

CHAPTER 1



2000

Iesha Turner was 5'4, weighing 135 pounds, with a shapely and curvaceous body. At the young and exciting age of 21, she knew she was beautiful and eagerly looked forward to the rest of her life. Her skin was the color of hot chocolate. She had bashful, mesmerizing hazel eyes surrounded by long, wispy eyelashes. Iesha wore her eyebrows carefully arched, and her skin complexion was so flawless that she did not need make-up. She possessed an almost perfectly shaped set of snow-white teeth within her bright smile that bore deep dimples on each side of her face and made you feel as if she kept juicy secrets. She stylishly sported her natural long, dark brown hair that was manageable- yet coarse and thick. She loved wearing her hair nappy because it gave her a sense of pride in her black heritage and extended more definition to her apple-shaped face. Her ears were draped with costly golden hoops that twinkled and glittered when the light bounced off them. She also wore a thick gold herringbone necklace that rested just above her cleavage and placed undeniable emphasis on her breasts. She kept her fingernails and toenails manicured with the latest airbrush designs and sequins.

It was her normal routine to visit Lynn's Nails every other Saturday morning, where she was known as a regular. Iesha held a standard that would never allow anything but expensive name-brand clothing to touch her body. She regularly sported high-priced fashions such as Gucci, Prada, and Dolce and Gabana.

She coordinated her outfits with Coach, Fendi, and Louis Vuitton handbags, hats, belts, shoes, and accessories. With a single glance, you could see that Iesha took great pride in her appearance and that she was very materialistic. She often referred to herself as single, sexy, and free. She had never had many female friends due to jealousy being a part of the relationships, usually from the other party, but she

had always had several male friends ever since she was a child. Outsiders may have called Iesha promiscuous, but she thought of herself as more of a free spirit than anything.

Iesha did not like restrictions and was upfront enough to let it be known. She would let all of her guy friends know that she is free to talk to or keep company with anyone she chooses, and she will not be held by any titles or to anyone. Iesha was strong and independent; growing up poorly taught her to get what she wanted for herself and not to look toward anyone for anything. But in this day and age, where most men were usually leery of "Gold diggers or Leeches," Iesha's independent nature was more than a fresh drink of water to most of the men she met; it was highly intriguing and respectable. She had become that way after graduating from high school and getting a taste of what it was like to be able to buy anything her money could afford.

Iesha would often sit back and reminisce on her rough childhood; she was aware that her materialistic lifestyle had developed from growing up as a poor and deprived child in the slums of Newark, New Jersey.

1982

As the middle child of four, she hardly received any attention and could count the times on one hand that she had received anything brand new. Her mother, Sheilah Turner, was doing the best she could by trying to raise her children all by herself as a separated, single parent on welfare.

Usually, the new clothing and shoes (if there were any) were given to Iesha's older sister, Tish, and then passed down to her once they didn't fit anymore. Tish, who was three years older than Iesha was more like a mini version of her mother. Tish was a natural-born leader and supervisor, so she did an excellent job keeping her three younger siblings in line. Iesha had so much love and respect for her older sister, but sometimes, she would find herself feeling anger burning from the growing resentment of being bossed around so much. However, she did find it comforting and thought of her big sister as a blessing in her life. Tish was always giving Iesha whatever shirts

she could not fit anymore, as well as socks, pants, shorts, and, on several occasions, even underwear.

Iesha, in turn, would have to pass down her outgrown clothing that looked as if it could be for either boy or girl to her two younger brothers, Dante and Damion. She had grown accustomed to doing without things and being told "No" at a very young age; it taught her not to ask for anything. Iesha had decided within herself way back then that if she could not get whatever she wanted for herself, it wasn't worth having.

Iesha could not shake the painful memories of being teased in school for sporting second-hand clothing and cheap shoes from the local Goodwill store. "Bell bottoms, we know you wear 'em Bell bottoms, why don't you share 'em!!" That was the painful song that was forever engraved into her memory that the cruel school children had actually gotten together and made up about them after an incident in which one of the popular girls' recognized her former jacket being worn by Iesha. Alisha Willis didn't spare a minute telling the entire fourth-grade class that her parents had given the jacket to Goodwill last summer.

While the other kids were being dressed in Levi Jeans, Starter jackets, and Nike, Addidas, or Reebok shoes, Iesha and her siblings had to make due with second-hand bell bottom jeans that had scrub marks on the knees, butterfly collar shirts, or turtle necks, that was way outdated, and shoes such as Pro-wings or Coasters which everyone knew came from Payless. What everyone didn't know was that on the very few occasions when Sheilah would find the Pro-wings or Coasters at the thrift store, she considered it a steal and would "Jump on them," as she would commonly say. Sheilah considered it a small privilege for people to assume that she even had the money to take her kids to cheap Payless rather than always being known for shopping at Goodwill.

