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"Come . . ." Gram fluttered each of her long, slender fingers. It was a motion Raya Joseph knew well. The frowning brow and waving hand meant for Raya to grab her own Bible, fill another cup, and join in the study and prayers as she had so many times before. They'd talk more later. Much later if Raya had anything to do with it.

Looking past Gram's outstretched hand, Raya slipped into the kitchen for a cup of freshly ground coffee syrupy with Splenda. Though she longed to join Gram's fellowship, Raya knew that one second at the table and she'd spill her guts. There was no fooling Gram.

Or God.

So drowning her bitterness with too sweet coffee, she escaped to her room, checked her new do, a flamboyant white-blond afro, in the mirror, and pulled on a little pink something she'd shoveled out of the bargain bin downtown. Before she'd met Darrell, pink had been her favorite color. She loved how fresh it looked on her, a

bright flush against her dark skin. Though Raya's mother had cautioned such bold color choices for someone of her complexion, Gram had taught her early not to listen to folks about what she couldn't wear. "The rainbow is yours," she'd said. And Raya had believed it. Until Darrell came along. Today she was reclaiming the rainbow still somewhere inside her.

When Raya returned to the kitchen, Gram looked up from her Bible. Raya's eyes fixed on the word above her grandmother's thumb.

Enemy.

The older woman raked a hand through her own afro, white from wisdom instead of dye. "One more thing. Miss Man Stealer is coming this way."

Raya gulped for air. "Who, Megan?"

Gram no longer spoke the girl's-woman's-name. To Gram's credit, she never had cared for Megan, not even when Megan was Raya's roommate at Stanford. "Watch that one," she'd said. "She's the devil in a tennis outfit." If only Raya had known how close the words would come to being true.

"Yes, her. She's coming to the city. I heard her say it on TV last night. Watch yourself, Aryanna."

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"I doubt she'll look me up." Raya certainly wouldn't go looking for her.

"Oh, but she will look you up, don't you see? Her kind won't stop until we're undone. Did you see the NBA play-offs? Your father took that one and her mother along with him. He had them on the summer Nia special too. I taped it for you."

"I don't watch the network much anymore, Gram. And yes, I saw them at the play-offs. What Daddy does on his time is his business."

His business. That's what everyone had always called it, though Mother's money and Raya's childhood served as the sacrifices that had built the Nia Network. Not so long ago, it had even seemed worth it. Now that Daddy had sold to Allied Media and they'd dropped most of the programs she'd help develop from the lineup, Raya didn't watch. It made her too sad . . . and too angry. "What he does has nothing to do with me."

"It has everything to do with you. Why do you think the Nia ball is in New York this year? You, that's why. Still, watch out. That worthless girl has more mess in mind. I can feel it."

More mess? Where had Gram been? There was nothing left to damage. This summer had flattened Raya like the toothpaste tubes in the bathroom down the hall.

"I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Her racing heart slowed. "I'm not worried about Megan. You shouldn't be either. Like you say, it's God's day. I'd better go out to meet it."

With another kiss on her grandmother's cheek and a mumbled, guilty prayer, Raya left the house, feeling like herself for the first time in almost two years.

Floating on a combination of caffeine and oil sheen, Raya walked easily to the train station instead of grueling down the avenue like on other days. Once on the platform, she took her usual seat to wait for her train, ignoring the coffee curses and urine-stained cement. Ignoring and being ignored, that was her plan, and up until now, she'd enjoyed great success.

Her pink dress, however, had other plans. It refused to be ignored.

"Hey, pretty mama," a man in a hard hat whispered as he passed. He paused for a reply, but she turned away, though a smile replaced the hard line that had been her mouth. He whistled on as if satisfied with her grin.

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Another man, smelling of cabbage, stopped in front of her. "Nice dress. Good cut," he said in a matter-of-fact, whiskey-laced way.

Raya whispered thank you in a pained tone as she recognized the man as a former tailor in the garment district, one whose shop had been orphaned by the sluggish economy.

