man miss me anymore.” Sweat built up around my chin, then its droplets fell into my hands. With courage foisted upon me, I ignited my inner drive while charging toward the stage. I ran with the force of a racehorse. I only have ten rows to pass before I’m reunited with my love. Oh no, he just turned his back. While swinging my arms to increase my speed, a bodyguard built like a linebacker stepped in front of me, picking me up. “No, Ma’am! You can’t charge to the stage. You can’t jump on the stage and possibly ruin Sammie’s concert,” said the security guard.

I looked away from the guard and noticed that Sammie’s back was turned to the crowd. I screamed for Sammie. He couldn’t hear me, because everyone else was screaming his name too. The bodyguard

politely took me back to my seat. Less than thirty seconds later, I attempted to charge toward the stage again, only to be cut off again—then escorted out of the venue. “Ma’am, I already warned you not to do that again. I was trying to work with you because I know you paid good money to be here. I don’t want you to lose your money, but I’m going to need you to calm down. If you charge toward the stage again, I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” said the security guard.

I nodded my head, turning away from him like a spoiled brat. The guard guided me back to my seat once more, as I overheard Sammie performing like the Godfather of Pop music. While attempting to walk back to my seat, I thought, I have to act while Sammie is still thinking about me. He just performed a whole song for me. I know he will see me if I’m able to get close enough to the stage. I have a plan, but I must act right now. I paused before the guard opened the door to let me back inside the auditorium. I faced the security attendant and said, “I am so sorry for my behavior. I’m just a big fan and I love Sammie Walker.” I pointed my fingers behind the vanguard, screaming with a dire tone of urgency, “Hey, look at that girl!”

The guard turned his head and asked, “Where?”

This is my moment. I opened the door and went for it. While sprinting, I felt my speed picking up. I know I’m going to make it to the stage. As I got close to the third row from the stage, I heard Sammie finishing another song. Sammie turned around to walk backstage, then I was stopped by security. Three large White men picked me up and carried me outside the stadium as I screamed Sammie’s name. While the men held me in their arms like a deranged psychopath, I wrestled to break away.

“Ma’am, we are going to have to ask you to leave,” said the guard from earlier. “I told you not to charge toward the stage again. You lied about that fake girl so you could make a run for it. I know you’re a fan

of Mr. Sammie, but he has a show to put on, and you aren't a part of his act."

I am his main act, you idiot. The men placed me down as I gestured that I would behave myself. I faced the guard that I was most acquainted with and said, "The song he just sung, My Favorite Color is You, was a song he wrote for me."

"Ma'am, I'm sure that the other thousands of women who are at this concert feel the same way that you do. The only difference is they're sane. They aren't delusional and charging toward the stage. Please leave now before I call the cops," said the guard.

I observed four men staring at me like I'm crazy. "Please go grab Sammie's manager and tell Sammie or his manager that Sophia Smith is here," I said.

The same guard replied, "Ma'am, you're crazy. I won't ask you to leave again. I'm just going to call the police, and have you arrested."

I can't get arrested in a foreign country. I don't want to ruin my chances of reuniting with Sammie at one of his other concerts. "Alright!" The guard walked me out of the building.

Then, I caught a taxi back to Hotel Supreme. I rode in the backseat with my arms crossed while lying on my back, stretched out. I cried profusely as the driver repeatedly asked, "Ma'am, are you okay?"

With tears choking my voice, I sounded like a muffled engine, screaming, "Just drive and leave me alone!"

Three minutes later, I arrived at the hotel. I quickly gave the driver his money, then exited the car. Upon exiting, I sprinted toward the door, glancing at onlookers staring at me as they pointed. Why are they pointing at me? Once inside the hotel, I rushed to my room and laid on the floor until I cried myself to sleep.

THE MUSIC WITHIN YOUR HEART



Due to hatred beyond their control, Sophia and her family are forced to flee, leaving behind her secrets and the young love she forged. Can true love reunite childhood friends ripped apart for decades?

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