On the few occasions when Iesha and her family were out shopping, if she complained to her mother that she didn't want a certain shirt or style of pants because she was going to get teased at school, she would be answered by her mother glaring at her, smacking her lips, and saying "Girl, you better be glad you gettin' anything. You must be crazy to act like you too good for these clothes,

you know I'm doin' the best I can off our budget. You better act like you appreciate it 'fore we walk up outta' here without YOU gettin' nothin'. Don't mess around and make me slap you!" Iesha's mother would roll her eyes and stroll down the aisle with her wide hips brushing the clothes hanging on both sides, all the while still talking about it and shaking her head, obviously bothered. "Got the nerve to complain to me, like we got money growin' on trees or somethin'. Better hope I don't jump on you fore' we get up out this store! Better shut up and be happy."

Iesha would hide behind her older sister as they all trailed their mother down the aisle; for some reason, it seemed that if her mother didn't look back and directly see her face, she would get over her angriness quicker. Iesha would fight back the tears that were welling in her eyes and threatening to spill over onto her cheeks at any given blink; she knew the danger of being seen crying after she had just gotten clowned by Momma; that would get you a for sure slap in a heartbeat cause Momma didn't play. Neither did Momma care who was in the store at the time or if they were looking or not, and she carried the attitude that she dared them to say anything about her disciplining her children. She felt that it was her God-given right.

Iesha could also recall times when her mother would take them to visit their cousins or other family that they didn't get to see that often. Momma would give them a speech that lasted the whole bus ride there. "And don't be askin' for none of they food- I don't care if you do get hungry, ya'll will eat when we get back home. I ain't tryin' to hear from the rest of the family that I brought ya'll over all hungry and stuff like I don't be feedin' ya'll or somethin'. That's the last thang I need is somebody talkin' about us. Understand?" "Yes, Momma." All of the kids would respond in unison. "Even if they offer you somethin' to eat, don't take it cause they don't mean it- and don't nobody ask me if ya'll can spend the night cause you know you can't, I'm tellin' you right now don't even try it, cause the first one that do is gon' get popped upside they head, do I make myself clear?" "Yes, Momma," The kids replied again. Momma would go on and on, rattling off a long list of rules she expected to be followed during their rare visits and the after threat of what would happen if the rule wasn't followed.

Momma would do anything from slapping you in the face or upside your head to taking off her shoe or her belt in public and beating you with it. Iesha could not help but twist her mouth up in disgust at the painful memories of her childhood. She loved her dear mother to death, but she did carry a small amount of resentment for her at the harsh treatment that she'd endured as a child.

Iesha recalled how before she became a single parent, when Iesha's Daddy D'wayne still lived with them, Momma was a much sweeter person.

The Turner family used to attend Sunday morning and Wednesday evening services at the Holy Temple Baptist Church on Edgar Lane. Daddy was deeply religious; he had been raised in the church as a child by his parents. Daddy would commonly refer to the church folks as his "family." He had been around most of the members his whole life. He had the reputation of being a very faithful member, and although Sheilah had not ever been to church before she met D'wayne, she tried to be as faithful as she could in going for her husband. Early Sunday mornings, the children would be awakened by the sound of Momma singing "Amazing Grace" and "Welcome Holy Spirit" as she cooked pancakes, sausage, grits, and eggs.

It was so warm and comforting to be awakened to that atmosphere. The children would brush their teeth, wash their faces, and go eat breakfast. Afterward, they would all put on their neatly pressed dress clothes, which Momma had laid out the night before. Daddy would come out of the room smelling like the scent of Old Spice aftershave, looking so handsome in one of his neatly creased, 3-piece Sunday suits. The family would all load up in the long, boxed-shaped Chevy, which also served as Daddy's work car, and head to the church. They would walk into the small church and embrace the sweet sound of the choir singing and praising The Lord.

Iesha vividly remembered how she would feel a tingle on the surface of her skin and warmth all over her body at the sound of the praises. Daddy would say that feeling was the presence of "The Holy Spirit." Iesha loved going to church and always listened carefully to the messages; she would even bring her notebook to write down scriptures to read later. After church, they would come home, and Momma would cook Sunday dinner—fried chicken with Momma's

delicious homemade gravy, smothered potatoes, cornbread, and steamed cabbage. Daddy would lead them into a prayer of thanks, and they would all sit down, eat, talk, and laugh.