"Tell your grandmother I said hello," he said as she slipped him her last twenty.

"I will," Raya said, praying for the two men, for the city, for herself. She finished with a hasty amen before she messed around and got comfortable. God wouldn't settle for less than all of her, and that was more than she currently had to give.

A cluster of women who'd smiled at Raya all summer, approving of her taupe demeanor and sensible shoes, frowned now, narrowing their eyes into jealous slits. Raya knew the look well, the shock when other women saw her legs, her crazy hair, her pink thinking. She'd tried to stay beige, be good, but there was enough of that at work.

Ignoring the women's chatter, Raya dragged her eyes toward her lap—but they snagged on a pair of almond eyes

focused in her direction. Was he staring at her? She peeked again to be sure.

Definitely staring. And she was too.

Whether it was sleep deprivation or temporary insanity Raya wasn't sure, but for the first time since coming to New York, she'd stared down a guy in the subway.

A very cute guy.

The one thing she'd come to like about New York was the friendly unfriendliness. People were nice enough, with smiles to spare, but there was no chitchat to endure, no looks to deflect. Nothing to explain. Everyone danced to their own music, rushed to their own destinations.

Except for him.

Eye Guy, seated directly across from her, pulled up the *New York Times*, crossed his legs, and left Raya to contemplate the razor-sharp pleats in his buttercream-colored suit pants. "You can tell a lot about a man by his pants," Daddy often said. She was more of a shoe girl, but Eye Guy's buff and cream shoes covered that too.

Though women's design was her passion, Raya admired the crisp lines of his suit, a modern take on a classic Brooksie three-piece, one her grandfather would have worn. The blazer spilled carelessly over the seat like sand

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spilling off a beach. His tie was perfectly knotted and just the right width to show off the vest, but it was the pants that stole the show.

Whether it was the pleats, the way he bobbed his ankle on his knee, or the three-quarter-inch cuffs young men never wore these days, Raya wasn't sure, but her eyes kept traveling back in the direction of her newspaper-masked neighbor.

A finger tapped her shoulder. Apparently, she'd captured someone else's attention as well. A girl with burgundy braids and dimples pointed at Raya's white-blond curls.

"What color is that?" She leaned in for a closer look.

Raya smiled and considered the girl's cheekbones. Good structure. Dramatic eyes. She'd make a great evening-gown model.

"It's platinum. Got it done at the Dominican shop in Flatbush."

The *Times* jerked down across the aisle. Eye Guy's temples were smooth, and his subtly highlighted hair spiked in places.

All the right places.

Hair Girl should have been questioning him. Wherever he went, they knew just what to do. He lowered the paper

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farther, revealing the beginnings of a beard, sculpted as though it'd been shaved around the edges. A dime of fuzz, identical to the ones she'd detested on other men, graced his lower lip. What kind of brothah was this? He was Wall Street and round-the-way all wrapped in one. Raya held her breath, taking in his smooth lips, the same nutmeg shade as his skin.

You need to stop. Right now.

Hair Girl helped out by tapping Raya again. "You said the Dominican shop, right? The last time I was there for a color, I came out looking like Pepé Le Pew. They can doobie though-wrap that hair around your head and have you looking oh so fine."

Raya nodded, remembering the times she'd sat in that shop, drinking in the sounds, watching the sway of the women's skirts as they whisked her hair around her head, set her tresses on rollers almost as big as orange juice cans. She was Daddy's little girl then.

"I know that's right. And there's a discount on—"

"Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. Girl, you don't have to tell me. I might forget about hair salon discounts if I can get a fierce fro like that."

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Fighting the urge to attack the rustling paper across from her and toss it away, Raya chuckled, both at the woman and at herself. After months of enduring New York's gorgeous men at every turn, she would have a breakdown because a guy had a nice suit. It figured.

"Try the shop again. Ask for Monica."

The girl nodded, but her expression remained serious. Obviously, hair was no laughing matter to her. "Thanks, girl. You rockin' that cut. I want it bad, but to tell the truth, I ain't that brave." She said it low, like a treasured secret.