It seemed to her that they were all so happy back then. Iesha remembered another memory of how sweet her mom used to be once when she was invited to a Halloween costume party by one of the other little kids at school when she was in the second grade. She had mentioned the party to her mother but had expected her to say no, she couldn't go because they couldn't afford to buy a costume. However, Momma had surprised her; she smiled at little Iesha and said, "Baby, what do you want to go as?" Iesha smiled and thought dreamily, "Uuuuhhhhh...a princess! I wanna be a princess!" Momma said, "Okay then, we just gon' have to find a way to make my baby a princess!" When Iesha got home from school the next day, her mother had a pretty little pink dress laid out on her bed, with pink stockings and white patent leather shoes. A little sparkly crown was embedded with diamond sequins and glitter forming the word "Princess," laid right beside the dress.

Iesha shrieked with delight, "Ohhhhh, Momma, thank you so much! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I love you, Momma." Iesha turned around and hugged her mother the tightest and the longest she had ever hugged her in her life. Momma laughed as she hugged her back, "Don't forget to thank yo' father, he's the one that went into his savings so I could buy it." She would never forget that day. That was one of the few days she could ever really remember being made to feel like she was something special. Iesha would bring that day to her remembrance to remind herself that her mother really did love her in the cold days that followed once her daddy left.

Iesha was never really sure about all the reasons why he left, but she was aware of the problems between the two of them. Sometimes, late at night, when they thought all the kids were asleep, Sheilah and D'wayne would stay up in the living room arguing. It was usually about her accusing him of being with someone else. Iesha recalled that her Daddy would deny it over and over: "No Sheila, I wasn't with nobody, baby. You know I be workin' hard all day and I can't help it if I smell bad by the time I make it home. Won't you give me a break? I'm tryin' my hardest to do you right, woman!" Daddy would sound

as if he were pleading. Momma would angrily growl back, "You aint s'posed to smell like that! Oh, and don't thank fo' one minute that I don't be seein' Susta Rose Anne lookin' you all up and down at church every Sunday, you must thank I'm blind, you must thank I was born yesterday, yeah, I know what time it is- but you just let me catch you and see what's gon' happen!" Daddy would retort with, "You just don't know that you gotta good man, do you? I work every day and put in all my overtime to take care of our family, and you just keep accusing me of nonsense! I'm gettin' tired Sheilah- I aint gon' take this too much longer. You ain't gon' miss yo' water till the well run dry, girl; you just watch and see!" They would argue until early in the morning or until Daddy finally gave up and just stopped talking back.

The next morning, however, Momma would be in the kitchen cooking breakfast and singing to herself, while Daddy would be at the table reading the newspaper and drinking his morning cup of coffee, preparing to leave for work. They would act like everything was so fine to the point that Iesha would sometimes wonder to herself if she had been dreaming the whole thing, either that they had found some way to make up quickly, or they were putting on an act believing the children didn't know they had ever argued in the first place, Iesha reasoned. This arguing and making up went on for years before Iesha's Daddy decided he'd had enough.

D'wayne had struggled within himself to stay and take it as long as he could; he was trying to live as God wanted him to, and he knew that The Lord's word said, "Do not divorce, except for cases of sexual immorality," and also that "If an unbelieving wife is willing to dwell with you then do not divorce her because she is sanctified by her believing husband, and by this, the children are also made holy." D'wayne was certain that Sheilah wasn't cheating. He was sure that no other man would dare go for her nonsense. D'wayne had felt he'd done all he could to keep his marriage together, but he just couldn't please Sheilah anymore. When it reached the point that D'wayne felt miserable every day and dreaded coming home from work, he knew that he had to do something. He had threatened to leave many, many times before, but this time was different. He was beginning to hate Sheilah. He loved his children with all his heart, and they were the

only reason he'd endured this pain and torture for so long, but now, even his love for them was not enough to keep him in this bottomless pit. He didn't have the heart to look Sheilah in the face and let her know he was really walking out on her and their family, so he waited until she fell asleep one night and, snuck out of bed, quickly packed all of his clothes in a suitcase, and left silently in the middle of the night. He left a note on the kitchen table, which served as a final goodbye before walking out the door.

Once he got in his car, he headed south to Decatur, Georgia, where his parents had settled years ago. He felt that he could at least get his head together down there. Maybe he would come back one day, maybe not, he thought as he drove away. Tears streamed down his face as he imagined the hurt and pain he was going to inflict on his children by leaving. One by one, he pictured each of their faces... Beautiful, Smart Latisha, Cute, Adorable Iesha, Strong, Independent Dante', and Wise, Inquisitive Damion. It was almost enough to make him turn around and try again, but then he pictured Sheilah's bitter, scowled-up face with her constant false accusations, and it made him smash on the gas pedal accelerating a little faster. All D'wayne Turner knew that he needed peace of mind and was fed up with being mistreated. Although he loved his children more than anything else in the world, he felt that one day they would surely understand why he left; no one could ever rightfully say that he did not try hard to make it work. So, with that assurance in mind, D'wayne headed steadily down the interstate, never to look back at Jersey again.