Brave? I'm just tired.

"Thanks." Not knowing what else to say, Raya turned back, but not directly to the front. No point in encouraging him.

Or herself.

Men were trouble. Especially buttercream-suit-wearing men. He had that same upwardly mobile look Darrell had. And studying the *Times* before work? Her father would have loved it. At least she didn't have to wonder if a man wanted her for money anymore.

The train screeched to a stop behind her and opened its doors before she could think. Usually she'd have spent the

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last few minutes clearing her head for the jam-packed ride. She wrinkled her nose at the morning smells swirling about as she squeezed inside the train—coconut hair grease, fried chicken, Adidas cologne, and Icy Hot. Her stomach knotted. Not the best combination.

Raya compressed her body as the last passenger, no doubt responsible for the menthol part of the scent, shuffled into the car, clinging to a pole with one wrinkled hand and her pocketbook with the other.

Gram, although taller, more confident, and much more dangerous than this gray-haired lady appeared, had taught Raya something about respecting her elders. She stared as a headphoned teen reeking of cologne marched to the last seat before the woman could sit down.

Raya gripped her bag and shook her head. At least she could share the pole with the older lady, make her feel more secure—

"Why, thank you, young man."

Huh?

Raya's heart pounded as Eye Guy lurched forward to the pole beside her. She'd tried her best to ignore him as they'd entered the car and had been relieved when he'd taken a seat. Now he'd given it up. The *Times* neatly tucked

under his arm, he assessed her with his eyes, but he remained silent. With a passing glance, she inspected his lips up close. Did he wear lip gloss or what? She nibbled at her own Bonne Bell, suddenly wishing she'd opted for something more grown-up.

What is wrong with me today?

"You're welcome, ma'am."

Raya's shoulders slumped. It was hot enough to swim in the train, but Eye Guy's voice sounded like a cool mist whistling up from Martha's Vineyard, her father's favorite summer getaway. The stranger's earthy timbre and sharp syllables rolled across the short space between them like a morning tide.

She swallowed as he stared down at her one last time, adding a camera-ready smile before a final retreat behind his paper. Raya forced her eyes to the floor. He probably played this game every day. And she'd played enough games.

The train brakes hissed to a stop. Raya tensed, anticipating the press toward the door. The old woman didn't move, and Raya was glad of it. The center of a mass of people probably wasn't the best place for the sweet-looking lady. The corner of a newspaper, neatly folded,

brushed her elbow. She looked to get away, to escape, but there was nowhere to go.

Eye Guy leaned over and whispered in her ear. "God loves you. I don't know why, but I feel like he wanted me to tell you that."

She stared back at him as the crowd crushed from behind. The doors opened and spit them both onto the platform. Without looking back, Raya spun on her heels, her legs moving like overcooked spaghetti. Her head ached, both from the sandalwood-lemon something that lingered on her shoulder and from the words that rang in her ears.

Couldn't he at least have been a little more original? And why didn't she feel comforted? Maybe because somehow she still didn't think she deserved the love of God—or anyone else.

There is none righteous. Not one.

Raya ignored the whisper slicing across her bruised heart. She picked up her pace, marched toward another lie—her position at Garments of Praise Fashion Design. Raya didn't belong there, designing practical uniforms instead of her crazy gowns, but for now, for Chenille, she'd have to make it work. Somehow.

"God loves you."

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Her legs churned faster as those chiseled cheeks blurred across her mind. And those clothes? Tailor-made. The walking Jesus tract was a good act, but this former Black American Princess knew all the lines.

To make things worse, she'd gotten blown off in her new favorite outfit. She'd actually thought she looked cute this morning, dark circles and all. Instead, she'd looked like exactly what she was—a woman in need of Jesus.

She turned onto the sidewalk and headed for her job, whispering into the morning humidity. "Lord, if you're trying to drive me crazy, you're a little late. I lost my mind three months ago."

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